HOLDING HANDS WITH DEATH:
ETHICAL PROMISES AND POLITICAL FAILURES OF OUR HUMANITARIAN PRESENT

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ABSTRACT

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ETHICAL PROMISES AND POLITICAL FAILURES OF OUR HUMANITARIAN PRESENT

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Taking the point of departure in the urgent social challenges tied with current failures of

humanitarian management and inclusion of Non-Western others in "developed" Western societies,

this dissertation explores the ways in which representation and knowledge about human suffering

guides our (un)willingness to act ethically with respect to vulnerable strangers and the difficult

conditions they endure. Contemporary cosmopolitan activism attempts to return the imperative to

act on injustices back to the individual in internal fashion; it is an empty and impotent 'activism' that

promises reform by way of the simple reflexive practice of acknowledging our feelings and

expressing our solidarity (in this case also empty and impotent) with those who are unjustly treated.

In drawing attention to gaps between our emotional dispositions and concrete political engagement

(gaps that are neither harmless or innocent), I hope to show how faith in the contemporary notion

of solidarity is overly optimistic and, as such, ungrounded and illusory. While I am not making a

claim that solidarity in itself is impossible or unwelcome, one has to be clear about the ways in which

our attachment and concern with others is simultaneously formed and determined by material reality

and the course of social, economic and political development that has ultimately led towards a

generalized reluctance to accept "common humanity" as the motivation for action (despite its

theoretical and institutional articulation among human rights milieus). One way out of this

predicament is to examine solidarity as a disposition that is dependent upon underlying ontological

negotiations and a system of knowledge production that articulates social conditions and the ways in

which these conditions affect our understanding of and inclination towards others. Only if we

understand solidarity as a moral and political disposition that struggles with competing demands of

economy, politics, and cultural differences, we can better understand how/why did the West subtly but surely turn into *an indifferent spectator* of injustices and inequalities that it has often directly or indirectly perpetrated.

By considering the ways in which such indifference and apathy affects the lives of others, it is obvious that such a stance entails a flawed relationship towards the world, oneself and other human beings. These faults are both, moral and political in nature. Thus, this odyssey into pressing global issues (and a reimagining of the role epistemology and discursive formations in general play in the moral and political agency of citizens) is a process that will ultimately indicate new possibilities for solidarity and global social justice. If we are to genuinely understand the demands of global justice, and if we are to reconsider the structure and form of national and international institutions, it is necessary to make sense of how individuals and public entities attend to the suffering of others. By recognizing the epistemological and political dimensions intertwined with current struggles we are better situated to understand how current crises impact the psychology of reasoning about tragedy, as well as the ontological formation (or sustenance) of individual and collective identities.

For Maya…

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INTRODUCTION

In his chilling parable of moral depravity, "To Those Born Later," Berthold Brecht ponders

the significance of the human condition determined by insensitivity and numbness. Reflecting on a

world which seems to lack a central aspect of moral and political meaning, he writes:

Truly, I live in dark times!
The guileless word is folly. A smooth forehead
Suggests insensitivity. The man who laughs
Has simply not yet had
The terrible news.

What kind of times are they, when
A talk about trees is almost a crime
Because it implies silence about so many horrors?
That man there calmly crossing the street
Is already perhaps beyond the reach of his friends
Who are in need?[1]

Although in this short passage Brecht pairs silence with insensitivity towards social conditions and

other human beings, and so at first glance seems to conceive ignorance that results from it as an

inescapable trait of the human condition, there is more to Brecht's poetic composition than this

cursory interpretation. As a magnificent parable of loss and disorientation amid the horrors of the

twentieth century, Brecht offers a powerful portrayal of humankind's worst appetites, weaknesses

and follies. While it is fascinating how Brecht recounts the loss of moral compass through this

portrayal of human ignorance, a subtler yet poignant lesson can be learned here from the ways in

which objective social conditions can illuminate that which within ourselves enables us to *see*, and if

we are courageous enough, to *witness*.[2]

This is important because we often understand instances of human struggle only through

mediated depictions which are typically formed by our own social and cultural milieu. Regardless of

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[1] Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913 – 1956,* Eds. John Willett, Ralph Manheim and Erich Fried. (New York: Routledge, 1987), 321.
[2] More will be said about difference between 'seeing' and 'witnessing' in chapter 2: see page 69.

the intended meaning and target of Brecht's poem, the allegory of human denial implicitly alerts the audience to the pervasive insensitivity that plagues our globalized world. One way of trying to find meaning in a world marred by human violence, economic exploitation and environmental devastation is to acknowledge and attempt to repair deep injustices produced and exacerbated by these processes. When examining public representations of various humanitarian projects it is clear in the final calculus of our society that some count more than others. There are those bestowed with narratives of tragedy who receive detailed public portrayals, while others remain mere statistics - a subtle way in which the empirical can also render something invisible. This tension between an awareness of the conditions that other individuals experience and the reactions to that awareness directs us toward a critical question about the nature of our understanding of those who suffer catastrophic experiences and the moral and political implications of their helplessness and vulnerability.

Insensitivity involves a cognitive and affective numbness to the lives of others. Isolated at a safe distance from the extreme brutality that victims of such violence endure, the privileged Western subject[3] often lacks attentiveness to the hardships and aspirations of those who suffer most. This invokes the sense of an inability to connect with and understand the experiences of those in need. This kind of insensitivity is at the core of the injustices explored in this dissertation. Although I favor the terms 'insensitivity' and 'numbness' because they have both cognitive and affective connotations, and because they are broad enough to encompass different aspects of our moral, epistemic and political life, the literature I engage with typically refers to cognitive and moral deficiencies of this sort as a tendency of a set of complex (and ongoing) social and political

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[3] By denoting 'western subject" I do not intend to conflate all members in one nation under the heading of "privileged" (or affluent). I am aware that not all citizens of affluent western societies have a "privileged" existence. Thus, when I phrase 'western subject' or 'western public' I have in mind individuals who share a certain social status, belong to certain gender, bear certain cultural and economic independence, and who have the capacity to provide aid to distant people in need. These individuals are usually target of humanitarian campaigns, and such campaigns rely on their donations.

processes that simultaneously create and sustain Western subjectivity as a site of witnessing, articulation and self-expression.[4] To say that one is insensitive towards the lives and experiences of others is not to say that in the eyes of those 'perceivers' the exploited and suffering multitudes are rendered completely invisible. Instead, it stresses that aspects of these insensitive spectators' lives and personal experiences inevitably become subject to public narratives wherein there is a reductive simplification and abstraction of the exploited and their suffering. They are often dismissed altogether due to machinations aimed at obfuscating, erasing, and/or discounting those lives and experiences, driven at times by cultural biases and other exclusionary practices (i.e. racism, sexism, etc.). What's worse, this insensitivity does not only mean that we do not perceive these injustices, but that we may perceive them falsely, which may lead to worse consequences as feelings of ethical loneliness are invoked among those who rely on our support. (Stauffer 2015) These methods of rendering invisible are processes with their own dynamics and mechanisms. That is to say, obfuscation, erasure, and indifference are enacted in public discursive narratives according to processes that can be tracked by observing the very disappearing in question. In order to examine social sensitivity (or insensitivity) as the absence of care and respect for what is perceived and articulated through these processes, one has to call to attention how the object of our concern (or lack thereof) is historically and politically produced and maintained as *alterity*, as well as what kind of consequences (and obligations) such social conditioning imposes on the Western subject and on Western societies in general.[5]

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[4] See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Verso, 2005); Lois Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (New York: Verso, 2014); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004); Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2009); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978); Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the College de France 1975 – 76* (New York: Picador, 2003).

[5] At the outset I want to remark that these distinctions *West – Non-West* do not intend to be perceived as homogeneous. As much as West cannot be regarded as a homogenous sphere of safety and privilege (take all the exclusionary and marginalizing practices within our own society plagued by ongoing sexism, homophobia and racism), same way South cannot equally be seen as one single sphere of vulnerability. My use of these terms preserve nonetheless a suspicious historical and political distinction that is sadly content of this dissertation: the global division of power that, in unequally

Taking my point of departure in the urgent social challenges tied with current failures of humanitarian management and inclusion of Non-Western others in "developed" Western societies, I explore the ways in which representation and knowledge about human suffering guides our (un)willingness to act ethically with respect to vulnerable strangers and the difficult conditions they endure. Contemporary cosmopolitan activism attempts to return the imperative to act on injustices back to the individual in internal fashion; it is an empty and impotent 'activism' that promises reform by way of the simple reflexive practice of acknowledging our feelings and expressing our solidarity (in this case also empty and impotent) with those who are unjustly treated. In drawing attention to gaps between our emotional dispositions and concrete political engagement (gaps that are neither harmless or innocent), I hope to show how faith in the contemporary notion of solidarity is overly optimistic and, as such, ungrounded and illusory. While I am not making a claim that solidarity in itself is impossible or unwelcome, one has to be clear about the ways in which our attachment and concern with others is simultaneously formed and determined by material reality and the course of social, economic and political development that has ultimately led towards a generalized reluctance to accept "common humanity" as the motivation for action (despite its theoretical and institutional articulation among human rights milieus). One way out of this predicament is to examine solidarity as a disposition that is dependent upon underlying ontological negotiations and a system of knowledge production that articulates social conditions and the ways in which these conditions affect our understanding of and inclination towards others. Only if we understand solidarity as a moral and political disposition that struggles with competing demands of economy, politics, and cultural differences, we can better understand how/why did the West subtly

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distributing resources along West – South axis, reproduces the prosperity of the former while perpetuating the poverty of the latter.

but surely turn into *an indifferent spectator* of injustices and inequalities that it has often directly or indirectly perpetrated.

By considering the ways in which such indifference and apathy affects the lives of others, it is obvious that such a stance entails a flawed relationship towards the world, oneself and other human beings. These faults are both, moral and political in nature. Thus, this odyssey into pressing global issues (and a reimagining of the role epistemology and discursive formations in general play in the moral and political agency of citizens) is a process that will ultimately indicate new possibilities for solidarity and global social justice. If we are to genuinely understand the demands of global justice, and if we are to reconsider the structure and form of national and international institutions, it is necessary to make sense of how individuals and public entities attend to the suffering of others. By recognizing the epistemological and political dimensions intertwined with current struggles we are better situated to understand how current crises impact the psychology of reasoning about tragedy, as well as the ontological formation (or sustenance) of individual and collective identities.

Humanitarian Pendulum

In following the mutations of these identities as historical and political processes that shape our moral impulse toward others, this dissertation offers an analysis of how representations and knowledge about the suffering of others invites us to contemplate the conditions of those for whom existence is agony. Every attempt to mediate knowledge about horrifying events also articulates a relationship that shifts our awareness into an acknowledgment of how suffering of those afflicted is inseparable from our own position in the world and the conditions that we enjoy, regardless whether we acknowledge the obligations that these relationships entail. Although this is evidently an epistemic shift, it is propelled by underlying ontological negotiations and material practices of society

that take place in the formation and evaluation of our experiences in regard to ourselves, the world we inhabit and other human beings. At the heart of these processes lies the acknowledgement of a fundamental change in the ways that the suffering of distant others is represented and articulated in contemporary political culture. In the last decades we are witnessing a degeneration of the liberal humanitarian principles of solidarity. We instead find a docile, narcissistic kind of self-reflection, devoid of significant political engagement with the "evils" of the world.[6] While there are still institutional and individual efforts to mobilize a political force from this moral encounter between spectator and vulnerable other, it seems that the liberal premise of the success of moral education that habituates social agents into the moral dispositions to act on behalf of those who are in dire need of help reveals the limits of an outdated ideology. Rather than improving ties of solidarity and fostering the awareness to acknowledge and respect differences among people and sociocultural ethos they may share, today's humanitarian agent seems to be part of an ontological lottery that involves the reduction of humanity to a division between, white and non-white, male and *non-male*, wanted and unwanted, poor and affluent, similar and different. These mechanisms and these divisions are sadly nothing new, however. They have been prevailing tools of domination from a white, European, masculine machine, and the Eurocentric, reductive understandings of difference and otherness that these social processes (i.e. processes that produce these identities and understandings) entail. The marks of colonialism, imperialism, and economic inequalities spurred by ongoing globalization do not readily disappear. Moreover, they belie the true inner-workings of neoliberalism.

This historical transformation of solidarity is a complex matter that should be approached in its economic, political, institutional and technological dimensions. As we see, any radical alternative to this dominant humanitarian situation needs to take into account the tumultuous dynamics

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[6] See Lillie Chouliaraki. *The Ironic Spectator,* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

between history and our present reality. There is a sense of the world beyond the West as a world that does indeed exist. But it is a different world. A world which confronts us with the uncomfortable but vital questions of power, responsibility and justice; and, in doing so, calls us to reflect upon historical choices that have ultimately designed our global political, social and economic conditions today. Even though there is a danger of simplification here, it is important to emphasize that neither the term *Humanitarian victim* nor the concept of the *Western Humanitarian Agent* has any ontological stability. Each position is made up of human actions, epistemic and ontological negotiations which are partly affirmation and partly identification of the Other and the self who is doing the negotiating. As Edward Said states this point eloquently, "(t)hat these supreme fictions lend themselves easily to manipulation and the organization of collective passion has never been more evident than in our time, when the mobilization of fear, hatred, disgust and resurgent self-pride and arrogance… are very large-scale enterprises" with enormous moral and political ramifications.[7]

The question of solidarity cannot be examined separately from the organizational structure that has built our present moral discourse in the first place. *Humanitarianism* as an organizational structure that articulates this discourse and offers a site wherein different dimensions of moral, economic and political intersect with, and determine one another, in ways that variously come to define what humanism and solidarity are. The humanitarian discourse has always focused the impact of its knowledge on the attitudes of the public and the messages such knowledge aims to convey. As such, it denotes a certain way of looking at the world. What I understand as humanitarianism in the contemporary conventional liberal context is a definite set of ideas and practices that can be located materially in their institutional and discursive form. As Didier Fassin argues, *humanitarianism* is a system of governance that designates "the deployment of moral sentiments in contemporary

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[7] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), xviii.

politics." Governance here should be understood in a broad sense, as a set of procedures established and actions conducted in order to manage, regulate, and support the existence of human beings and an economy of harm that they are exposed to. On the other hand, "moral sentiments" refer to emotions that direct our attention to the suffering of others and make us want to remedy that suffering.[8] Similarly, "humanitarian" should be understood in meaning, "as connoting both dimensions encompassed by the concept of humanity: on the one hand the generality of human beings who share a similar condition (mankind), and on the other an affective movement drawing humans toward their fellows (humaneness)."[9]

This interconnection between regulative practices and theoretical invocation of moral sentiments displays the complex role and value of moral emotions in contemporary politics. The political economy of moral sentiments is evident in ways in which it nourishes political discourses and legitimizes political practices, particularly where these discourses and practices are focused on the disadvantaged and the dominated, whether at home (the poor, the immigrants, the homeless, etc.) or further away (the victims of famine, epidemics, or war). Such complex humanitarian assemblage includes, but also exceeds, the intervention of the state, local administrations, international bodies, political institutions more generally, spatial organizations, technical standards, procedures and systems of monitoring.

This complex apparatus, of course, has a history. This is not the place to retrace it, but it is worth underlining two stages of its development. *The first stage* relates to the emergence of moral sentiments in philosophical reflection and subsequently in intellectual culture from the eighteenth century onward. Modern subjectivity and identity cannot be seen independent from the conjunction of affects and values that regulates conduct and emotion toward others based on a respect for

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[8] Most particularly since Adam Smith and his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). For further details see Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Los Angeles: Enhanced Media, 2016).

[9] Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present,* (Berkeley: University of California Press. 2011), 2.

human life and dignity. *The second*, more recent development, relates to the articulation of these moral sentiments in the public sphere and in political action, at the end of the twentieth century. While it is difficult to determine a precise date when this development started, one may note that increased convergence of diverse measures and initiatives over the past two decades have been defined explicitly or implicitly as humanitarian. Such measures and initiatives include (but are not limited to) the creation of diverse humanitarian organizations, the development of governmental ministries that deal with humanitarian assistance, and the public presentation of various conflicts worldwide as humanitarian crises (which then justifies military intervention under the same banner), the proliferation of initiatives and regulations designed to aid the marginalized parts of society (i.e. the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, people without healthcare protection, immigrants, and applicants for refugee/Asylum status, etc.). Although there is a significant temporal gap between these two phases, they are nonetheless interconnected, and the development of recent humanitarian practices draw their genealogical framework from the philosophical discourse on moral sentiments.

With that said, it is the latter phase that I am principally interested in here. Despite inherent problems with the philosophical foundation of humanitarianism, my primary goal is to offer a clear account of the shifting nature of what can be called *the politics of precarious lives* over the past few decades.[10] Alongside the technological and practical adjustments in recent years, there is an ongoing shift in discursive formation reflected in increased public presence of humanitarian conundrums in an unjust world. The ongoing translation of social reality into the new language of compassion (and a development of practices that embody such language) seems to mirror the West's epistemological and affective conversion of moral capacity.

Despite the proliferation of literature that deals with suffering and trauma, and the fact that these themes are commonplaces of the social sciences and new political discourse, humanitarianism

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[10] Please see Butler, *Precarious Lives,* 2004; Butler, *Frames of War,* 2009.

is ultimately just *politics of inequality*. There is often a form of cynicism at play when one deploys the language of moral sentiments at the same time as implementing policies that increase social inequality, regulations that restrict the rights and liberties of immigrant populations, or military operations with essentially geostrategic goals. From this perspective, the language of humanitarianism seems to be nothing more than a deceptive cover for the imposition of unjust and brutal market forces of an equally unjust and brutal world. But even if this is the case, and I think it is, the question still remains: *Why does it work so well?*

In order to answer this question, it is not enough to ask how humanitarianism generates support among listeners or readers. We must instead focus on explaining why people often prefer to invoke the idea of suffering and compassion instead of justice. In the contemporary world, the discourse of affects and humanitarian values offers a high political return. This ongoing attempt to treat humanitarianism as a symbol of what is good about the world -- as the world's superego, an echo of the possibility of a more humane world -- has tendencies to conceal inequalities on which humanitarianism draws its purpose and validity. One reason why humanitarian language has been steadily increased over the last few decades is the fact that after a century of ideologies and bloodshed, it still offers a seductive simplification of our reality without real commitment to action. Sympathy can allow an entire generation to imagine the discovery and expression of solidarity, an empty solidarity, not through ideas of progress and social criticism, but instead in the management of expedient moral sentiments and care-taking. Aid agencies seem to be driven by both, humanitarian values and individual interests.[11] This is especially evident in cases when such agencies appear to be more like 'pornographers of death,' more preoccupied with constructing heroic images of their organization for donors than about the actual plight of victims. What is worse, many seem

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[11] A salient example is a recent *Propublica* investigation that shows the Red Cross raised $1 billion to build homes for Haitians yet only built six homes -- https://www.propublica.org/article/how-the-red-cross-raised-half-a-billion-dollars-for-haiti-and-built-6-homes

to believe that good intentions are enough. When we look back at the spectacle of aid agencies often feeding the perpetrators of violence in refugee camps alongside their victims, or "humanitarian" photographers leaving starving children at the mercy of vultures and other predators[12], one should ask oneself why are such harsh lessons not taken seriously when we evaluate implications of today's humanitarian agency. As humanitarian organizations increasingly ally themselves with governments and corporate donors, and by doing that compromise in ways that ultimately corrode their core organizational values; it seems to me that the issue is not how to justify political undertones of a shifting humanitarian ideology, but whether and how humanitarianism can sustain its ethics.

Pitfalls of Humanitarianism

What this short reflection on humanitarian practices and its intertwinement with power leaves us with is an elementary question: *What is, then, humanitarianism?* Is that a failed project or just an unsuccessful one? Taking into account media portrayals, an increasing interest within academia, and solid institutional influence in public space, humanitarianism appears to be thriving. One can say without much fear of being mistaken that humanitarianism today is one of the firmest established topics on the global political agenda. There is a growing international acceptance of the legitimacy of humanitarian interventions. Funding has skyrocketed. Currently, there are more organizations dedicated to the idea of relieving the suffering of afflicted peoples than ever before. And yet, what do these efforts ultimately do? In order to give an answer to this question one has to disentangle humanitarianism as a moral-political imperative from relations of power and ideological impediments that it seems to sustain and serve. For the task of disentangling, however, critical

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[12] Camps in question were managing people from Rwanda, and more recently people from Darfur. The photographer in question here, Kevin Carter, received tremendous backlash over the photograph from people who were awed that he took the photograph rather than help the child who was very near to a shelter
-- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin_Carter

analysis must approach development of humanitarianism from two specific critical lines. The first is primarily political, and concerns earlier descriptions of humanitarianism as reminiscent of the Neoliberal political and economic logic. With its own scales of risk and proportionality, humanitarianism serves a violent militaristic apparatus by evaluating the desired and undesired consequences of corporate and military acts. Recent humanitarian interventions show how spatial organizations, procedures and systems of monitoring have become the means for exercising contemporary violence and for governing those who are unwanted in the West. The condition of collusion of these technologies of humanitarianism, human rights and humanitarian law, including the attendant military and political powers constitute what Eyal Weizman has described as our *humanitarian present*.[13] The driving force of humanitarianism is accordingly no longer a sense of naïve but engaged compassion, but instead a highly specialized and concerted international effort to manage populations that are seen as posing risks. Within this present condition, all political opposition, social activism, and institutional reforms are replaced by the elasticity of measures, degrees, negotiations, proportions and administration. Thus, as humanitarianism aligns with forces that it ultimately aims to challenge, the humanitarian spectator and the victim become a site wherein aesthetic and ethical transformations and negotiations take place.

This brings us to a second problem closely related with the increasing commodification of private emotions and philanthropic obligations, a process that is in itself determined by the production of administrative knowledge as an intrinsic aspect of today's humanitarian practice. This epistemological dimension of humanitarianism and the ethics of solidarity turns around questions of representation and the articulation of knowledge that are *modus operandi* of increasingly institutionalized neoliberal logic of measures, standards, micro-economic explanations and strategic depictions of afflicted individuals, often at the cost of actual insight into systemic causes of global

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[13] Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils* (New York: Verso, 2011), 4.

poverty or violence. Such reduction of humanitarian methodology into a form of depoliticized managerialism further suggests that instrumentalization of humanitarian practice and humanitarian discursive regimes has direct impact on epistemic and affective dispositions of subjects who are in themselves vessels of humanitarian agency. The fact that suffering is also characteristic language of the contemporary world and that compassion has become a significant political force, the western humanitarian subject is exposed to the constant risk of renouncing objectification in his description, and ultimately of reinforcing the social construction to which he unwittingly contributes. What eludes these questions is an approach that would allow us to analyze the effects of domination expressed through suffering at the same time as the construction of processes of which suffering is the object. Being a product of social processes that differentiate our "self" from others and condition our capacity for affective attachment and reflexive engagement with the political conditions of human vulnerability, we are confronted with the uncomfortable but vital question of our cultural situatedness, privilege, ontologically unstable alterity, and lastly, with justice in its national and international context. Insofar as our judgment of others in need and the social conditions that create their suffering rely on our own current beliefs and norms, they may appear irredeemably parochial, ideological, and ultimately as an instrument that serves to rationalize and justify injustices and inequalities in their liberal, neo-colonial, or humanitarian guises.

The political and epistemic problems of the current state of humanitarianism are closely related and an awareness of their intertwinement helps us understand its ambivalent nature. Raising awareness about these issues can motivate a strategy for reflecting on gaps and inconsistencies between humanitarian ideals, questions of justice, and what humanitarianism actually is in practice. The best way to think through the challenges of humanitarianism and the contemporary humanitarian agent is not only to conceive humanitarianism as something that is confronted with subject who has inadequate conceptions of motivation or inadequate goals in regard to solidarity

with others. Both aspects, which are actually true, are a reflection of deeper processes of subject formation and the associated formation of moral and political dispositions within contemporary Western moral and political agency. The contribution to the reproduction of inequalities and injustice is problematic, and only possible if we accept (or assume) that our material reality and knowledge itself bears the stamp of ideology. Thus, if we take humanitarianism to be a project based upon the application of moral sentiments, a project that mobilizes compassion, speaks of compassion but actually veils injustices or supports global forces directly or indirectly responsible for the humanitarian crises that aid organizations seek to ameliorate, humanitarianism is ultimately a form of ideology itself. Taking into account that humanitarianism seems to be a self-repair mechanism of a system that engenders inequalities and injustice, the fact that these inequalities and injustices ultimately help humanitarianism self-validate its own existence point to ideological tendencies of a discourse that is unavoidably bound up with a history of colonialism and human exploitation. Despite its benign objective of maximizing efficiency in providing aid and increasing accountability to donors, the financial regime of the aid and development field ultimately justifies a neoliberal logic of control that ultimately collapses the cosmopolitan aspirations of humanitarianism into the corporate aspirations of the West. In doing so, it not only fails to serve the ideal of global cosmopolitan solidarity, but delivers harmful effects on vulnerable others by establishing relations of dependence that reinforce already-present inequalities.

This paradox at the heart of the humanitarian field, requires us to examine not only the structural issues tied with humanitarianism in its institutional form, but also the moral and political implications that such a structure has on the individual agency. In other words, one has to be clear what kind of impact humanitarianism has on both the material conditions of people affected by humanitarian crises and on the constitution of the moral disposition of western spectators on whose donations and engagement humanitarianism ultimately depends. Most of the moral and political

appeal of humanitarianism is informed by an emphasis on urgency and vulnerable iconography of poverty and violence. But we should reflect on what has been ultimately gained through such public depictions and what has been lost. What really happens when we use images of suffering? Do we speak of inequality? Do we invoke human trauma in order to recognize the underlying systematic nature of violence? And more generally, what are the consequences when we mobilize compassion rather than challenge underlying injustices? Are scales of humanitarianism different then scales of justice?

With that said, identifying humanitarianism as an ideology does not aid us much in our task of ameliorating the damage dealt by a farcical system. A central argument of this dissertation is that shortcomings of humanitarianism are mere symptoms of deeper social and political problems inextricably linked to the moral and political dispositions of the 21st century individual. Reflecting upon the intersection of epistemological issues and the articulation of knowledge about human suffering (and the subsequent constitution of the western subject's moral agency) play a crucial, if often unacknowledged role in grounding the humanitarian ontology of others' precarity, and the associated political implications that such processes invoke. We must consider the standards by which we measure and evaluate others and our social reality. These standards (and processes) often overlook and/or obscure the extent to which the very material and epistemological preconditions for moral agency and recognition of moral and political urgency are themselves space wherein ontological negotiations about the understanding and identity of others takes place. A humanitarian ontology of precarity can be thus understood as an ontological product of epistemic and political processes that form, change, use and abuse certain understanding of others and social conditions that they are inevitably part of. As a product of negotiation and representation, the other is an object without voice, without meaning other than that given to her by the political discursive apparatus of the west. This conundrum follows more or less directly from the inherent distortions of

humanitarianism and its material and discursive practices that frame the humanitarian encounter.

In the end, is there an alternative? Although this dissertation addresses such distortions, and pathologies that result from them, my aims are not only to disclose present inequalities and limits of solidarity at the beginning of 21st century. My motivation is to also make humanitarianism transparent to itself and chart a path toward a different kind of humanism altogether. To do so, my work here approaches the humanitarian practices from the standpoint of an imagined, alternative understanding of humanitarianism and solidarity. One which remains critical towards itself and takes into account challenges tied with nature and the limits of Western subjectivity, along with the ways in which our "selves" remain vessels of an unjust world plagued by violence, oppression and inequality. Choices that our governments make and benefits that we sow from them result in conditions where our "compassion" should be mobilized in order to help people that our morals and our politics have ultimately abandoned and failed to recognize as part of a humanity that we so stubbornly advance. It is not that the situation on the ground has radically changed (violence and exploitation are a few of the innate aspects of history of human civilization), rather it is that violence and injustice have a different meaning for us, and more specifically, that we conceive of our responsibilities in a way that is historically unjustified and morally wrong. In emphasizing these limits in our collective understanding of the world I am not seeking to judge whether it is useful or dangerous to determine whether we should celebrate or be concerned. I am simply trying to recognize the phenomenon for what it is and measure its effects, or more precisely, interpret the issues involved with the transformation of our moral and political subjectivity. It is for the readers, if they accept my analysis of these moral and political stakes, to draw the normative conclusions they consider to conform to their ethical and often ideological view.

To do so, this dissertation is divided into two main parts. The first identifies some of the weaknesses of humanitarian discourse and practices, and it has an analytical dimension in that it

attempts to tease out the political forces, cultural habits, forms of knowledge, skills and expertise that were folded into the organization and form of subjectivity that is at the center of humanitarian attention. The second part focuses on offering an alternative way of thinking about responsibility and solidarity. Following critical social theorists, I argue that our way of apprehending the world is in itself a historical and critical process; that is, by facing and identifying problems we also come to describe and reimagine the world. This way, by bringing inconsistencies of humanitarianism into the spotlight I show how humanitarianism has become a language that inextricably serves both to define and to justify certain discourses and practices that ultimately govern human beings. Hence, what I have earlier identified as conventional liberal humanitarianism operates in contexts where its practices often contribute to problematic and unjust outcomes. So, by disclosing pathologies internal to humanitarianism, I hope that I am at the same time pointing at things that critical humanitarianism needs to avoid. In light of this, my dissertation is not pretending to give a systematic and empirical account of the current pitfalls of humanitarianism. Rather, it navigates the complex landscape of mass media, global economy and politics by offering fragmentary insights on some of the issues within the humanitarian field. It is obvious that a growing problem our political culture faces today is increased difficulty in mobilizing solidarity with people who are culturally and geographically distant from us. From the critical humanitarian perspective, this is an important problem. Although there is an increasing amount of literature on humanitarianism, most of these (often brilliant) analyses[14] stop at one of the institutional levels: They either focus on the deficiencies of institutional management or the political shortcomings of current policies that result from an

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[14] For example: Michael Barnett, *Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); Deen K. Chatterjee, ed. *The Ethics of Assistance: Morality and the Distant Needy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Simon Chesterman, Michael Ignatieff and Ramesh Thakur, eds. *Making States Work: State Failure and the Crisis of Governance* (New York: UN University Press, 2005); B. S. Chimni, "Globalization, Humanitarianism, and the Erosion of Refugee Protection." Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper, (Oxford: Oxford University, 2000); Didier Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Didier Fassin and Mariella Pandolfi, eds. *Contemporary States of Emergency: The Politics of Military and Humanitarian Intervention* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Martha Nussbaum, *Creating capabilities: the human development approach* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

inability (and unwillingness) of government or nonprofit officials and workers to struggle for a more just world. Although identifying these shortcomings is very important (and necessary), I focus on showing inherent inconsistencies and ideological tendencies of humanitarian principles and practices that are the hallmark of today's humanitarianism and human rights discourse, and as such, fail to preserve the idea of humanity for which they ostensibly aim.

In *chapter one* – I analyze the increased interest in so-called moral sentiments (feelings of sympathy, anger, compassion, empathy, resentment, etc.) and the political dependence on these emotions for shaping political agents, practices and institutions. In order to offer an in-depth examination of compassion as one of the most politically charged emotions, I begin by reconstructing the anthropological and philosophical discourse concerning the nature of the latter. To address the general characteristics of this moral sentiment it is necessary to start with the basic assumption that human beings have a predisposition to be concerned with the wellbeing of others, and that under certain circumstances exposure to the pain or suffering of others can elicit moral reactions among spectators. Historically, early modern thinkers have made human passion a central topic of moral and political theory, arguing that compassion is one of the inherent aspects of being human. Taking Rousseau as one of the main representatives of this trend in modern philosophy I aim to examine the role given to compassion in contemporary political culture and see whether such an emotional disposition should be fostered in citizens and embodied in institutions. In the second part, I take a skeptical view of compassion's political credentials. Ultimately, I argue that compassion is an inadequate way of thinking of motivation and solidarity. The predominant liberal understanding of compassion thrives on its promises to enlarge the moral and political boundaries of communities, and engender (and sustain) equal respect across contingent geopolitical contexts. Yet in practice it seems not only that this sentiment does not deliver on its political promises, but also imposes limits on agency that further lead to an entrenchment of victimhood and resentment.

By diminishing the moral and political status and agency of relevant recipients, it fails to address the injustices it identifies and it exhausts empathic identification while generating indifference and political fatigue. The critical standpoint I have in mind maps the ways in which the limits and inconsistencies of an ethics and politics grounded in compassion can be critically iterated. I follow Adorno's rejection of the notion of compassion as a basis of moral practice on the grounds that compassionate behavior sets out only to mitigate injustice, and not actually change the conditions that create and reproduce it. In addition, compassion in itself presupposes an asymmetry in the relation between the involved people. This asymmetry is political rather than psychological, because of inherent inequalities that compassion in this setting inevitably implies. When compassion is exercised in the public space, it is, therefore, always directed from the more powerful to the weaker. In order to unmask the naïve idealism which ignores the primacy of interests and ties forged by history (and for compassion to realize its potential as a sentiment that can be valid moral and political motive), social critique has to challenge the social contexts that give rise to human suffering, and inspire citizens to take a responsibility to protect others from injustice and undeserved agony. The final part of this chapter, then, aims to identify conditions under which compassion can be conceived of as an important cognitive and normative resource that makes us aware of unacknowledged forms of human suffering and compels us to remedy it. One way to redeem such potential is by identifying the ways and means of ensuring that compassion does not confine itself to paternalistic, intrusive political actions that strip others of their dignity and agency.

While the first chapter deals with compassion and is partially concerned with disenchanting illusions about main impulse of humanitarian motivation, *chapter two* explores conditions under which the object of humanitarian discourse is conceived and organized. I focus on the historical conditions under which the specific figure of the other is constituted and analyze the moral and political implications of this constitution. If we look back upon the recent history of human rights

abuses and acknowledge that such events are being articulated, circulated and lately institutionalized throughout a number of conventions, we still must realize that the objects of such knowledge are not simply given, but are also a form of an aggregation of identities. Thus, it is necessary to explore how specific political, economic and discursive practices facilitate the subject's encounter with the other and how the latter is constituted and given to public interpretation. By questioning how a specific understanding of the other is formed, this chapter aims to draw attention to the inconsistencies associated with the problematic relation between witnessing atrocities and the moral responses that such knowledge should entail. In the context of gender, racial, sexual, ethnic, economic or cultural exclusion/oppression, I argue that there are cognitive and affective deficits that amount to specific forms of epistemic insensitivity. I draw from the recent work in social epistemology and traditional critical social theory to argue that the inability to listen and to learn from others (and the inability to call into question one's own perception/articulation) highlights a grim reality that we are surrounded by discourses that privilege certain perspectives while ignoring (and silencing) others. Taking into account that cultural, racial and/or gender insensitivities result from a lack of knowledge of social realities as much as a lack of self-knowledge (i.e., knowledge of one's own position with respect to the relevant categories and the relevant forms of oppression) it seems necessary that defining social methods of inclusiveness should be broadened to include epistemic component and analyze epistemic deficiencies in social interaction. Given the ethical and political dimensions to representing the bodies, suffering and conditions of displaced others, and particularly because often humanitarian victims themselves have no access to, or input in, those ethical and political discourses that qualify the non-Western place in the epistemological systems of Western host societies, witnessing serves as the most practical (and, perhaps, the *only* practical) empathetic space. The experiences of these people are real, concrete conditions (whether we acknowledge them or not), and the manners in which we articulate e.g. the poverty, violence, hunger

and discrimination that seem to be their daily reality also illuminate the too-simple mechanisms for self-reflection by which Western humanitarian systems operate. The moral appeals that these conditions convey—and the empathy gap in the discourse regarding the suffering of others—means that most of the humanitarian capacity to mobilize public support depends on the systems' power to constitute distant others as objects of our attention and concern. The indirect implications of this, of course, strongly indicate the humanitarian victim's current struggle to survive, but the constitutive power of the other as "worthy of empathy" is directly indicated by the political choices that West has made in the past, and how those past choices continue to bleed empathy from the discourse in present decision-making. For example, what is currently happening within and at the outskirts of European borders is not only failure of humanitarian systems and the binding weakness of international law, but also reveals the troubling nature of the racialized, gendered, and cultural nature of our Western moral and humanitarian agency, and its flawed mechanisms of self-evaluation, social inclusion and humanitarian management.

Following an analysis of the emergence of spectator and victim as social categories, I consider the ways in which the suffering of others is presented to us in concrete social terms. I do this by reviewing in *chapter three*, the impact of a visually dominant media on the subject's reception of and response to such instances. It is important to disclose the contexts in which public representation defines the standards of our social experiences. One can do that by indicating how the relation between images, public knowledge, and individual agency (either through direct action, omission, or apathetic spectatorship) is constituted. Analyzing iconic photographs of human suffering, I argue that although images can be powerful mediums that force attention and involvement, their resonance ultimately depends on where they are coming from, who wants to see them, and the political contexts that support their interpretation. Thus, despite recent calls for a reconsideration of the validity of images of suffering as tools for socially and politically engaged

photojournalism and art, there are many arguments that express doubts about the moral and political sentiments that gruesome or aesthetically appealing images of trauma may stimulate through public exhibits. On the one hand, images can facilitate the articulation of a certain degree of moral indignation, responsibility, empathy, and compassion, forced by the fact that viewers need to decide where they stand in regard to the content that they see. On the other hand, they can generate more deleterious responses—voyeurism, shame, guilt, complicity, and indifference. In following the dialectic of such processes this chapter takes the troubling relation between the invasive representation of human trauma and the political nature of the public use of such images as a convenient starting point. In order to understand exactly what is at stake here, I point out that such an analysis should not exhaust itself in answering what makes public representations of human suffering ethically suspicious and intolerable, but should rather extend this task by clarifying how the public forms sentiments about their social and political reality by elucidating under which conditions public representation promotes broader political agendas. Humanitarian imagery geared towards popular media, tends to appeal more to our emotions than our reflective analytical capacities. In its *medialization* of suffering, humanitarian strategies of mobilizing public awareness – often presented alongside photographs of helpless children – also functions to compete for money in the charitable market. The relation between humanitarianism and media is thus one of interdependency: journalists – who depend on aid workers for access, transport, accommodation, information, telecommunications, sound bites and medical care – tend to narrate the events of a crisis from their point of view. Some of the media practices themselves are conditions within which humanitarianism operates, but they are not under control of it. It is not clear, though, how exactly social powers organize the field of public perception, and how this organization galvanizes political support or opposition to concrete historical events. This chapter ultimately suggests that, in order for politically implicated images to have an immediate critical effect on individuals and their agency, they need to

cultivate alternative modes of perception. Such modes, then, would challenge persisting cognitive and perceptual norms that sustain the lethargic consciousness of an audience and help induce new modes of subjectivity.

Finally, after discussing how representations of human suffering shape public understanding of tragedies that result from human right abuses, *chapter four* turns to the question of what reforms are necessary to make humanitarian appeals effective means to encourage better acknowledgment of individual and collective responsibilities amid a history of exploitation and injustice. While we must require a historically and institutionally specific reading of contemporary geopolitical conditions that result in human suffering, we also must be careful to detach ourselves far enough from our everyday cognitive and material embeddedness to more clearly understand opposing political contexts within which they are enclosed. Despite often admirable efforts to disclose mechanisms that prevent individual or collective acknowledgment of responsibilities aroused by evidences of human rights abuses, we still need a more careful vocabulary to distinguish between the conditions that result in human suffering, the conditions that frame its appearances, and the normative implications that such encounters demand from the viewing public. The pressing question, then, concerns not so much what changes in our social organization are necessary to foster solidarity among people (even if such concerns are justified and welcome), but in the context of a highly commodified field of humanitarian ethics one should plunge into the phenomenological depths of our subjectivity and explore cognitive and material dispositions that constitute the moral and political tissue of western public life. My argument is that the problems of motivation and engagement cannot be addressed simply by shifting around public representations or knowledge and values that are reasserted through them. Far from underestimating the power of images and ideology, what I suggest is that the morality of solidarity requires a more holistic understanding of humanitarian subjectivity.

Running beneath this discussion of responsibility – and beneath all of the dissertation's chapters – are the intersecting lines of inquiry into the relationship between epistemology, ontology and ethics. The focus on this relationship is of course not new. The moral and political deficiencies of the modern subject have been an important topic before, and while my analysis ultimately contests common understandings of responsibility and ideological tendencies of our cognitive dispositions, it ultimately takes its point of departure in critical philosophies that have given these problems their concrete historical articulation. To this end, I start with Emmanuel Levinas' account of intersubjective nature of subjective autonomy and his understanding of responsibility that aims to link the ethics of alterity to egocentric liberal subjects decoupled from the moral burden that weighs on them. It is precisely this disclosure of the burdensome character of subjectivity, and how it relates to social conditions, human vulnerability and intersubjectivity that draws me towards Levinas' fundamental framework. Similarly, early critical theory scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have called for a critique of cognitive and material dispositions that result in reductive habits of cognition and atrophied moral agency. Both groups of thinkers call into question the assumption that responsibility should be equated with perpetrators and victims. Rather, their work suggests that an account of responsibility and moral agency could potentially have diverse objects of study approached through an analysis of social conditions and discursive formations that are intertwined in moral and political formations of subjectivity. Despite their differences around the role of cognition in catalyzing moral dispositions, both Levinas and Adorno agree that a certain cognitive distance with objects of our thought sustains ontological formations that prevent social actors from recognizing primordial ethical context.

While my reading of Adorno finds his work partially open to the possibility of ethics beyond the common liberal understanding, what I find ultimately helpful in addressing today's issues of moral and political subjectivity is the guiding thread of his work that shows how epistemology ought

to be ethical, and that ethics should in turn be political. Unlike Levinas, who rejects the question of knowledge as just another formation of "ontology", Adorno's insistence on the primacy of the object of our knowledge invites us to think ethically and see the priority of the Other as a crucial feature of any ethical relationship. While this interpretation may be suspicious for some Levinas and Adorno purists, I find it faithful to the overall spirit of their respective work. Thus, rather than stories about "them", I conclude that humanitarianism and the ethics of solidarity are inevitably an exploration of ourselves and the ways in which these "selves" are formed and sustain certain values and relationships with the world at large. This process of self-knowing or self-reflection explores whether or how we may be able to remap our understanding of our relationships with others and the world around us, as well as what kind of consequences this remapping would have for current political culture.

Although this invitation still draws on the legacy of the *humanism* (yet, without relying on its moral certainties, knowledge or indifference towards its own history), it sees solidarity with others as a political rather than a consumerist project. Success of this project depends on an openness towards *unlearning*, often taken for granted, privilege and acknowledgment of differences among frequently incomparable historical and cultural contexts of people whose invoked "common humanity" often serves as a concealment for underlying historical inequalities and oppression. Thus, what really matters in ethics is not so much what values can be given to the others, or how such values constitute and guide the moral agency of individuals, but rather *how* can we interrupt a numb routine of indifference and provoke a sense of obligation towards conditions that are not independent of our choices (i.e. independent of our moral and political omissions). Such an account of a humanitarian ethics beyond compassion may not entirely coincide with what is usually thought of as morality. It strongly defends a public ethos of solidarity with others beyond the West. It is, simultaneously, an equally strong call for caution against the increased tendency of current political

culture to instrumentalize the vulnerability and needs of others. Such caution is not meant to be an invitation to an alternative set of universal moral and political guidelines. Its focus is in rethinking the foundation of our own subjectivity the meaning that process imprints upon our moral and political agency. If responsibility towards others always occurs amid a tension between different moral perspectives and historical inequalities that determine the position of humanitarian agents (and victims), then an analysis of such a tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance, must deal with the disheartening question of a moral gap that exists between seeing, understanding, caring and acting upon the vulnerability of others.

Philosophical Heritage

From the events of the tragic civil war in Bosnia during the 1990s to the refugee camps in Turkey and Greece today, most of the concerns that I raise throughout this dissertation illustrate how the inevitable entanglement of our moral dispositions with power relations demand a radically different way of thinking about our ethical agency. Such an alternative account of subjectivity is rooted and constituted in clear opposition to the dictates of the liberal discursive imagery that seems to form and guide the ways in which Western (humanitarian) agents understand their moral obligations towards non-Western others. As my introduction alludes, the central puzzle for current humanitarianism is to bridge the gap between the ways that vulnerable others are represented in the West, knowledge that such representations aim to articulate, and the subsequent moral re/action (or lack thereof). To deal with these processes properly we should start by recognizing a plurality of social relationships with people whose suffering solicit us both morally and politically. This is nowhere more evident than in the current predicament of millions of forcefully displaced people from the Middle East, Africa and Afghanistan. One way to avoid reaching a dead end in current

debates about the nature of humanitarian crimes and the failure of humanitarian management is to make a conscientious effort to reverse an underlying epistemic and ontological burden of Eurocentric and Neoliberal subjectivity and develop an attitude that values and morally acknowledges lives of others outside of our cultural routine. This statement may seem trivial and philosophically naïve, but I urge my readers to take a minute and reflect upon the consequences and obligations that arise from decentering Western subjectivity and unlearning privilege that most of us take for granted.

A constitutive dimension of this dissertation demands from us to reflect upon an alternative account of humanitarian (or moral) subjectivity, an account that depends upon a change in a way we think about human autonomy (an understanding grounded in an account of vulnerability as a common feature of humanity); it requires us to rethink our understanding of responsibility and what responsibility is, in the first place, if we take the moral (and political) priority of the others as a starting point of our moral deliberation. I end by offering a diagnosis of our inherently reductive cognitive dispositions and possible (and necessary) ways in which non-instrumental relations with the objects of our knowledge can take place; this process confronts us with an image of ethics and solidarity that insulates us from excessively abstract and ultimately empty philosophical speculation. By drawing its normative content from the tensions of an "existing" social world, it seeks to imagine a new humanitarian ethics and solidarity.

Although my overall argument resides in the same conceptual borough as contemporary theories of social and political philosophy, it does differ significantly from them insofar as it is principally informed by several influential, critical philosophical ideas. My philosophical approach in this dissertation is for the most part situated in within the intellectual tradition of the Frankfurt School, primarily work of Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Walter Benjamin. Although I do not intend to offer a critical re-evaluation of their work, at times I point out at possible directions

where the application of their principles seem relevant and necessary for current social criticism. Their theories are perhaps unintentionally useful in exploring social issues that they themselves never considered directly in their own philosophical discourse (e.g. colonialism, gender inequality, racism, etc.). What I find particularly inspirational about this tradition is its emphasis on society as a web of social relations that result from the intertwinement of material and symbolic forces whose workings condition the social circumstances and experiences of social actors within these material and historical contingency. Thus, by understanding our social reality in terms of an interdependence between the individual and its cultural, economic and political environment, critical theorists help us to conceptualize our moral and political subjectivity as a product of a social reality saturated by power relations. It is exactly this collapse of subjectivity into an amalgamate of social relations that constitute the political drive and imagination of critical theory.[15]

An understanding of political and moral deficits of today's (humanitarian) agency is impossible without focusing on social pathologies and underlying ideological discursive formations that are constitutive of our reality. These references to the material and symbolic aspects of our social conditions and human agency constitute the Frankfurt School's commitment to immanent standards of normativity. Rather than originating from a progressive reading of history or ideal standard of a universal ethics, their commitment instead consists essentially of an attempt to draw out the fundamental properties of a form of life and subjectivity that reveals the ideological character of social conditions and distorted thought practices sustained by our social reality. Philosophically, though, this conviction that cognitive endowments and social factors affect the living conditions of subjects and their agency also poses a farther-reaching meaning for today's increased necessity of including epistemic forms of oppression and violence in theories of social criticism. There is an intimate and necessary correspondence between how we conceive of others

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[15] Please see Amy Allen, *The End of Progress* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), xi-xiii.

and how we treat them, and such correspondence is historically an expression of exclusionary and violent processes within society.

Although my analysis is directly or indirectly indebted to the thought of Theodor Adorno, and other members of the Institute, that does not mean I lack consideration for other forms of cultural, social, or political theory that have progressive or emancipatory aims. Such a liquid understanding of "critical theory" allows me to bring into concert different thinkers that are often considered to be in a direct opposition. Thus, concepts and themes introduced in the following chapters are often done in a way that bring together traditional and contemporary critical discourse with post-structuralism and its diverse feminist, critical race and postcolonial reiterations. Here, I mainly refer to group of French philosophers whose research interests span from Neo-Marxism and phenomenology to contemporary political thought, including such thinkers as Emmanuel Levinas, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Guy Debord, and contemporary extensions of their theory in the works of Judith Butler and Jacques Ranciere. Although my goal here is not to draw naive similarities between them, a significant overlap of their philosophical focus and method helps me identify and bring into concert different aspects of their respective theories. In the process of this eclectic engagement, this dissertation is an attempt to articulate and navigate a complex humanitarian web of social conditions, human choices, actions and omissions. Given the nature of these theories and the ways in which my account draws on their theoretical resources, the framework that I develop here in order to reflect on problems of current humanitarianism may seem theoretically promiscuous and overly pragmatic. In the case of the ambitious critical oeuvre of Frankfurt School thinkers, using portions of their analysis as a method for resisting and transforming current pitfalls of our moral and political agency may seem like a misconception or even a misrepresentation of this body of work. In order to show how these interpretive arguments serve the purpose of a systematic and constructive critique of our current humanitarian present, I devote the remainder of this introduction to

identifying and elaborating on themes and concepts whose reading and application guide my interpretative arguments.

Accordingly, moralizing the potential of Theodor Adorno's critical philosophy remains a crucial influence and a guiding thread of my analysis. This moralizing potential -- reflected in his emphasis on the unacceptable existence of administered human suffering -- not only calls attention to the pathologies inherent in the Neoliberal organization of society, but also sustains the emancipatory vision of philosophy as a critical force that moves us toward the transformation of distorted sociocultural and political conditions. Throughout his work, Adorno reveals the knot between an atrophied capacity of social agents to critically engage with pathological social conditions and reason as it emerges within a culture administered by an instrumental form of thinking and economic reductionism. His analysis demonstrates that in advancing its egocentric account of reason, enlightenment era thinkers of the West tacitly promoted a worldview wherein the personal interests of a small set of people were privileged such that the struggle for power directly supported narrowly conceived Eurocentric standards of rationality, culture, and morality. Increased public indifference towards violence, ongoing desensitization through media, economic exploitation, endemic poverty on both the domestic and international level and further devaluation of human life in general call to mind Adorno's distress concerning the crisis of liberal notions of culture, agency and responsibility.

An underlying aspect of Adorno's thought that draws together different segments of socio-historical experience in capitalist society is his situating of the instrumental 'logic of identity' at the foundation of human rationality. What amounts to an insistence on an object's total 'identification' with the requirements of a universal concept is more than simply a cognitive mistake. Rather, a deeper understanding of our cognitive capacities and habits uncovers underlying ideological and historical roots of such thinking. The way we comprehend reality is linked to a particular

organization of social productive forces and by understanding these different dimensions of human existence we are in a position to reveal the reductive and ideological character of such epistemic and material dispositions. In one of the central passages of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno summarize this argumentative core:

> Reason is the agency of calculating thought, which arranges the world for the purposes of self-preservation and recognizes no function other than that of working on the object as mere sense material in order to make it the material of subjugation. The true nature of the schematism, which externally coordinates the universal and the particular, the concept and the individual case, finally turns out, in current science, to be the interest of industrial society. Being is apprehended in terms of manipulation and administration. Everything – including the individual human being, not to mention the animal –becomes a repeatable, replaceable process, a mere example of the conceptual models of the system. Conflict between administrative, reifying science, between the public mind and the experience of the individual, is precluded by the prevailing circumstances. The senses are determined by the conceptual apparatus in advance of perception; the citizen sees the world as made a priori of the stuff from which he himself constructs it.[16]

This repressive tendency of our cognitive constitution contextualizes and sustains the pathological nature of social relations that causes the subject's inability to empathetically appropriate his human and natural surroundings. Since individuals are not isolated units, but rather products of their social and cultural environment, their experience of the world is already preformed by a reason that subjugates its objects through conceptual codification. The 'conceptual imperialism' that underlines the epistemological primacy of the subject not only impoverishes experience but also, through its abstract classifications, destroys the uniqueness of things while simultaneously conditioning us to approach them as useful specimens. In practice, these common tendencies of our cognitive organization inevitably lead to a reduction in our grasp of reality given that objects appear to us as simple instances that trigger a socially appropriate conceptual response. What appears to be a product of intellectual socialization affects both our self-conception and our conception of objects and others. And, it also determines our responses to them within a social structure wherein contemporary economic and political dynamics mirror theoretical ones.[17]

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[16] Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 65.

[17] By extending Marx's concern for commodity fetishism and exchange value, Adorno emphasizes that wherein concepts subordinate objects of thought, on a social level this kind of oppression receives its manifestation in the commodity structure of society. As the commodities penetrate social reality in all of its aspects, individual lives are controlled by social forces that conceal the real nature of the historical conditions by hiding domination behind the veil of normative universals. Such universals (the monetary fund, legal system, education, police, etc.) yield a model of the objective form

It is exactly Adorno's understanding of the social roots of epistemology and its relation to morality that inevitably lead to important ontological questions which Adorno himself avoided to explicitly address. His continuous suspicion of the ideological grounds of Heideggerian 'fundamental ontology' leads him to maintain that ontology is in a constant flux with epistemology which ultimately becomes constitutive of morality. Consequently, Adorno gives us in *Negative Dialectics* an ethics of cognition wherein reflection upon conceptual determinations of the object of knowledge helps the knowing subject remain attentive to the object's 'otherness.' Sadly, Adorno leaves us only with traces of such an ethics. In evoking such attentiveness to otherness Adorno reminds us that a crucial problem for philosophy is not only to acknowledge what is lost in conceptual codification or to identify the unjust structural features of a predominant liberal universalism, but also to work against such obstacles by recognizing the ethical demands that non-identity, or the other in his particularity, places on us. This claim according to Adorno commits philosophy to a recognition of its relationship to violence, and reflects on the ways in which it has fueled (and fuels) hegemonic tendencies of Eurocentrism, colonialism and increasing militarism. Attempting an aspirational and emancipatory reading of Adorno also brings us to the limits of his work. Although Adorno's insights have proven extremely fruitful for diagnostic purposes, it remains unclear how an acknowledgment of complicity can mobilize political agency in a way that would ultimately overturn relations of power and privilege that have historically resulted in the oppression, subjugation and murder of non-European people. This worry becomes even more evident once we remember that Adorno was doubtful about the emancipatory potential of collective social action.

To make up for the deficiencies of Adorno's analysis I complement his views by turning to the work of Michel Foucault. To this end, Foucault's theory of disciplinary and normalizing power remains helpful in addressing a host of issues concerning agency and autonomy. This dissertation focuses on two central aspects of Foucault's analysis: (a) his understanding of power as an

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of modern society together with all subjective forms corresponding to them (art, mass-media, consumerism, etc.). Emphasis on the close relationship between the instrumental desire of identity thinking and the commodification of social reality allows Adorno to chart the causal relationship between a reductive understanding of the world and the distorted living conditions that result in deformed personal agency. The sense of mastery that underwrites the instrumentalization of the conceptual grasp of an object reflects the coercion and exploitation inherent in totalitarian societies. Behind the reduction of the human individual to a bearer of exchange value lays the domination of one group of humans over another. Unless one rejects outright Adorno's assumption concerning the materiality of culture and consciousness, cognitive errors and moral failures cannot be taken as separate modes of inquiry. Thus, neither ethics nor cognition can be prioritized, rather they have to remain in constant dialectic relationship. Western philosophy's entwinement with Nazism, colonialism, and cultural imperialism partially accounts for such a claim. To get beyond such complicity, it is necessary to formulate a critical response to such injustices beyond the pious eye we turn toward a narrowly causal set of historical contingencies.

organizational structure of social reality,[18] and (b) the genealogy of subjectivity within a web of discursive and material practices that Foucault calls 'biopolitics.' My overall strategy is to distinguish several different ways of understanding these processes through which the power relations between social conditions, social agents and their *other(s)* have been historically formed (and also the ways in which they are sustained today). Taking into account the close relationship between socialization practices and the constitution of subjectivity, Foucault's analysis of power brings into a single space an interdisciplinary inquiry into the cultural, social and psychological dimensions of personal agency and the nature of their complex interactions. Because every social and political theory presupposes a particular notion of the subject, it is important to examine how different conceptions of subjectivity are formed and how these formations affect the ways in which we conceive others and determine our actions towards them. It is precisely our self-conceptions that guide our understanding of social relations and other human beings. To see oneself from a certain perspective implies that social factors affect the way we differentiate ourselves from others and their environments.[19]

Many critical feminist, race and postcolonial theorist have accepted Foucault's analysis of power and subjection and used it as a framework for their analyses of different ways that subordination occurs around a multifaceted axis of gender and race relations.[20] Relying on his work, their accounts of social identity, gender, race, ethnicity, etc. systematically challenge deeply entrenched assumptions what is "natural", "normal" or seen as a "value" within society. If Foucault is right in that our agency is developed within a web of social relations that constitute the normative background of our epistemic sensibilities and moral/political faculties, this evaluative framework simultaneously constrains and enables our ability to know ourselves and others. As the following chapters show, the structure and dynamic of such processes (i.e. formations, negotiations, inclusions, exclusions, humanizations, dehumanization, etc.) compel us to admit that such an acknowledgment

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[18] Which Foucault takes from Nietzsche, who emphasizes power as the organizational structure of reality, in general - not just social reality.

[19] For the purposes of the analysis here, I reflect on the structure and dynamics of exclusion, especially how exclusionary practices not only target and classify specific groups of people, but at the same time constitute them as either worthy or unworthy of recognition and public concern. The premise is that the exclusion of certain social (and humanitarian) sectors (racial and gender-based groups, the LBGT community, immigrants, refugees, ethnic and religious minorities etc.) takes the form of widespread instances of disrespect and their gradual dehumanization. This social mechanism of control and subordination relies on a complex system of beliefs and structures of their representation that aims to produce and reproduce certain social conditions.

[20] Please see Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008); Allen, *The End of Progress,* 2015; Nancy Fraser, *Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004); Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself,* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005); Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2009).

of the unavoidable impurity of our cognitive, moral and political faculties necessitates giving away overly-ambitious claims that some philosophers or social activists (especially those in humanitarian field) make regarding the possibility of mobilizing solidarity independently of addressing its social, epistemic and ontological constraints. Too often such attempts end up as ignorant, illusory or as reinforcing the same injustices and inequalities they aim to combat by ignoring the often incommensurable experiences of differently positioned social groups.

One way a society creates and maintains such "positions" is through hegemonic social imaginary[21] grounded in an evaluative frame which ultimately functions as a tether that binds a given socio-political culture together, and renders the social conditions that surround its subjects intelligible. What Foucault calls a "grid of intelligibility" is nothing but the sum of different conflicted and aligned social imaginaries rooted historically in social conditions and relations of social forces that operate by establishing contexts wherein the subject recognizes herself and encounters the other. As a discursive formation, encountering the other is not only an invitation to either associate or dissociate, but from the outset reflects and constitutes social relationships wherein the participation of the Non-European is typically involuntary.[22] Hence, this 'other' becomes perceived by Western subjects as an ungrateful position whose perceptive (and subsequent normative) pacification not only leads to a diminished moral and political status, but also stands as a prelude to her subsequent marginalization and oppression. Not only does this asymmetry of power ultimately make the inclusion or exclusion of marginalized and oppressed subjectivity dependent on the European subject's capacity to acknowledge or deny her agency, but further, the difference in this capacity also represents an exercise of domination over others whose epistemic marginalization additionally leads to a material one. These processes are interrelated and, as such, limit our potential to have reciprocal relationships with others because agency and autonomy always fall onto one side, the side of privileged and powerful agent.

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[21] My assumption is that society is a site wherein different social imaginaries collude, negotiate, combat or dominate each other. This way marginalized and oppressed subjectivities still preserve a possibility of agency.

[22] As we will see later, Judith Butler uses this capacious aspect of Foucault's understanding of power in order to disclose ways in which the evaluative role of these frames is expressed in automatic processes that focus attention on public representations, and the ways in which we acquire knowledge about social conditions, and other people. Such forms of experiencing and forming knowledge are in themselves selective and exclusionary. Since cultural and political contexts of the public sphere are both epistemic and ontological domains, citizens may include or exclude on the basis of how and what knowledge has been gathered and represented, or on the basis of the situated social situation of both the subjects and the foreign others within the society at large. In this sense, discursive and ontological formations (at least of humans and their identities) grow out of actual social experience, which is to be understood in terms of the relations of power, historically speaking, in which such experiences take place.

But how do we begin to tackle these issues and pave the way for genuine moral and political engagement amid so many injustices and human vulnerabilities? Not only do these epistemological and ontological negotiations that take place within a power saturated reality, they circumscribe and define who we are, our sense of self, the way we are perceived by others, what we are able to see and who the Other is. Additionally, they impose a condition of 'reproducibility,' a prerequisite that allows for the perpetuation of social conditions whose history (and longevity) often mistakenly influence us to believe they are 'natural' in some way, rather than a product of historical choices that have been made at the cost of conquered, enslaved and oppressed people. Yet, in light of shifting social and cultural contexts, the reproducibility of power relations also entails a possibility to break out of previous oppressive contexts. One lesson we can take from this brief introduction is that only when we detach from reductive accounts of 'knowing' and 'seeing,' when we reconfigure the direction from which power flows, do these hegemonic imaginaries fall apart.

In the end, to overcome the constraints of our social and cultural positioning we not only have to give away our privilege, but also our identities that we may have become attached to. If my solidarity and humanitarian engagement with others means giving up my identity and privilege as a male, white, European subject, then it is obvious that I may have strong motivations to hang on to it, and hang onto power that such privilege entails. After all, history does not easily forgive centuries of divisions, exploitation and murder. Hence, whatever approach we choose to distance ourselves from this attachment, it is obvious that radical social and political transformation depend on our capacity to purge ourselves from epistemic, ontological, social, moral and political privilege. If we ultimately want to redefine our position in the world, it is necessary to ascribe the characteristic of collapsibility to the norms that emanate from underlying frames that form and guide our deepest moral and political commitments, and of course to regain a notion of responsibility that underlies them. Only by installing different configurations of power and by making the emergence of different patterns and ways of thinking, seeing and caring is such a change possible. Despite a difficult social and political reality, there seems to exist hope for a more inclusive and perhaps all-encompassing relation with others which transcends the narrow and exclusionary logic of humanity to which our political culture abides. Notwithstanding, it is vital to remain attentive of the hardships inherent in such an endeavor because overcoming exclusionary logic often (if not always) implies, at the same time, the difficult task of overcoming ourselves.

CHAPTER 1

SLEIGHT OF HAND: COMPASSION AND THE CLAIMS OF HUMANITY

Few phenomena are as formative of our experience of the social environment as displays of human brutality. Encounters with such displays invite us to explore our relation to other human beings who experience conditions that are for the most part so removed from our own lives that we remain dazed by the inconceivable hardships that they are forced to endure. This not only raises questions about the nature of relationship that such knowledge creates, but also what kinds of obligations are invoked by it. There is no doubt that our knowledge determines how we feel and what we do, but this relation between "what we know", "how we feel" and "what can we do" is far from being straightforward. Neither one of these questions gives a clear guideline how to act on an injustice done to other people. When we think about claims that our morality impinges on us, it seems always to be a result of certain effort and sacrifice. For the most part we are caught in our everyday concerns, we theorize about moral principles, but our practices are often at the distance from our basic assumptions about what is right or wrong. We are moved by scenes of depravity and we are moved by the actions of others, and for the most part we are trying to understand what makes people commit the acts that they do. To this end, I begin with a general understanding that human beings are vulnerable, and that this vulnerability is in itself constituted as a social phenomenon that we share with other people. Sometimes this vulnerability calls upon us as moral actors, conditioning us to experience the lives of others in a way that invites us to contemplate on our own condition. In order to achieve this one has to understand the reasons why we respond to others in the way that either ignores the historical, political, economic and cultural conditions that guide our formation as social actors, or helplessly succumbs to it. This succinct statement of our dependence on social conditions and other human beings locates us as already part of social relations, in which our subjectivity is in constant projection to encounter with others. Such

encounter, regardless of how occasional, marginal, obscure it may be, creates a form of social meaning, and it is always at risk of misunderstanding or being misunderstood. Let us consider the example of Srđan Aleksić, a name which recently became the center of discussion about compassion, responsibility and reconciliation in the aftermath of ethnic violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Srđan Aleksić was a promising Serbian athlete and an amateur actor from Trebinje, a town in southern Bosnia and Herzegovina.[23] In 1993, arguably the most violent year of the conflict, this young man alone confronted four Serbian soldiers who attacked and wanted to murder his acquaintance, a Bosniak, Alen Glavović. In front of onlookers and police officers, Srđan was beaten to death by the same soldiers, whose uniform and ethnicity he shared. Following this event and the aroused atmosphere of ethnic hatred, Alen left his home town together with four thousand other Herzegovinians of Muslim faith. The papers of their 'voluntary' eviction were signed by Serbian authorities, and while the media celebrated this form of ethnic cleansing as a success story of newly formed national identity, Srđan's grave reminds us of the bloody and contradictory price that has to be paid. In the aftermath of these events, one of the murderers was killed at the front, ironically his image now stands beside Srđan's image in the Serbian military memorial room in Trebinje. The only thing that they shared is that both of them were Serbs—everything else was radically different.

Almost twenty years have passed since the ending of the Bosnian war. The case of Srđan Aleksić shows all the complexities of historical, interpersonal, and political layers of violence, but also how hope exists in a world plagued by inhumanity. The epilogue of such a story is rarely limited to a narrative of the difference between good deeds and bad deeds. It is a dynamic encounter that invites us to think through conditions that led to such events, and what has made people accept and facilitate such roles. If we do not take time to reflect upon the anger and sadness of people whose

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[23] For more information about Srđan and the event itself https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Srđan_Aleksić

lives are affected by such conditions—if we ignore the reasons that motivate and justify the choices they make—we will never truly know how their lives and environment can be reconciled with the violent past.[24] In the face of such conditions, concepts of humanity and justice receive a completely different meaning, and often something else than theoretical abstraction is necessary to remind us what being human really means. That 'something' also will be impossible to grasp and articulate if we ignore Srđan's selfless act in protecting another human being against cruel odds, or if we forget Srđan's father's capacity to publically forgive murderers of his son. Given how complex motives of human agency are, one can ask what can be learned from such an experience. What lesson can we take from such brutality and tragic loss? My aim here, then, is not to materialize blame and discuss moral and legal liabilities of soldiers who commit atrocities, or the nature of social conditions that nurtured their pathological behavior. This event reminds us about something else: the lives of Srđan's friends, his father, Alen Glavović and people who witnessed the event. These lives have been affected by their loss and the experience that followed it. What emerges from such an experience is the primarily tacit demand that forces us to rethink if Srđan's momentary impulse is a sign of humanity or sign that our humanity has reached its tragic limits. Although there is always a danger of romanticizing the conditions of those that face or engender cruelty, the story of Srđan Aleksić momentary impulse of humanity sadly begins and ends with the epitaph on his grave: "He died doing his human duty."

What is this duty, than, and what can be said about the mechanisms that prevent it from occurring more often? Srđan's story appeals to the readers' sense of compassion, and is intended to motivate the desire to act in accordance with such compassionate feeling. Such a gesture amidst such brutal conditions recalls an understanding of political subjectivity that has roots in modern thought as far back as Adam Smith and Jean Jacques Rousseau. It bids its audience to access a part of the self

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[24] Please see Jill Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness: The Injustice of Not Being Heard* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

that resonates with the vulnerability intrinsic to all human beings, but to which some are materially more exposed then others. It appeals to an alleged human capacity to internalize the suffering of other human beings, which in one way or another has been a goal of 'liberal political culture' since the eighteenth century onward. The effects of such internalization, however, are not straightforward. While it is clear that Srđan's act was emotionally poignant and instructive, less certain is whether it has resulted in tangible improvements in material and political conditions for other wretched and vulnerable lives in Bosnia. These conditions unfortunately worsened in the following years, culminating in the massacre in Srebrenica conducted by Serbian forces on their Muslim co-citizens. Now, reflecting upon these events from a safe distance what can we say about compassion if, for the most part, such isolated gestures of sympathy can be seen as humane acts of small number of people? This, of course, complicates the modern assumption that compassion engenders appropriate humanitarian action. In the case of various social and political projects enacted in the name of horrifying events in Bosnia, there may even be grounds for suspicion that expressions of sympathy exhaust themselves in fine political rhetoric—or worse, give rise to further injury through a perverse desire for the spectacle of others' suffering. For it is one thing to arouse awareness among bystanders about vulnerability of others; it is quite another feat of the imagination to productively respond to such feelings. The case of Srđan Aleksić brought into the public sphere a new collective identity, making visible for the first time the complexity of war torn apart social fabric. In so doing, it also brought to light lies and omissions through which mainstream Serbian, Bosnian and Croatian identity had hitherto been formed.

In what follows, I aim to address a difficult question that arises when we think about the conditions under which compassion plays a significant role in shaping social life. There is an increased interest in so called moral sentiments (feelings of sympathy, anger, compassion, empathy, resentment, etc.) and the political dependence on these emotions for shaping political agents,

practices and institutions. In order to examine in depth compassion as one of the most politically charged emotions, I begin by reconstructing the anthropological and philosophical discourse concerning the nature of the latter. To address the general characteristics of this human sentiment, it is necessary to start with the basic assumption that human beings have a predisposition to be concerned with the wellbeing of others, and that under certain circumstances exposure to the pain or suffering of others can illicit moral reactions among spectators. As we have seen in example of Srđan Aleksić it seems that in some cases this human capacity transcends restraints of sociocultural habituation, and may prompt feelings of sympathy for a previously dehumanized and/or subordinated category of people. The way in which such acts may provoke a redistribution of social meaning raises an important question of the political importance of the passions as a moral and motivational foundation of human agency. Historically, early modern thinkers have made the human passion a central topic of moral and political theory, arguing that compassion is one of the inherent aspects of being human. Taking Rousseau as one of the main representatives of this trend in modern philosophy I aim to examine the role given to compassion in contemporary political culture, and see whether such an emotional disposition should be fostered in citizens and embodied in institutions. In the second part, I take a skeptical view of compassion's political credentials. The predominant liberal understanding of compassion thrives on its promises to enlarge the moral and political boundaries of communities, and engender equal respect across contingent geopolitical contexts. Yet in practice, it seems not only that this sentiment does not deliver on its political promises, but rather imposes limits on agency that further leads to entrenchment of victimhood and resentment. By diminishing the moral and political agency of recipients, it fails to redress the injustices it identifies, it exhausts empathetic identification and in addition it generates indifference and political fatigue. The critical standpoint I have here in mind tracks the different ways in which the limits and inconsistencies of an ethics and politics grounded in compassion can be critically iterated. I follow

Adorno's rejection of the notion of compassion as a basis of moral practice on the grounds that compassionate behavior sets out only to mitigate injustice, and not actually change the conditions that create and reproduce it. In order to unmask the naïve idealism which ignores the primacy of interests and ties forged by history, and for compassion to realize its potential as a sentiment that can be valid moral and political motive it has to challenge the social contexts that give rise to human suffering, and inspire citizens to take a responsibility to protect others from injustice and undeserved agony. The final part of this chapter, then, aims to identify conditions under which compassion can be conceived as an important cognitive and normative resource that makes us aware of unacknowledged forms of human suffering and it compels us to remedy it. One way to redeem such potential is by identifying the ways and means of ensuring that compassion does not confine itself to paternalistic, intrusive political actions that strip others of their dignity and agency.

Compassion and its Discontents

While experiencing the distress and trauma of other human beings, the need to prevent or redress their suffering is arguably the most fundamental moral obligation. In the face of horrifying events we witness how different moral sentiments receive their articulation in the sphere of public life. Such articulation is closely followed by an attempt to extend the realm of individual and collective concerns beyond people's usual sphere of interests in an attempt to use these sentiments as moral and motivational foundation for political action. The important feature of this process is not only that it places human trauma immediately within a set of social relationships, but also that such traumatic experience is immediately negotiated as an encounter between social agents, wherein their experience and reaction to these events constitute them as social actors. The cultural experience of human suffering today is distinguished by an unprecedented expansion in our field of cultural vision. More than just material for news outlets, these scenes of human deprivation bid their

audience to access a part of the self that resonates with the vulnerability all human beings share. Such exposure also appeals to a capacity to internalize the other's suffering and should serve to transform our political outlooks and moral dispositions. We are part of a political culture today, where, arguably, more is done to institutionalize and protect the sanctity of human life than ever before in the history of human civilization. On these grounds, human interaction that take place through sentiments of 'pity' and/or 'compassion' seem to be of vital importance for the acquisition of social awareness and the arousal of social conscience. At the same time, these sentiments serve not only as the spur to social consciousness but also as bonds for social attachment and moral responsibility, which may be at times maliciously instrumentalized and suffer the risk of unintended consequences.

Such analytical distinctions and critical viewpoints draw on a long tradition of public debate over the ways in which moral sentiment might serve as a civic virtue. To begin with, compassion is "the feeling that arises witnessing another's suffering and that motivates a subsequent desire to help."[25] This ability to feel with the suffering or misfortune of others contains within itself an appraisal of the seriousness of various predicaments that the other experiences and centers upon a concern for ameliorating their suffering. Although a great deal of theoretical work continues to marginalize the role of emotions in political deliberation, there is an increased interest in ways how the emotions shape and are shaped by political agents and their practices. Compassion like any other emotion, poses a risk when it becomes the basis of political judgment and action, but the issue is how to manage these risks so that we can use benefits of this moral sentiment. Sophisticated attempts to understand how our sentimental attachments to others might be fashioned for the purpose of social reforms (and control) is nothing new; they have been part of liberal political culture since the 18th century. In an attempt to understand why people may might be motivated by

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[25] Goetz et al, "Compassion: An Evolutionary Analysis and Empirical Review" in *Psychol Bull.* 136:3 (2010): 351.

moral feeling to care for others Rousseau argues that the possibility to act compassionately towards

others is lodged deep inside us, and as such is a natural disposition present in all humans. He argues

that one can either choose to ignore this feeling and defy what is essentially part of human nature, or

we can cultivate the experience of compassion to bring us closer to the rest of humankind. In his

preface to *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality,* Rousseau elaborates on this point, there he writes:

> Throwing aside, therefore, all those scientific books, which teach us only to see men
> such as they have made themselves, and contemplating the first and most simple
> operations of the human soul, I think that I can perceive in it two principles prior to
> reason, one of them deeply interesting us in our own welfare and preservation, and
> the other exciting a natural repugnance at seeing any other sensible being, and
> particularly any of our own species, suffer pain or death. It is from the agreement
> and combination which the understanding is in a position to establish between these
> two principles, without its being necessary to introduce that of sociability, that all the
> rules of natural right appear to me to be derived – rules which our reason is
> afterwards obliged to establish on other foundations, when by its successive
> developments it has been led to suppress nature itself.[26]

In various ways this inner impulse of commiseration is dictated by our common sensitivity rather

than by rational deliberation. This claim entails an understanding of compassion as an ethically

constitutive passion and affective practices. Such an inclusion doesn't mean the loss of our reason,

but in case of compassion it would imply that there is an inherent capacity to sustain a sense of

ourselves as aspects of a non-purposive ethical intersubjectivity, that is open to and responsible for

the suffering of others. Thus, for Rousseau the demand for higher levels of control over violent

tendencies and for greater detachment and foresight in relations with other people was an important

dimension of the civilizing process that would result in creation of the moral and political

attachments among citizens and increasing social inequality.

This trend towards widening the scope of emotional identification between people whose

lives had become more closely interwoven and who were mutually dependent, unfortunately, also

highlights the increasing gulf and differentiation between social actors. What in Rousseau begins as

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[26] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1992), *13.*

an otherwise flattering contrast between pre-social and social human development points out at a deeper problem: for although all individuals possess this immanent sensitivity inclining them to act compassionately towards others, they may be incapable of attending to its dictates due to processes of social upbringing and development of social and cultural faculties that Rousseau sees as inherent aspects of social world. Some observations about the reasons for the differences follow in conjunction with reflections how Rousseau (and other enlightenment thinkers) responded to the moral challenges that resulted from inequality that followed advancement of cultural, economic and political differences between individuals. The issue tied with compassion's affectedness by social inequalities is reflected in the fact that compassionate behavior is more likely to commence between people who are alike and is less likely to be directed towards those who are regarded as occupying fundamentally different social circumstances. In order to avoid a narrow and self-centered sense of human relations and build up a stable and lasting concern for others, Rousseau emphasizes the role of education and the ways in which social cohesion depends on a social capacity to foster the growth of compassion as the first step in socialization of citizens.

The moral contortions of civilized societies led Rousseau to articulate an account of how to cultivate compassionate impulses between individuals. While in the state of nature compassion seems to be unmediated affective disposition that is inherent to every human being, in *Emile* due to social constraints compassion becomes something different: it is a feeling in which imagination takes part. The imaginative capacity to feel with vulnerable others, for Rousseau, is a constitutive dimension of public life that enables civic sensibilities. It is an ability to put oneself in the place of another human being, of imagining what she feels and be able to consider why we should act on her vulnerability. What makes an individual feel compassion for another person, then, is not only the extent of the other person's problems or miseries. Compassion to some extent helps individuals (as well as social institutions) recognize certain shared presumptions about what is it like to be a human

being, and conceives of solidarity as a political, rather than only moral, project. The individual sympathizes with another person's experience, with the experience of a human being confronted with the limits of her own condition: personal destitute, illness, or mortality. Speaking of his protagonist Emile's growing sense of humanity, Rousseau writes:

> In directing his nascent sensibility to his species, do not believe that it will at the outset embrace all men, and that the word mankind will signify anything to him. No, this sensibility will in the first place be limited to his fellows, and for him his fellows will not be unknowns; rather, they will be those with whom he has relations, those whom habit has made dear or necessary to him, those whom he observes to have ways of thinking and feeling clearly in common with him… It will be only after having cultivated his nature in countless ways, after many reflections on his own sentiments and on those he observes in others, that he will be able to get to the point of generalizing his individual notions under the abstract idea of humanity and to join to his particular affections those which can make him identify with his species.[27]

Thus, compassion's role in sustaining a public ethos of solidarity with vulnerable others and as a form of individual's moral education accounts for the formation of the general idea of humanity. This formation is due to the progressive extension of the individual's concern from people close to her, and to humanity in general. In this sense, Rousseau elaborates a 'genealogy' of the idea of humanity as a result of the expansive strength of the sentiment of compassion, but humanity here is not viewed as an indistinct abstract whole; rather, the idea of humanity as Emile conceives of it is the mere possibility of another human being experiencing the same condition, the same finitude as he does.

To explore this claim further, it is important to understand the circumstances under which compassionate dispositions towards others may develop (or fail to do so). Specifically, it is necessary to understand how far individuals are bound together in relations of mutual dependence, and how their respective social positions and related constructions of the other influence potentials for increasing compassion in relations between people they have been separate from, and frequently divided against each other. Historically, it seems that Rousseau's response to this challenge lies in his

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[27] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 233.

insistence on the relational nature of social life and human development. Such an account comes close to suggesting that compassion grounds ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of connection, meaning and control. We are all vulnerable creatures, prey to physical and psychological wounding; thus, one important aspect of our sociality is an inability to see ourselves independent from others (our dependence on others and mediated comparisons and acquisition of knowledge ground the ways in which we are formed and consciousness of the world around us). Given this innate human vulnerability, at least some form of minimal solidarity between social actors is necessary in order for social attachments to make sense. As he writes: "It is man's weakness which makes him sociable, every attachment is a sign of insufficiency. If each of us had no need of others, he would hardly think of uniting himself with them… It follows from this that we are attached to our fellows less by the sentiments of their pleasures than by the sentiments of their pains, for we see far better in the latter the identity of our natures with theirs and the guarantees of their attachment to us."[28] Because of our dependence on other people, and because of the way trauma affects us one way to comprehend weight of conditions that some parts of humanity are experiencing depends on our capacity to transcend ourselves and the illusion of self-sufficiency by taking a radically different perspective. This identification with the other, is for Rousseau not only an inherent aspect of subject formation, but also accounts for the development of intersubjectivity and genesis of morality in social context in which my encounter with others creates regimes of meanings that enable me to mediate knowledge about the world around and potentially efface the difference that exists within social landscape (or at least make them bearable).

As we see in both *The Discourse* and *Emile,* whether or not we follow this voice of compassion depends on our ability to recognize and identify with one another. Taking into account that socialization practices bear responsibility for depriving us of the more elemental ability to

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[28] Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, 221.

identify with another by apprehending the natural sensibility we all share, it also supplies us with the surrogate faculty to compensate for the lost one. As he puts it:

> To become sensitive and pitiful the child must know that he has fellow-creatures who suffer as he has suffered, who feel the pains he has felt, and others which he can form some idea of, being capable of feeling them himself. Indeed, how can we let ourselves be stirred by pity unless we go beyond ourselves, and identify ourselves with the suffering animal, by leaving, so to speak, our own nature and taking his. We only suffer so far as we suppose he suffers; the suffering is not ours but his. So no one becomes sensitive till his imagination is aroused and begins to carry him outside himself.[29]

It is this capacity for imagination that sets in motion the moralizing processes among viewing public. This is because imagination—that is, the capacity to place ourselves in the victim's condition—enables a fleeting transfer of emotions as if the suffering were our own, and can potentially lead to action. This moralizing potential of sympathetic identification constitutes, indeed, one of the most important legacies of the Rousseau's pedagogical and moral analysis of compassion. For Rousseau exposure to suffering is significant for his conception of development of moral subjectivity in that, properly cultivated, it activates latent potential to care inherent in all and orients it towards purposeful action that aims to alleviate that suffering. While Rousseau does not necessarily exclude the importance that natural 'goodness' has in moral deliberation within civic society, with the faculty of imagination as the capacity of image and language to represent suffering as a cause of sympathetic identification, it does locate the source of moral agency in a continuous tension between public realm and individual self. Due to different social positions, difference in cognitive and material faculties and dispositions, compassion is no longer a sentiment contingent to our natural dispositions, rather requires specific cognitive effort to overcome pitfalls of increased social differentiations. Although this demand to feel for the hardships of other individuals depends on subject's capacity to transcend her own position (and the illusion of self-sufficiency), trying to achieve a different perspective could, also, be conceived of as a social mechanism developed to

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[29] Ibid., 222.

negotiate social inequalities. As we have seen, in part this is unfortunate corollary to a life in civil

society where individual is unable to resist falling prey to the personal vices of vanity and greed. Yet

due to the growing inequalities of civil society, natural sensitivity and other common features of

natural equality become overwhelmed by manifold conventional differences, to the point where

individuals are so different from one another that they can barely recognize any common humanity

beneath the layers of social and cultural articulation. This is a lamentable consequence of the

civilizing processes that leads to a certain moral instability of compassion, and highlights the

difficulties of navigating through pitfalls of social imaginaries that inform and articulate our

knowledge and objects about the suffering of others.

Rousseau's insights about the dependence of compassion on imagination and recognition

strikes familiar, contemporary chords. The disposition of compassionate solidarity does not

automatically arise as a consequence of the sight of suffering as such, but inheres instead within a

particular representational structure of suffering – a structure that manages to incite the spectators'

sympathetic identification with the person who is suffering, and make specific proposals as to what

we can do to alleviate their hardships and pain.[30] If we want to understand why people might be

motivated by moral feeling to care for distant others, one has to first disclose the social and cultural

conditions that delimit our apprehension and affective response when confronted with scenes of

human suffering. Despite the much celebrated rhetoric of contemporary proponents of

humanitarian compassion, their claim that the experience of the suffering of others serves to

radically transform our political outlooks and moral dispositions, our historical record of growing

social and global inequalities, actually reveals the opposite tendency. It is also very likely that the

moral and political contradictions that arise for people in connection with experience of being

positioned as remote witness of distant suffering complicate the compassionate sensibility insofar as

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[30] Please see Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Politics, Morality and the Media.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

the latter depends on the increased mediation of human misfortune through what Horkheimer and Adorno identified as complicity between technology and capitalism.[31] Although Rousseau's insistence on the moral acknowledgment of the unfortunate conditions of others highlights the obvious importance of compassion and imagination in shaping public humanitarian imaginaries, at the same time we also see the difficulties anchored with this view. The movement from feeling to action entails understanding and assessment of the situation and consideration of the appropriate response. Political agency that results in compassion can take various forms, and resulting political action might have various outcomes. What is more important, being compassionate establishes a relation between social actors where the causes of suffering and vulnerability already sets up the context between the political agents active within the political system and the victims of injustice or affliction who are excluded from the exercise of political agency. Compassion conceived this way is a practice that not only polarizes humanity into the beneficiaries of acts of solidarity, and agents who are providing the aid, but also as a mechanism of 'othering' that navigates pitfalls of global economy, historical injustices, and a private calculable logic of sentimental obligations towards vulnerable others.[32] Hence, despite its focus on human vulnerability as the clearest manifestation of common humanity, it is an awful paradox that a life in which we devotedly strive for shaping dependencies is already grounded in an asymmetry and difference in the vulnerabilities we experience. While compassion in its humanitarian renderings takes this human vulnerability as the starting point, it also simultaneously evokes the language and workings of power, wherein a constitutive dimension of compassionate behavior appears to rest on inherent difference in social positions that benefactors and beneficiaries share.

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[31] Please see Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).
[32] Please see Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), *5*.

The central question, then, both for Rousseau and contemporary proponents of the ethical

and political dispositions grounded in compassion is whether we can ever feel commiseration for

another without somehow invoking our self and our standing relative to the conditions that shape

and affect us and other human beings. We have seen that Rousseau's account relies on the

moralizing potential of sympathetic identification wherein the individual must first experience the

other as a subject similarly endowed with sensibility.[33] Yet this 'subjecthood' for Rousseau is pure

potentiality, susceptible to the diverse influences of environment, culture, religion, wealth or social

status. Today, a constitutive dimension of humanitarian discourse organized around nurturing

compassion among the Western public, takes place among the individuals who confront one another

no longer as the simple, sensible beings who accidently cross paths in a state of nature, but instead

are subsequently and inevitably marked by conventional differences like male, female, poor, black,

white, Christian, Muslim, etc.. Between the 'denaturalized' subjects of civil society whom Rousseau

describes as having attained 'self-consciousness' the act of identification and subsequent recognition

remains an ambivalent endeavor. Even if the initial effect of an encounter with the other reveals the

universal sympathy we all share as sensible human beings, the next and inevitable aspect of

recognition is its dependence on the layers of our subjectivity that are conventional, particular and

alien. Hence, imagining ourselves in the position of another creates challenges for different groups,

because different social groups share different cognitive and material dispositions for experiencing

their environment and other human beings. Mapped onto the broader asymmetry between the

affluent and poor, white and black, male and female, contemporary humanitarian arrangements

render the mediation of afflicted parts of humanity mainly through cultivation of the ethical

dispositions that are undermined by the same differences humanitarians want to highlight and

overcome. We are consequently much more likely to lose touch with the sensible voice of

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[33] In Rousseau's words "commiseration will be all the more energetic as the observing animal identifies himself more intimately with the suffering animal." Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality,* 132.

compassion insofar as we are socially constituted, wherein such constitution defines the limits of our ability to imagine ourselves in the position of the other. Following directly from this systematic gap between social actors, the difference between different social groups explains not only why we are so often incapable of mobilizing a generous ethos of engagement across these differences, but also why differences so often result in insensitivity, ignorance, and subsequently cruelty and violence.

Critique of Compassion

We have seen that theoretical account that situates compassion at the center of contemporary public culture starts with a common understanding that compassion is a sign of living for others or as a form of mutuality and recognition. It is, as we saw in a short exegesis of Rousseau's philosophy, that the quality and occurrence of compassionate dispositions depend on cultivation of human natural inclinations to acknowledge and act upon suffering of others. Although inherent property of our moral structure this disposition to act compassionately, due increased inequalities and contingencies of social life does not automatically arise as a consequence of moral deliberation, but rather inheres instead within a specific epistemic structure of imagination that manages to incite spectator's awareness of the other. Although the moralizing potential of identification with others may mobilize a certain array of emotions that are constitutive of the moral tissue of Western public life,[34] contemporary debate on the worth and role of compassion continues to be plagued by its normative and cognitive ambivalence. Despite much elaborated rhetoric, compassion remains a controversial and unreliable ethical and political motive. The critics in their various disciplinary iterations, conceive of compassion to be far too partial, inconstant and unreliable to rely on as a moral and political drive. As some of these critics argue, it motivates actions and policies that: unwittingly entrench victimhood and resentment rather than create agency; express

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[34] Please see Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator,* 2013.

itself as a shaming pity that diminishes its recipients and fails to redress injustices it identifies;

exhaust empathetic identification and generates indifference and fatigue; and worse still, is

profoundly connected to subordination, exploitation and domination. While I do not intend to

completely reject the political and moral worth of the idea of compassion, I do think it is necessary

to disclose the ways in which it can go dangerously awry, what in turn jeopardizes an impartial

application of principles of justice that proponents of an ethics and politics grounded in compassion

want to advance. In what follows, I explore ways in which some influential critical strands engage

with compassion in order to potentially open up an emancipatory and authentic ethics of solidarity

and responsibility.

In retrospect, drawing upon what I have introduced in previous section, it seems that the

moral and political value of compassion relies on the one hand, on the representation of

vulnerability that carries with itself the moral claim to common humanity, and on the other, the

assumption that such knowledge motivates public to act. Compassion, in this sense, constitutes the

dominant figure of a natural inclination to care for others, which are cornerstones of humanitarian

philanthropy that is the dominant practice for today's management of human deprivation

worldwide. Despite its benign objectives, critiques argue that the humanitarian regime ultimately

legitimizes the neoliberal logic of the market that turns altruistic aspirations of contemporary

humanitarianism into the concealed aspirations of a global economy, and the political interests of

affluent countries. In doing so it not only fails to serve its moral and political purpose, but

perpetuates a questionable climate of dependence that has harmful effects on the vulnerable others,

a dependence which often masks traces of historical injustices and ongoing exploitation. In blurring

the boundaries between sociopolitical conditions, spectatorship and action, critiques challenge the

contemporary conception of compassion as moral and political drive, and the ways in which such

sentiment has been cultivated through institutions and presupposed objectified perceptions of the human deprivation.

Philosophy has traditionally been suspicious towards the moralizing potential of compassion to address human deprivation and vulnerability as an object of critical reflection and deliberation. To this end, I take my point of departure in Adorno's critical iteration of the limits and inconsistencies of an ethics of compassion. Although Adorno holds in high regard both identification and solidarity with others,[35] he, nonetheless, argues that these are distorted due to the cognitive and material distortions of an administered world, at the same time rejecting the notion of compassion as a basis of moral practice on the grounds of its dependency on the contingency of an agent's capacity to act compassionately. This contingency depends on the ways in which society shapes our cognitive dispositions to apprehend and recognize the other without falling prey to the ideological character of these processes. Unable to go beyond a neoliberal-capitalist social determinism of human agency grounded in pursuit of self-interest, Adorno's major line of criticism is centered on the view that an ethics of compassion sets out only to mitigate injustice, and not actually change the conditions that create and reproduce it. Rather than challenge the social contexts that give rise to human suffering, compassionate behavior takes such contexts as a starting point, and at least implicitly resigns itself to them. Given Adorno's emphasis on human suffering and on moral impulses generated in response to it, it is precisely this inadvertent character of compassionate behavior that ultimately define its limits and determine value of our actions that are related to others. As he elaborates on this theme in one of his lectures:

> This is because the concept of compassion tacitly maintains and gives its sanction to the negative condition of powerlessness in which the object of our pity finds itself. The idea of compassion contains nothing about changing the circumstances that give

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[35] Please see: Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, "Moralischer Impuls und geselschaftliche Refelxion. Das Verhaltnis der Kritischen Theorie zur Mitleidsethik," in Ders., *Gesten aus Begriffen. Konsteallationen der Kritischen Theorie* (Frankfurt am Mein, 1997): 153 – 197; Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

rise to the need for it, but instead, as in Schopenhauer, these circumstances are absorbed into the moral doctrine and interpreted as its main foundation. In short, they are hypostatized and treated as if they were immutable. We may conclude from this that pity you express for someone always contains an element of injustice towards that person; he experiences not just our pity but also impotence and the specious character of the compassionate act.[36]

Adorno's criticism seems to rest on two distinct, though related, considerations. *First*, compassion does not entail address of the cultural, economic, legal or political context of the victims' suffering. The benefactor responds exclusively to the bare fact of the victim's deprivation, while for social criticism (and Adorno himself) it is of crucial importance to track and address its systematic causes. Such a depoliticized understanding of compassion, Adorno argues, occludes the political dimensions of suffering which leaves victims without proper means to invoke questions of justice and responsibility of individuals and collectives accountable for their misfortune. This inadequacy of compassion is entailed not only in its contingent character of people's capacity for compassionate behavior, but also in the fact that this capacity itself is dependent on the same injustice and inequality it aims to alleviate. Put differently, whereas compassionate behavior partially enables the alleviation of human suffering in some cases, it also simultaneously conceals the act's own complicity with relations of power that result in such unjust conditions and subsequently divide humanity into subjects with agency and vulnerable others. *Second,* Adorno seems to insist that we address the hard question of whether and how we can formulate and institutionalize a type of compassion that fully acknowledges and addresses the political agency of victims. He remains suspicious towards the nature of relation that is established between the benefactor and the victim who is the target of compassionate acts, a relationship whereby the figure of the spectator is fully sovereign in her agency over the victim, whereas the victim remains a passive target of humanizing efforts. Unlike liberal political culture, which assumes a universal character of compassion exercised as moral solidarity between equal members of humanity, Adorno urges us to be aware about

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[36] Theodor Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), *173.*

subordinating, voyeuristic and narcissistic dispositions of compassion, wherein modern subjects enjoy the sense of her own superiority through acts of passionate engagement with suffering of others, at the same time fortifying the vulnerability of the victim. In this sense, the act of compassion does not bridge the moral distance between those who watch and those who suffer, but ultimately intensifies such distance by establishing different social status between benefactors and beneficiaries.

These criticisms notwithstanding, there is also another side to Adorno's overall relation to compassion. Although his analysis takes as a starting point the breakdown of the referential function of compassion in regard to nature of human agency and sociopolitical conditions that give rise to injustice and atrocities, the advantageous effects of this breakdown could be seen as an arousal to critically reflect upon the possible ways to redress the effects of those conditions. In order to escape the shortcomings of a depoliticized account of compassion, such critical reflection of causes of suffering entails that compassion needs to be accompanied by an insight wherein our compassionate act in response to suffering is connected with awareness of the culpability of prevailing sociopolitical conditions and our own complicity and privilege. Rather than merely legitimizing claims for solidarity by confronting the urgency of human suffering, the moralizing function of this insight relies on what Adorno identifies as a 'moral addendum', a moment of somatic innervation without which no impulse to change the unjust conditions can be conceived.[37] It is in the light of this inherent rupture in discursive capacity that Adorno examines the emergence of a new disposition of solidarity that invite us to render deep asymmetries of power and injustice the very object of our reflection and engagement. This not only shifts the role that compassion has for constituting moral or political agency, but also more importantly, it offers an alternative vision of morality in general, wherein moral practice becomes a critique of society. As Adorno writes:

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[37] Please see Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Verso, 2005), 365.

> In short, anything that we can call morality today merges into the question of the organization of the world. We might even say that the quest for a good life is the quest for the right form of the politics, if indeed such a right form of politics lay within the realm of what can be achieved today.[38]

This is possible only by looking beyond others' distress to its causes; political compassion establishes the conditions necessary for anger or indignation. Anger motivated by political compassion, Adorno maintains, has an important cognitive and political function: it alerts states and citizens to the sources of harm and suffering that require political redress and focuses our compassion on its systematic causes. While this connection to social justice does not necessarily give compassion any explicit role (beyond a general obligation to attend to suffering and its causes) a more specific contribution of Adorno's work to thinking about political compassion is to suggest the possibility that our moral sentiments and critical reflection can be a justified element in the politics as impetus to and sustaining force of political agency and action. In arguing that compassion requires more than mere charity, Adorno allows for bringing our understanding of the moral sentiment into the sphere of justice: compassionate action has a specifically political focus where suffering is perceived to be a result of systematic injustice and distorted social conditions. Even then another problem remains: there are no guarantees that knowledge about the causes of social injustices may result in significant changes in human agency. On the contrary, exclusionary practices often depend upon the fact that dehumanization and indifference takes place regardless of knowledge or awareness of the social agents.

This leaves us with apparently paradoxical insights into the political role of compassion today. Although at the heart of contemporary humanitarianism lies moral acknowledgment of unfortunate others who's suffering calls for public action, such calls also disclose the moral distance between those who watch and those who suffer. We have seen the difficulties with mediation of human suffering and how knowledge stemming from it depends on an agent's capacity to recognize

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[38] Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, 176.

the similarities between otherwise different individuals. Critics would argue that this assumption about general capacity for this kind of recognition hardly seems an adequate basis for binding obligations, as contemporary advocates of humanitarianism might insist. Even if we are able to transcend the contingent social differences that constitute modern individuals – an act of the imagination that Rousseau himself admitted to become more doubtful day by day – the moral cornerstone of solidarity that we discover bears the form of life that has an elementary biological character and lacks all the qualities which make it possible to treat it as a life.[39] Evoking images of others who are suffering such an encounter between an individual and the other seem to yield only the most basic biological fact: namely that she, like us, feels pain and suffering. Thus, recognition of what we share in common with other individuals leads to the disheartening reduction of the distinctively human to the merely biological. What this reduction does is not only an exhaustion of the concept of humanity, but also through this process of exhaustion it creates conditions for the production of a specific *form* of humanity that enables 'Western' civilization to identify and define itself. As Rancière describes this feature of contemporary humanitarianism:

> The predicate "human" and "human rights" are simply attributed, without any phrasing, without any mediation, to their eligible party, the subject "man." The age of the "humanitarian" is one of immediate identity between the ordinary example of suffering humanity and the plenitude of the subject of humanity and of its rights. The eligible party pure and simple is then none other than the wordless victim, the ultimate figure of the one excluded from the logos, armed only with a voice expressing a monotonous moan, the moan of naked suffering, which saturation has made inaudible. More precisely, this person who is merely human then boils down to the couple of the victim, the pathetic figure of a person to whom such humanity is denied, and the executioner, the monstrous figure of a person who denies.[40]

The irony of this 'monotonous moan' is that compassion today carries within itself virtually all of the vices of liberal hegemonic order that sustains power relations between the West and the global South. In the end, the convenient fiction of human equality is just that – a fiction – and thus a

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[39] Please see: Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1998); Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).
[40] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 126.

political theory that aims to preserve compassion as a moral force needs to take these fundamental dependencies and inequalities into account.

Conclusion: Sentiment of Inequality

I started this chapter with the goal of critically examining compassion as one of the most politically charged emotions. My analysis so far has considered the human disposition to acknowledge human vulnerability and act selflessly in order to address the injustice or alleviate the suffering that others experience. Historically, we have seen that this moralizing process depends upon our capacity to imagine ourselves in the position of those who are less fortunate. If we look at the contemporary political culture we see that it has come to encompass a wide range of mediated practices that rely on our social capacity to nurture this moral imagination in an attempt to make this disposition to act compassionately a public imperative. This is important, not only because it is essential to focus on the ways in which human misfortune is presently mediated and articulated, but also because such articulation sets norms that subtly regulate our capacity to recognize ourselves as actors upon their suffering. While most of contemporary humanitarian discourse relies on documentation and representation of human suffering in order to cultivate a relation to distant others and move the Western public into action, the ways in which our witnessing of inhumane conditions succeeds (or fails) in establishing moral bonds with victims tells us a lot about the social processes in which we seem to be formed as moral actors.

Even though the moralizing potential of sympathetic identification constitutes the disposition to act compassionately, such a disposition does not automatically arise as the consequence of the sight of suffering as such. Rather it inheres in the capacity of the social structure to humanize the other, and as such incite the spectators' identification with the victim. The danger that lurks underneath such processes is a continuous risk of transforming our moral bonds with vulnerable

others into narcissistic self-expression that has little to do with solidarity and aid. In blurring the boundaries between witnessing and acting, one reduces the encounter between Western spectator and vulnerable other from an ethical and political event to an often narcissistic self-reflection that turns our actions into mechanism of 'othering.' At the heart of this reduction lies a deeper concern—namely, that despite its benign objectives, humanitarianism (and our dispositions of solidarity and compassion that it aims to advance) in general ultimately follow rules of neoliberal logic of management and control. In the context of such critiques, humanitarianism may deprive us not only of the voice of vulnerable others, but also of a moral discourse that would link vulnerability to justice. In order to avoid trivializing public appeals for solidarity, current political culture needs to stage vulnerability not only as a target for the fleeting empathy of the Western audience, but also as a demand for critical reflection and deliberation about historical processes that lead towards such conditions.

To this end, I have introduced Adorno's critical assessment of compassion to show the pitfalls of uncritically relying on compassion to address or resolve significant political injustices and divisions. By drawing on the limits of spectators' sympathetic identification, his analysis of the ways in which individual experience is formed and determined through historical conditions carries with itself the implicit claim that due this determination social actors often misrecognize or obscure the conditions and motives that result in human suffering. This reference to effects of social habitation renders compassion a contingent ethics that no longer aspires to a reflexive engagement with the historical and political conditions of human vulnerability. While there is no doubt that public representations of human vulnerability and suffering can mundanely cultivate dispositions of compassion and solidarity, it is also evident that there are inescapable constraints under which compassion and aid are practiced today. Despite the proliferation of mundane witnessing through media outlets, the Western individual ultimately enjoys the sense of her own interiority by means of

passionate engagement with the suffering of others. Such retreat into 'egoistic altruism' clearly, albeit

sketchily, illustrates the present difficulties tied with humanitarianism: namely, that spectators might

find it difficult to identify with the victims without thereby minimizing injustices done to them or

rendering them passive objects of public attention (i.e. making such injustices more relatable by

paralleling them with less significant traumas that are more common to the spectator's frame of

reference). In drawing attention to ambiguous political implications of compassion, Adorno

unintentionally reveals an important aspect of contemporary moral agency of spectators, namely that

traumas that other people experience invoke moral claims only if this trauma is situated and

articulated through the selective, reductive imaginary of the West. In seeking to redress, then,

political and ethical deficits of compassion, one has to start with the observation that today's

common notions of solidarity and empathy situate a Western spectator within a political and moral

space that simultaneously serves as a site of witnessing, site of articulation and site of self-

expression. Such a complex nature of moral acknowledgment of the vulnerable others continuously

sustains public imagery that simultaneously articulates the Western individual as an agent giving her

a specific identity that rests on a problematic hierarchy upon which ethical impasses of compassion

and solidarity are grounded.

In the end, the greater importance of my reiteration of Adorno is that presses us to address

the hard question of whether and how we can formulate and institutionalize a type of compassion

that fully acknowledges, recognizes and addresses the problematic nature of the political agency of

spectators and victims. The formation of critical compassion is likely to prove most difficult where

there are historical and political grounds for significant discord and disagreement between

compassionate agents and those they attempt to assist. In post-war societies (in societies in

aftermath of severe violence like Bosnia) it has proven difficult, if not impossible, for compassionate

citizens to acknowledge the weight of their own political agency, and answer the appeals of those in

need, because these often cut against not just their materials interests, but also their identity or pride. If we are to justify politicizing compassion, then we need carefully to consider how to institutionalize and inculcate a critical form of compassion, one that enables citizens to identify how and when their sentiments become misplaced or inappropriate, when compassion is not an act of individual benevolence but rather a question of justice. The affective social imaginary is contained in, but not synonymous with nor antagonistic to, a rights–respecting liberal cosmopolitan imaginary. In this regard, we might understand that a moral imaginary of contemporary humanitarianism is itself agonistically composed of ethicalities, which on the one hand rely on the distancing techniques of practical and purposive reason and on the other on those which are risky, performative and affective. Such an inclusion would not mean the loss of our reason, rights and tolerance of differences. But in the case of compassion, it would imply that we would need to do the difficult emotional work of trying to sustain our sense of ourselves against the risk entailed in feeling with the suffering of others. It would also require an understanding of the ethical and political benefits produced by this form of intersubjective engagement. The difficulties of achieving such ethical benefits are perhaps embedded in the hegemony of the rational autonomous subject whose ethicality is constituted as a tolerant rights holder. Instead such theorists consider the possibility of a non-purposive ethical intersubjectivity, open to and responsible for the otherness of the other.

CHAPTER 2

HOLDING HANDS WITH DEATH: THE DARK SIDE OF OUR HUMANITARIAN PRESENT

One of the important claims of the previous chapter is that compassion remains politically sterile if it fails to mobilize critical reflection upon the conditions and lives of those who emerge as objects of humanitarian attention. Despite innate optimism of current liberal culture, compassion itself is manifested as the personal choice of a Western consumer; it remains a form of public action insofar as it silences vulnerable others by negotiating their humanity as a consumerist practice devoid of genuine solidarity. This phenomenon invokes fear that compassion as a moral sentiment ultimately promotes the specific configurations of power that legitimizes the corrupted rationality of neoliberalism and the inequalities that it engenders. Interfering in the current struggle over the boundaries between humanitarianism, economy, and politics, following Adorno I argue that the explicit invocation of justice is the only morally legitimate alternative to the neoliberal imaginary and its dehumanizing processes. Before we can chart the ways in which this shift is possible, there are other problems that demand our attention. Solidarity as personal preference not only constitutes the West as a self-assertive, narcissistic public, it also constitutes the vulnerability of the other, often as a semi-fictional figure that inhabits epistemological limbo wherein the Western public negotiates her ontological and moral worth. Thus, just as the solidarity of the Western humanitarian agent belongs to the private realm of personal choices and affections, whereby often these choices appear to be made independently of the configurations of social powers that actually constitute and define them, the Non-Western other is disposed of her vulnerability and thrown into the realm of public negotiations as an image of human suffering that awaits Western acknowledgment and confirmation of its suffering.

As a consequence, these images lack historicity and any concrete link to justice. Even if these representations are linked to historical circumstances and sustain an impotent rhetoric of common humanity, their depiction in public imagery does not present those people as historical agents who are part of a world that invokes a sense of solidarity and obligations. Rather, their agonizing experiences are reduced to a process of distributing resources, wherein the relation between the Western spectator and Non-Western victim is negotiated both materially and symbolically. The suffrage of the humanitarian victim, consequently, is manifested as a personal experience of the Western bystander who remains ignorant of the moral and political weight inherently entailed in the inhumane conditions faced by the other. Hence, it is not the case that stories of humanitarian tragedies lack a "vocabulary of justice" but, rather, that such stories lack autonomy in the sense that their experiences and relation to responsibility and justice is subordinated to experiences of the Western humanitarian agent and stories about the 'West'. This brings us to the main argument of the following chapter, namely, that the notion of common humanity cannot be taken as universal property, devoid of any classifications. Rather, it is often a lethal construct of diverse practices which selectively humanize certain classes of people rather than others. Closely linked to this notion of "humanitarian" selectivism is the complex overdetermination of the subject's cognitive (and subsequently moral and political) dispositions by social forces. Although an analysis of compassion as the discursive engine of the liberal humanitarian present helps us understand the limits of such a discourse, what ultimately renders the moral disposition of Western agents is the entanglement of her epistemic and affective faculties with normative architecture that "frames" the otherness of non-Western subjects according to mechanisms of an ontological formation primarily reinforced by policies, techniques, and ideologies explicitly oriented around the epistemic exclusion, and reduction, of complex and idiosyncratic identities of Non-western people.

Introduction: Humanitarianism and its Discontents

In *Theses on the Philosophy of History,* Walter Benjamin reminds us of the countless, voiceless victims of modernity's striving for ostensible progress:

> A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward.[41]

Many find unbearable, as Walter Benjamin did, the thought of history's nameless victims as nothing more than stepping-stones along the path of human development. When we consider the political and institutional dimensions of certain forms of violence and suffering, we can easily recognize that woeful patterns of exploitation, exclusion, slavery, rape and murder were not just accidental byproducts of humanity's modernization processes, but rather among the latter's central mechanisms. Additionally, if we take into account that, in the past century, more than one hundred million individuals have met a violent death at the hands of their fellow human beings, there remains no doubt that this tragic number warrants the melancholy that Walter Benjamin expresses. While a stance like Benjamin's needs to remain integral to our critical sensibility, we still are left with the question: What sorts of public lessons may be learned in light of such a dire historical record?

To address this question, it appears necessary to make sense of how one attends to the suffering of others, as well as what form political and ethical reflection ought to have if human vulnerability is our point of departure when confronting instances of horror. One way of trying to

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[41] Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 2007), 257.

find meaning in a world marked by domination, militarization, and violence is to remember and attempt to repair the deep injustices done to the victims. Most discussions of the moral and legal aspects of contemporary human rights discourse emphasize the structural arrangements and policies that ought to regulate the conduct of individuals, collectives, governments and international institutions. From this standpoint, we should question the epistemic and ontological constitution of the subject who is doing the negotiating and in which ways humanitarian norms and practices are framed and represented to her. The problem, then, does not simply lie in a concern to offer a radical alternative to various difficulties tied to contemporary humanitarianism through the reorganization of institutional forces. Instead, it is embedded in a need to disclose the ways in which public sentiment is formed, and how social forces foster the support of political subjects. Looking at public representations of various humanitarian projects, we soon see that some people count more than others. Some lives are bestowed real identities, and their tragedies receive detailed public portrayals, while others remain invisible, treated as mere statistics. How do we decide which victims count and which do not? What norms do we, and should we take into account amidst their suffering? How does exposure to the suffering of others involve and prompt the moral faculties of spectators? These questions direct us to a tension between knowledge about the conditions other individuals' experience, and the reactions this knowledge conjures in contemporary political culture. Since political (and aesthetic) representations of human suffering can be problematic, examining how sociocultural formations affect public concern should help us think about humanitarianism within the public sphere. This may also aid our understanding of those who suffer catastrophic experiences.

My first step towards this goal is to ask how these conditions should be understood, and ask how we may assess the capacity of contemporary political culture to morally evaluate contemporary humanitarian practices. My analysis begins by reflecting on the conditions under which the object of humanitarian discourse is conceived and organized. I focus specifically on representations of human

suffering in which an idea of the victim is already constituted. I then ask what moral and political implications for humanitarianism follow from this dynamic. A central tenet of human rights advocacy and humanism in general is the conviction that human life and dignity are inherently valuable and should be protected irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, class or political affiliation. Moreover, this conviction is closely followed by another assumption, namely, that humanitarian organizations are relatively independent of political and economic interests. What is problematic about these claims is not only humanitarianism's alarming intertwinement with militarism and political power, but also the arbitrariness of response to suffering, and Eurocentric legacy of colonialism that are still reflected in selective Western attentiveness. This brings into question the norms that guide the public articulation of victims' agony. By questioning how a specific understanding of the other is formed, I aim to draw attention to the inconsistencies between the witnessing of atrocities and the moral responses that follow. The controversial status of humanitarian culture raises many questions about political power and how that power affects subjects, their actions, and their comportment toward others. It is often thought that political (and moral) reasoning is preconditioned by public representations of the social conditions and historical events that surround social actors. I argue that in order to cultivate active engagement with the suffering inflicted by human beings on one another, we must trace the processes by which depictions emerge as critical landmarks of public knowledge and imagination.

Representations of Human Suffering and Today's Humanism

The rise of humanitarian discourses in affluent societies in the aftermath of colonialism and the two World Wars ranks as one of the more astonishing occurrences of an astonishingly tragic century. In the often cited claim that, "the need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition for all

truth,"[42] Theodor Adorno states a precondition of reflecting ethically on the persistence of unnecessary human suffering. At a moment when new sites of atrocities emerge, Adorno's position mirrors the basic need to grasp why humans behave inhumanely, and what kinds of obligations follow. Even if we accept this interpretation of Adorno's claim, there is more entailed in the processes by which the appearance and articulation of tragic events take place. Despite the moral charge that human suffering contains implicitly within itself, bearing witness to inhumane conditions is perplexing as the relationship between suffering and representation raises ethical questions that evade a simple and immediate answer.

Traditionally, humanitarianism has been located at the intersection of ethics and politics, and, often dramatically, demonstrates the interdependence of these spheres. Understanding its emergence and implications requires more than simply examining the history of humanitarianism's attempts to address human vulnerability or incite compassion among those who are in position to provide aid. It is only by exploring how humanitarian discourse is organized by political and economic forces (as well as the cultural values that sustain and contest them) that we can grasp the impact this discourse has on individuals. This impact is not always immediately evident. Despite its benign objectives, humanitarianism tends to accept divisions and inequalities that it allegedly aims to efface. Today, there are serious problems in every facet of humanitarianism; these faults are both moral and political in nature. The reach and effectiveness of a humanitarian ethic are compromised by tendencies toward excessive individualism, cultural universalism, Eurocentrism and subsequent moral selectivism. Positioned between the spectator as a fully sovereign agent, and the unfortunate other who remains the passive target of humanizing efforts, humanitarianism ultimately reinforces, rather than bridges, the distance between two distinct moral perspectives. This division is reflected

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[42] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 17-18.

in the articulation and distribution of representations of human suffering, from which humanitarian discourse derives its moral force.[43]

Representations of human vulnerability, by virtue of both constituting and conveying an ethical attitude between victims and the viewing public, reveal how extreme brutality frequently and peacefully coexists with more benign, immersive aspects of our everyday experiences. The irony of this is apparent in the fact that privileged members of Western societies[44] witness the suffering of others from the comfort of the catbird seat, wherein the agony of strangers becomes a form of both fictional and nonfictional display. One can ask, then: how should we understand the impact of such knowledge on the Western individual, deeply immersed as it is in a privileged economic and epistemic system, when we consider how commonplace it is for that individual to see suffering of women, children and men on a daily basis? The problem of Western humanitarian agency, than, cannot be addressed only by pointing to cognitive dimensions of the agent's desensitized state. Rather these cognitive dimensions are multifaceted—social and relational in nature—and affect not just how we perceive others' lives, but also other affective instances of our agency as well. In particular, they delimit our capacity to empathetically engage with the conditions of others, and to listen properly to what their suffering ultimately tells us about ourselves. To state the problem even more succinctly, to *witness* means to epistemically immerse in social interactions which take place under complex and diverse social and political circumstances, and to be conditioned through those relations by social powers whose manifestation we can find in those circumstances and interactions that they ultimately enable. Witnessing, then, is different than *seeing,* and although it includes this

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[43] See Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Politics, Morality and the Media* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006) and *The Ironic Spectator* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Kate Nash, "Global Citizenship as Show Business: The Cultural Politics of Make Poverty History." *Media, Culture & Society* 30/2 (2008): 167 – 81.

[44] By denoting "members of societies" I do not intend to conflate all members in one nation under the heading of "privileged" (or affluent). I am aware that not all citizens of affluent western societies have a "privileged" existence. Thus, when I phrase "western individual" or "western public" I have in mind individuals who share a certain social status, bear certain cultural and economic independence, and who have the capacity to provide aid to distant people in need. These individuals are usually target of humanitarian campaigns, and such campaigns rely on their donations.

perceptive dimension, witnessing also implies certain affective engagement with the events and conditions that others experience. Taken together, these factors inevitably draw attention to the ways in which public knowledge is formed and articulated. What is less certain, however, is how, both politically and ethically, we should understand these processes. Given the public's dependence on the force of representation, one must consider a number of processes in which exposure to images of human deprivation operates as a vehicle of political knowledge and humanitarian action. These processes refer not only to the capacity of social institutions to articulate and relay information about cultural and political conditions of other human beings. They refer to how such information is organized, and how subsequent knowledge in light of this information shapes our understanding of events that demand our moral attention. To gain an adequate historical understanding of the events we are experiencing, it is necessary to question the broader social and political context. In other words, it is necessary to analyze how specific cultural, economic and political conditions result in the epistemic deficiencies that give rise to exclusionary, otherizing public sentiments.

This request is important since we often only know sites of human disaster through media depictions that are usually formed in our own cultural and technological frameworks.[45] The implications of this have been manifested in decades of natural and human-made disasters, wherein the power to speak on behalf of those rendered voiceless prompts us to reflect on the relationship between humanitarianism and its targets, as well as how political, economic, and cultural conditions shape that relationship. Given the ethical and political dimensions to representing the bodies, suffering and conditions of vulnerable others, and particularly because victims themselves have no

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[45] See Luc Boltanski, "The Legitimacy of Humanitarian Actions and their Media Representation: the Case of France." *Ethical Perspectives* 7/1 (2000): 3–16; Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001)

access to, or input in, those ethical and political discourses that qualify their place in the epistemological systems of Western societies, witnessing serves as the most practical (and, perhaps, the *only* practical) empathetic space. Thus when we draw relation between representation, knowledge and selective nature of Western moral and political responses, it is obvious that the current epistemic deficiencies have moral and political ramifications. The experiences of these people are real, concrete conditions (whether we acknowledge them or not), and the manners in which we articulate e.g. the poverty, violence, hunger and discrimination that seem to be their daily reality also illuminate the too-simple mechanisms for self-reflection by which Western humanitarianism and integration systems operate.

The moral appeals that these conditions convey—and the empathy gap in the discourse regarding the suffering of distant others—means that most of the humanitarian capacity to mobilize public support depends on the systems' power to constitute Non-Western victims as objects of our concern. The indirect implications of this, of course, strongly indicate the ongoing struggle of those people to survive, but the constitutive power of the Non-Western others as "worthy of empathy" is directly indicated by the political choices that West has made in the past, and how those past choices continue to bleed empathy from the discourse in present decision-making. What is currently happening within and at the European borders is not only failure of humanitarian systems and the binding weakness of international law, but also reveals the troubling nature of the racialized, gendered, and cultural nature of our Western moral and humanitarian agency, and its flawed mechanisms of self-evaluation, social inclusion and humanitarian management. Being able to conceive of others as objects of ethical concern is a prerequisite to being open to seeing them as subjects with moral and political entitlements.

Fundamental to the self-understanding of the Western subject (as well as her view of her own relations to the rest of the world), than, is how she articulates the implications and objectives of

a humanitarian discourse, particularly because contemporary theories of humanitarianism regularly

serve as ideological rationalizations of the incorporation, production and politicization of ethno-

gender-racially identified "others." Theoreticians often interpret humanitarian practices through

analyses of large scale humanitarian efforts and frequent "success stories," but limiting the

discussion of humanitarianism in this way both misses its complexity and minimizes the role played

by major economic institutions, national governments and military, in the advancement of their own

geopolitical interests. To avoid this deficiency, it is necessary to conceive humanitarianism as a

relational process embedded in the structures and regulative powers of international law, political

management, work of the media, and the global economy. We are presented with a humanitarianism

that is instrumental in nature—one which has not been encouraged to question its own ends; this

feature alone makes it an effective servant of militarism and imperialism. Writing about the

proliferation and contradictions tied to humanitarian practices, Eyal Weizman describes the process

by which the latter result from the very configurations and effects of power that they seek to

subdue: "Humanitarianism, human rights and international humanitarian law (IHL)… have become

the crucial means by which the economy of violence is calculated and managed... (A)t present, spatial

organizations and physical instruments, technical standards, procedures and systems of monitoring

have become the means for exercising contemporary violence and for governing the displaced, the

enemy and the unwanted."[46] While it is fascinating how Weizman recounts "the economy of

violence" and its involvement in structuring the conditions for conceptualizing and organizing

humanitarian discourse, a different lesson to be learned here calls forth the ways in which political,

economic and cultural interests shape humanitarian practices and how this bears on the constitution

of agents that may be either the objects or subjects of these practices.

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[46] Eyal Weizman, *The Least of All Possible Evils* (New York: Verso, 2011), 4.

Humanitarian Pendulum: The Case of Alan Kurdi

In order to illustrate this tendency of contemporary humanitarianism to consistently misunderstand its own structure and achievements, let us consider the ongoing tragedy of refugees in Europe. We are experiencing the biggest forced displacement of people on European soil since the Second World War. Based on the last UN reports for 2016, approximately 750,000 refugees have already crossed the Mediterranean Sea and reached European shores. This trend will continue in the ensuing months. While a majority of these people are fleeing war-torn countries like Syria, Iraq, or Afghanistan—countries whose violent present is well-documented through international media outlets—the European public has a tendency to dispossess these people of their urgent situation and the volatile events that have led to their subsequent exodus. For the most part, this dispossession is accompanied by a change in vocabulary that makes these people devoid of viable social and legal status. This mediation of vocabulary is hardly accidental; it has deep moral and political motives and consequences. Like most processes aimed to form or modify public attention, it is guided by political interests that (in this particular case) aim to diminish the moral and political weight of conditions these people are experiencing.

When we structure the ways in which we can encounter others, we narrow our capacity to understand the underlying social processes before us. This process of normative destitution renders the lives of these people a mere statistic, and tells us a good deal about our own political culture and agency. When we think closely about the implications of such processes, we can see that public representation of their conditions and motives is attenuated, intentionally abstracted away from to mute the sheer magnitude of their suffering. Such abstraction often takes the focus away from the hardships these people endure, and falls back on successful stories of humanitarian management by individual European agents. When we think about acknowledging their vulnerability, we soon realize that such acknowledgment depends on recognition of their deracinated status; and, as their status

shifts from "refugees" into "migrants", euphemism begins to bury the severity of their condition. Such a disheartened account aligns nicely with recent public statements among European officials where the movement and numbers of refugees are often depicted as "waves", "floods", or "swarms" of people, transparent disaster imagery that impresses a "plague" status onto refugees, now easily conceived as a threat to the wellbeing of European societies and culture. While this process in itself discloses a two-faced nature of how public representation works and the problematic ways in which public sentiment is formed, the real problem lies somewhere else: not only does such representation have dire consequences on the moral and legal perception of refugees, but by awarding them different political status for public reception, one also alters the range and nature of obligations that the European public has toward these people.

Such a shift in representation (and subsequent recognition) is not an accident. It has deep political and economic motives. Not only does it aim to give an incomplete picture of the causes of the current refugee crisis, but it is guided by interests that aim to shirk responsibility for the urgent humanitarian management of the tragedies befalling these people. Attempts to portray this humanitarian disaster as a natural phenomenon devoid of human agency and political interests underlines the desperate effort to conceal implications of the Western world in political turmoil—implications already observed in the Middle East and other parts of the "developing" world. As with many instances of human negligence and suffering, this major humanitarian crisis has very concrete economical, cultural and political causes. Sadly, as this disaster unfolds before our eyes, it tests liberal norms and values that have created a predominant moral consciousness of the "developed" West. It is not as though Europe could not anticipate this tragic turn. For example, if we consider alarming conditions such as the severe drought in the Middle East in recent years, the subsequent political turmoil that was directly or indirectly initiated through diverse political and economic interests of the West, or unsuccessful "humanitarian" military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, it is difficult to

justify a lack of predictive vigilance. The difficulties caused by an influx of refugees that countries

such as Greece, Macedonia, Serbia, Germany, and France are currently experiencing is something

that has been a dire humanitarian reality for years in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey. [47] The main

reason why this refugee crisis has received such global attention in recent months stems from the

fact that it has reached European borders, and as such represents a cultural and social burden that

the Western world finds unpalatable.

Continuous efforts of European countries to halt the movement of refugees through

administrative measures (locking land borders, building walls and fences, warehousing refugees in

controlled environments, lastly giving in to Turkish government's 3 billion Euro heavy blackmail,

etc.) has, for the most part, proven unsuccessful in preventing people from trying to reach the safety

of the Western world. However, such measures were not without impact on the human life that they

have tried to keep at a distance. Unable to reach safety by land, refugees have often decided to set

out for European countries by the sea, which is often an extremely dangerous and tragic endeavor.[48]

Yet most hardships that refugees experience rarely reach the front pages in Europe, and when they

do it usually ends up being a tragic statistic for an often indifferent public rather than a mobilizing

factor for meaningful action. The tragedy of hundreds of thousands of people on the move, risking

their lives on the Mediterranean, becomes a European story only when suffering or horror cannot

escape a morally pacified public.

Consider for instance, the death of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, who washed up on a Turkish

beach after his family's boat capsized as they tried to reach a Greek island. That night more people

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[47] According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Turkey has already spent approximately $3 billion on the Syrian crisis and the costs are only expected to rise. In order to understand the uneven allocation of the current humanitarian burden, compare the total number of "registered" refugees from Turkey (387,883 individuals) with affluent countries. For example, Canada pledged to the UN to resettle 1,300 Syrian refugees by the end of this year. EU countries have agreed to accept 120,000 displaced people. This raises important questions about the international management of the current humanitarian crisis in Syria. Taken from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/negar-mojtahedi/post_8716_b_6299078.html
[48] Within the past year (2015) at least 2000 people have died or disappeared in the Aegean and Mediterranean.

died—among them, Alan's mother and five year old brother. Although such tragedy is a recurring event on the Aegean and Mediterranean Seas, something changed that morning when Alan's body was found. At least for the moment, the photo of this dead child turned the plight of a whole group of people into something more than a sterile abstraction. This disturbing photo shows a dead body of a small boy, face down in the sand. To view this photo is much more than witnessing the perils of human life. It is not that suddenly we acknowledge moralizing features of human vulnerability, and thanks to such an insight we decide to share solidarity with these people; there is much more behind such an encounter. To describe it also means to acknowledge a vast, precarious human condition.

But just as this photo cannot tell us much beyond one innocent life having been lost, it also cannot instruct us how to ignite this fleeting moment of compassion and mobilize it into a political impulse capable of changing horrifying conditions that children like Alan experience on a daily basis. If this photo and the death it captures change anything, what is now different? The fate of Alan Kurdi and the subsequent media attention is one of those tragic, entrenched and seemingly common processes that often surround us. The sudden lurch in media draws public attention to the specific instance of human vulnerability and suffering, and although such attention is very welcome, in the end it has limited reach and longevity. It is sensationalism, not humanism. There are layers of experience invoked by the perception of such tragic events, and it not only emphasizes selectivism in ways in which the refugee crisis has been handled up to this point, but further discloses a deeply entrenched evaluative framework that regulates whose lives are deemed valuable and whose are rendered invisible. There is suffering among children all over the world; children whose faces and bodies we (by commission or omission) do not see, and since we allegedly do not *see* them, their suffering has no impact on us. In Sub-Saharan regions of Africa (especially those areas that are affected by Ebola), the mortality rate of mothers and infants is still the worst in the world, and while the international community is occupied with maintaining quarantines and saving the lives of

infected Westerners, African children keep on dying of infections in a world where we are supposed to have medically conquered such maladies.[49] The images of dead Palestinian babies during the last war in Gaza should have stirred enough conscience to stop ongoing brutalities. Echoing hypocrisy and a limited reach of Western humanitarianism, the American writer of Palestinian origin, Yousef Munayyer, tweeted cynically: "As a Palestinian I can tell you this much, if pictures of dead kids really did stir global conscience, Palestine would've been free long ago."[50] Without going into the complex nature of the Israeli and Palestinian conflict, the questions one can ask are rather simple: What happened? Why did Alan Kurdi's death move the world so "deeply" when other children's lives and deaths do not seem to matter much? To understand this paradox, one has to disclose the ways in which the public pendulum shifts between humanizing and dehumanizing the other.

In the end, nothing that Western governments are doing in response to Alan's death will actually make death less likely for millions of other people in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. If anything, history teaches us the opposite. The West has always been very selective in acknowledging whose dead children matter, often using their deaths to define its humanitarian present and justify "humanitarian interventions" which have time and again ended up causing more suffering. In the wake of Alan Kurdi's death, Europe has not only failed to understand the extent of tragedy that these fleeing individuals must endure, but it even intensified absurd distinctions levied against incoming people. Western audiences seem to feel far greater sympathy for refugees than for migrants, because the former are seen as victims without real choice, while the latter are not forced to move out of desperation for their lives. But how can we justify these distinctions? Are they really valid or is this, again, mere euphemism? Most of our humanitarian efforts unfold as a polarization between those people whom we humanize and are willing to sympathize with, and those whom we

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[49] On mortality rates of children in Africa see:
http://www.unicef.org/publications/files/Child_Mortality_Report_2015_Web_8_Sept_15.pdf
[50] Taken from @YousefMunayyer Sep 3 https://twitter.com/YousefMunayyer/status/639445716763549699

decide are not worthy of our solidarity and empathy. In such an unjust world, one can ask a disheartened question: who is eligible for Western tears? If it is only people from Syria, what about those who are coming from Iraq and Afghanistan? If we focus our attention only at those who somehow drown at our doorstep, what about those who are still alive but trapped in provisional camps at the outskirts of the "developed" West? If we focus our attention only on children, what about their parents and other family members? Can we really define what makes a meaningful environment for a child, determining what family members are worthy enough to be present from those who are seemingly expendable in child's life? What gives us the power to make such a choice in the first place? If we owe our compassion and support only to people who are fleeing from violence, what about those who are desperately trying to escape poverty or issues related to climate change? What is, then, the threshold of pain and vulnerability that we will acknowledge as a valid justification for people to leave their homes? Identifying the structural features that account for these humanitarian selections is more difficult than noting the humanitarian failures themselves. What the current refugee situation shows is that political and administrative spheres of liberal Europe are unable to respond adequately to the complexity of problems at hand. This is not only because such attempts would demand significant economic sacrifice or resources that Europe simply does not have, but rather because adequate response would demand disclosing the problematic legacy of Europe's past—as well as the lethal implications of their present political choices.

Social Inclusion and Non – Western Other

This brief account of the current state of the refugee crisis, given above, sufficiently indicates the general tendency of the Western public to differentiate from, and select, which people are worthy of assistance. Although this is an important feature of how our perception and knowledge guides our reactions on instances of human suffering, such an account does not fully articulate the

complexity of our humanitarian present. While these conditions clearly evince skepticism about some trends in current moral and political consciousness of the West, it is also important to recognize all the efforts that individuals and diverse humanitarian organizations make in providing immediate help to people in need. And although such efforts are crucial for the management of emergency situations, my analysis focuses on mechanisms that guide our reception of others in ways that may limit the reach and efficiency of what these organizations can really do on the field. That means, among other things, to disclose ways in which our knowledge about others is informed. Being able to conceive of others as objects of ethical concern is a prerequisite to being open to them as possible political subjects. This is an important distinction that carries with it a different set of obligations that place specific demands upon institutions and individuals. We have seen that one way in which our relation to others is formed falls back on reductive models that direct and reduce our perceptual possibilities. Given this state of affairs, something that must be realized, then, is that even though learning of, acknowledging, or witnessing human suffering should motivate compassion, the latter is in these circumstances by no means automatic and guaranteed. The possibility of compassion is inextricably tied to social structures that may or may not evince the capacity to humanize the other, and hence may or may not incite the spectator to identify with her.

Why did the image of three-year-old Alan, than, cause such uproar while thousands of other children remain invisible? How can we justify this moral scale and difference in the weight that we place upon people and the conditions they endure? The first step in answering these questions is to acknowledge that socio-economic privilege carries with it a certain cultural and geographical unfamiliarity from the kinds of harm that befall marginalized others; this in turn invites polarizing viewpoints on conflicts and conditions that the privileged eye has little access to fully comprehending. One consequence of such polarization is that it creates a general level of silence and distancing from these horrors, which in turn affects those who suffer most from them. My argument

implies not only that our specific epistemic and material position fails to comprehend other people in a way that would recognize them on their own terms, but rather than being a strategy for encountering the other under terms of reciprocity, we encounter these people without awarding them their own moral, cultural and political standards. Such pseudo–recognition, rather than enabling recognition of the other, becomes a strategy for domination in the form of prediction and control, in which possibilities for deeper engagement are ignored and neglected. What further complicates this process, however, is the potential that this attempt may be transformed into a narcissistic self-expression that bears little on solidarity and aid. Thus, when we turn human tragedy in outlets of our own expression (it's just enough to witness countless interpretations of Alan's death on social media) one blurs the boundaries between witnessing and acting. Under such circumstances it is easy to reduce the encounter between the spectator and vulnerable other from an ethical and political event, to a self-obsession that turns our actions into the mechanism of 'othering.'[51]

This reductive stance that Western spectators often adopt towards strangers drags the image of the other back into the "Western" context. This, in turn, discounts the vital role that cultural difference plays in the epistemic negotiations that take place within 'discursive regimes' in the production of knowledge.[52] Indeed, across many variations in its ideological representations, the "other" as the target of Western humanitarian efforts is never a purely biological figure, made independent of "Western" cultural hegemonies. Rather, the other properly embodies a collection of various geographical, economic and political factors that a Westernized gaze (either in part, or entirely) casually omits. Whatever their specific form, content, and function, public representations were and are generally mediated by power relations; they serve, by nature, to inform, interpret and

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[51] See Edward Said, "Imaginative Geography and its Representations: Orientalizing the Oriental," in *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context,* ed. David Theo Goldberg and Philomena Essed, (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 15 – 37; Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004); Lilie Chouliaraki, *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (London: Sage, 2006).
[52] See Jose Medina, "Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter-Memory, Epistemic Friction, and *Guerilla* Pluralism" in *Foucault Studies,* 12 (2011), 9 – 35.

ultimately justify economic and political relations that can be, morally speaking, quite problematic. Negotiating the intersection of moral address and political action relies, of course, on having a subject to address to begin with; it is the possibility of address that integrates the Other's agency into moral and political discourse. If we look back to the recent history of humanitarian interventions and major global development goals (e.g. UN Millennium Goal - the eradication of poverty, Climate change motivated emission policies, etc..)—and even if we acknowledge that such events are being articulated, circulated and consequently institutionalized in a number of ways—the objects of these interventions (i.e. human beings in unjust conditions and requiring aid) still are not valued on their own terms; rather, they are an aggregate, an association of identities submitted to the Western gaze in order to validate their circumstances. With the regard to practices that structure our experience about instances of human suffering and people who are forced to endure such horrifying conditions, such attempts are, by nature, selective and exclusionary. To witness the deprivation of others does not, however, identify what is 'human' in those who suffer (and, by extension, what we identify as 'humanizing' for ourselves). There are conditions, differentiations rooted in individual and cultural differences, that take place within an ontological horizon saturated with social and political forces that make such processes transcend the domain of humanism, and force us to question the moral and political foundations of our agency. Insofar as the ways in which objects of our knowledge are always determined by social and cultural norms, such discursive formations make us a necessary party to epistemic and sociopolitical subjugation—whether we choose to acknowledge this or not. This colors the very notion of the "gift" of humanitarian aid. The ontological formation (and subsequent recognition) of other people remain, ultimately and unavoidably, consequence of power relations and geopolitical interests that are constitutive of our agency—and, tacitly, serve a justificatory thrust for forgiving the individual's suffering in exchange for identifying the Other with an aggregate identity more comfortable (or at least, less problematic) for the Western gaze.

This kind of clandestine influence, although widespread and increasingly institutionalized, points toward deeper conceptual and perceptive structures that predetermine public awareness of human suffering. While there is no doubt that such knowledge about the suffering of others can evoke fleeting feelings of compassion and solidarity, it is also evident that there are inevitable constraints under which humanitarian support is practiced today. Even though portrayals of human suffering encompass a significant part of our understanding of instances of injustice, there lies the danger that the western individual ultimately enjoys the sense of her own interiority by means of passionate engagement with the suffering of others.[53] Whether or not such enjoyment results in affirmative action toward vulnerable others, any form of humanitarian action has a tendency to occur when the spectator absorbs the other or recreates her as a version of the spectators' self (or a version that is acceptable for the spectator). If the relationship between spectator and victim ends up being one of self-imposition and appropriation, then humanitarian encounters between western individuals and human vulnerability are intrinsically insensitive to the other's independence and personal boundaries. Such encounters not only prevent the other from establishing her own identity, but subsequently deny her the capacity to define her agency, reducing her to an object of projection and simulation. This retreat into 'egoistic altruism' distinctly illustrates a most pressing difficulty with humanitarianism: spectators may be challenged to identify with victims without also minimizing injustices inflicted on the latter, or rendering them passive objects of public attention. This insensitivity extends to include the contours of how the others' can be perceived and recognized. By establishing epistemic boundaries of the other, the spectator often assumes that the object of her attention is transparent that it can be grasped without out-running the spectator's knowledge.

It is exactly this problematic aspect of solidarity that invites us to question how the spectator's subject-formation influences humanitarian politics today. In her recent book *The Ironic*

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[53] Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator*, 2013.

Spectator Lilie Chouliaraki traces the roots of successful humanitarian management in the importance of revisiting social practices that have turned question of solidarity into matter of consumerism as one of critical failures of past and present Western democratic societies. According to her understanding, success of humanitarian practices depends upon removal of entrenched patterns of racial/gender/ethnic stigmatization and ways in which representation of atrocities and victims often occur against the backdrop of a homogeneous reductive identity of the West. As she puts it:

> Similarly entangled into the often unexamined certainties of 'objective' representation, the spectator of distant suffering often becomes arbitrarily collectivized in the totalizing figure of the 'western actor' – be this figure the guilty westerner confronted with the imagery of emaciated children, the kind-hearted benefactor in Hepburn's testimonies or the impartial news viewer of early disaster reporting. Such construals of the western actor as a unified collectivity of conviction, irony claims, remain blind to the plurality of enactments of solidarity by particular actors in specific spaces and times… Rather then privileging solidarity that allows both figures of suffering to emerge as historical beings, struggling with the moral and political dilemmas of their time, the paradigm of pity covers up such dilemmas in universalist discourses that take for granted the apolitical *agape* of salvation or the selective internationalism of revolution. At the heart of these positions… lies the Enlightenment belief in common humanity, which irons out the plurality of discourses and practices of solidarity in the name of self-assured yet orientalist moralism.[54]

In her profound analysis of the ambiguous moral and political implications of our concern with the suffering of others, Chouliaraki reveals an important aspect of the contemporary spectator's moral agency: traumas experienced by others invoke moral claims only if they are situated in and articulated through a resolutely selective public imagery of the West. If one intends to redress the sociopolitical and ethical deficits of humanitarianism, one must start with the observation that today's common notions of solidarity and compassion situate the Western spectator within a political and moral space that serves simultaneously as a site of witnessing, articulation, and self-expression. Comprehending all that which affects the potentiality of moral acknowledgements of

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[54] Chouliaraki, *The Ironic Spectator,* 189.

vulnerable others is a complex and ongoing process. Failing to engage in this process helps to prolong a perception of the spectator as an autonomous agent with a specific identity, and the victim as an anonymous other.

The absence of care and respect for what is perceived, combined with the lack of responsibility to those who are affected by such perception, makes it inevitable that the knowledge that is formed in turn becomes merely a means to the spectator's moral and political ends. These concerns go even deeper, for human deprivation does not occur in a vacuum, but is in itself constituted as a social phenomenon with a specific and contingent geopolitical context. Since representations of social conditions and the lives of others have not only epistemological, but ethical and political dimensions, the first step in tackling the issue is to analyze how specific cultural, economic, and political conditions facilitate our encounter with the other, and how this other is constituted and given to public interpretation. What is at stake here, then, is the relation between subjects and conditions wherein a specific image or identity of vulnerability emerges. As Catherine Mills reiterates this point, "Being human is fundamentally conditioned by an indefinite potentiality for being non-human… Thus, the distinction between the human and inhuman is itself constitutively unstable."[55] Such distinction ultimately falls back on social and political conditions that allow such a formation to take place. With all of this, it appears that exposure to the suffering of others unavoidably invokes questions of how alterity is historically and politically produced and maintained, as well as what kind of obligations such social conditioning imposes on individual spectators.

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[55] Catherine Mills, "Linguistic Survival and Ethicality: Biopolitics, Subjectivation, and Testimony in Remnants of Auschwitz" in *Politics, Metaphysics, and Death: Essays on Giorgio Agamben's Homo Sacer,* ed. A. Norris (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005.), 201.

Whistling in the Dark: The Enchantment of Human Suffering

Having given close attention to the fact that the spectator is active not only in seeking and selecting perceptive input but also in constructing knowledge, we highlight the fact that limiting and shaping knowledge is a social activity, not the passive and neutral reception of raw, pure perceptional evidence by individuals. The problem, therefore, is to recognize that an ethical encounter has already begun with the moral demand that the existence of inhumane conditions (e.g. poverty, famine, genocide, etc.), forces upon us, and not only with humanitarian campaigns and *ex post facto* acknowledgements that representations of suffering may have political and moral connotations. In other words, our reaction (or lack of one) toward the appalling conditions exhibited for the public carries the inevitable risk that the choices we have made through our action or inaction already constitute a political stance that bears on moral evaluation.

The main argument of previous pages is that perceptive (and subsequent normative) pacification of the other not only leads to a diminished moral and political status, but such objectification also stands as a prelude to her subsequent instrumentalization. An assuaged model of humanity is devoid of agency, will, or purpose—other than the one given by the Western spectator's evaluative horizon. Such reduction of distant others to empty vessels mirrors this process of pacification; the division between spectator and the other also makes her dependent on the spectator's capacity to acknowledge or deny her own agency. Another important aspect of this relationship is that difference in capacity also represents an exercise of power over others, because their epistemic marginalization subsequently leads to a material one. These processes are interrelated and as such limit our potential to have reciprocal relationships with others because the agency is always assumed to fall onto one side, the side of the spectator. What relationship between these two perspectives can we discern here?

It is evident that the ethical relation between spectator and victim should be considered further by looking toward the spectator's inevitable political clout. In one of the classic reiterations on this theme Adorno writes:

> The detached observer is as much entangled as the active participant; the only advantage of the former is insight into his entanglement, and the infinitesimal freedom that lies in knowledge as such. His own distance from affairs at large is a luxury which only these affairs confer. This is why the very movement of withdrawal bears features of what it negates. It is forced to develop a coldness indistinguishable from that of the bourgeois. Even where it protests, the monadological principle conceals the dominant universal.[56]

Despite certain convergences, articulations and parallels, spectatorship is a position that denotes privilege: *the person who suffers is over there.* This dichotomy between spectators and victims is asymmetrical. It implies a gap between different epistemic and ontological positions that these two modes of agency share. Although witnessing and articulating knowledge about inhumane conditions are cognitive processes, they nonetheless presuppose a specific ontological status of subjects. This status is socially conditioned and sets up limits of what can be conceived as human. Hence Adorno exhorts his readers to remember how crucial it is to acknowledge the multitude of conventions that such an encounter attributes to the relation between spectator and the other.

Central to this relation is the capacity of public representation to depict unsettling instances of suffering in a way that often reduces complicated realities into symbolic gestures. What many iconic images of human suffering have in common is the creation of 'ideal victims', wherein complex political motives and social conditions are diminished in order to display appalling, and yet simplistic visual tropes. Against the backdrop of the ongoing humanitarian crises in the Middle Eastern region, with Syria and Iraq in particular, images of victims and refugees have emerged that depict human bodies in an agonized emotional state, often showing tears and pain caused by the destruction of their homes or/and loss of family members (consider photos of Alan Kurdi's father

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[56] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (New York: Verso, 2006), 26.

in wake of that tragedy). Such images are instrumental in capturing public attention, as they appeal to the sensibility of the spectating audience through their capacity to capitalize on the audiences' moral indignation. This indirectly implicates viewers in victims' helplessness and vulnerability. The irony of this process is that the moral appeal ultimately shifts the focus from victims to viewers, by reproducing socially shared values and beliefs that often fail to invite an audience to engage critically with the conditions and motives that result in such instances of human suffering. What this example (and these photos) ultimately demonstrate(s) is that, despite authentication strategies aimed to humanize the victim and mobilize public attention, there is a parallel process wherein spectators posit themselves as sources of solidarity. In doing so, the spectator's response depends on the norms of a conceptual framework that molds the constitutions of both dimensions of the humanitarian encounter, namely, her own identity as a spectator and the identity of the victim.

As a consequence, both dominant and subordinated identities tend to be conceived as exemplifying certain homogenized natures, and some form of reduction is applied to both sides to create the necessary polarization. But this process of homogenization does not have the same consequences on these entities, especially if we take into account the lack of power to acquire recognition of their diversity and distance. Hence, when we try to articulate the "subject" who is a victim of exclusion, violence or poverty, we are not referring to a particular individual but rather are denoting a model for agency and intelligibility, one that is always constituted against the background of the social world. In order to establish an ethical relation between the western spectator and victims, a victim's vulnerability first must be perceived and recognized as something familiar.[57] Social ontologies operate by establishing contexts wherein the subject recognizes herself and encounters

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[57] As Asma Abbas shrewdly points out, this process is one where "suffering is made present in a standard way: it is domesticated into pain and harm, which become the central, overarching, occluding motifs in our experience of our own and others' suffering and in our relation and response to it. The usual locus of ethical-political discourses that take suffering seriously is why and how someone would be driven to cause harm, what history unleashes suffering, and how we must respond to scenarios of human suffering that defy human imagination. In all these, the positions of the perpetrator and the observer-respondent are often the coordinates within which the victim is evidenced." (Abbas 2010, *11*)

the other. This encounter is conditioned by interpretative structures that govern the apprehension of the vulnerability of other, and through that apprehension guide our moral faculties. Viewing human agony, then, is not only an invitation to either empathize or dissociate, but already from the beginning invites spectators to participate in the constitution of the other's vulnerability.

This typically involuntary participation is drawn from within a set of broader standards that guide the viewer's attitudes toward unsettling content. On this view, our agency is developed within a web of social relations that form normative background of our epistemic sensibilities and moral and political faculties. This evaluative framework is simultaneously constraining and enabling our abilities to know ourselves and others, to make judgments about the world, and make our aspirations intelligible for other social actors. The evaluative role of these frames is expressed in automatic processes that focus attention on public representations, and the ways in which we acquire knowledge about social conditions, and other people. Such forms of experiencing and forming knowledge are naturally selective and exclusionary. Thus, symbolic frames guide citizens' cognitive and affective habits—insofar as they prompt subjects to attend to some aspects of their experience (and, by implication, ignore others).[58] Since cultural and political contexts of the public sphere are both epistemic and ontological domains, citizens may include or exclude on the basis of how and what knowledge has been gathered and represented, or on the basis of the situated social situation of both the subjects and the foreign others within the society at large.

Grid of Intelligibility and "Symbolic Frames"

The passages above offer a glimpse of the Eurocentric epistemic architecture that "frames" and manages otherness of non-European subjects according to mechanisms of an ontological

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[58] Furthermore, the advantage of understanding that our cognitive, affective, and political subjectivity is a result of various tensions in cultural, social, economic and political relations of power, is that it integrates the study of epistemic (and subsequently, moral and political) exclusion with that of gender, cultural, racial and ethnic exclusions that are driven by discursive interaction, and ways in which knowledge is represented and articulated within society.

formation primarily reinforced by policies, techniques, and ideologies explicitly oriented around the epistemic exclusion, and reduction, of complex identities of Non-European people. To the extent that every society is defined by values and institutions that presuppose a capacity for social actors to influence the decisions of others, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which social imaginaries set up the contexts in which the interpretative and symbolic dimensions of our discourses form and guide individual knowledge and action. We are surrounded by discourses that privilege certain perspectives, and one way to make sense of ways in which humanitarian relation with distant others is plagued by selectivism is to discuss epistemic and ontological grounds of such processes. Before turning to the task of analyzing historical aspects of deficient epistemic interaction and the ways in which epistemic oppression sustains social accounts of marginalization, I first want to call attention to mechanisms of epistemic and ontological formation that affect construction of agency, and then draw the contours of a political discourse that often links our articulation and reception of others with historical processes that lead towards unjust conditions and different forms of social exclusions. Only once we have spelled out the regulative structure of such a discursive field (with regard to broader standards that guide moral and political deliberation, but also acknowledging constraining power such standards have), will we be in a position to understand the role that our cognitive dispositions – specifically, the notions of epistemic violence, epistemic agency and epistemic oppression – plays in the overall process of humanitarian inclusion and social/global justice.

The strongest textual evidence for such an epistemological and ontological matrix is found in the poststructuralist tradition, more precisely in Foucault's works on power and genealogy.[59] His critical engagement with power/knowledge regimes offer historically specific analyses of the present conditions designed to lay out contingent conditions of possibility of our subjectivity as historically,

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[59] See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978); Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended. Lectures at the College de France 1975 – 76* (New York: Picador, 2003).

socially, and culturally specific.[60] Foucault uses the notion of a "grid of intelligibility" to describe

particular relations of power through which we make sense of ourselves and world around us. In

volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality* he writes:

> Powers condition of possibility, or in any case the viewpoint which permits one to
> understand its exercise, even in its more "peripheral" effects, and which also makes it
> possible to use its mechanisms as a grid of intelligibility of the social order, … it is
> the moving substrate of force relations which, by virtue of their inequality, constantly
> engender states of power, but the latter are always local and unstable.[61]

Such "force relations" refer to the ways certain historical and social conditions make possible (i.e.

render intelligible) specific frameworks of meaning, through which social agents make sense of

cultural, political, economic reality. Foucault characterizes this grid of intelligibility as the

organizational sphere wherein "the multiplicity of force relations" operate and constitute a series of

formations that have both epistemic and ontological dimensions which are internally related,

according to the "rule of immanence."[62]

The idea that our ways of apprehending is determined by the social and cultural conditions

in which we find ourselves, involves a highly constraining nature of our epistemic agency. In other

words, "grid of intelligibility" creates *a frame* that institutes and maintains relations of coherence and

continuity among norms that guide our perception and knowledge. These relations are not value-

neutral; rather, they delimit a range of what can be seen or understood, according to the constitutive

and violent work of those norms which guide our articulation and ascription of knowledge. As a

result, a coherent and socially intelligible subject is one whose "essential" features accords to certain

norms (and relations between them) implicit to the grid which enables "intelligibility" in the first

place. The implications of such a dependence of a subject on social conditions and cognitive

dispositions that these conditions engender, points at the controlling and violent nature of the

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[60] Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), *5; 45-71; 75 – 95.*
[61] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978), 93.
[62] (ibid, 98)

processes that constitute social identities. Erin Gilson reiterates this point very clearly when she suggests that the "excess" of objects in regard to discursive and ontological determinations points at the innate reductive character of such a process. To wit: "What is not contained within the frame remains incomprehensible, unperceivable within its terms, but also, in its unintelligibility, defines as intelligible what is circumscribed by the frame."[63] Thus, in order to elaborate normative aspects of the construction what (or who) "Non-Western other" is, one has to disclose ways in which their apprehension is grounded in the relation between her and the normative framework that ascribes certain meaning to her spatial and historical situatedness. These techniques and practices are in themselves mechanisms of subjugation that drag the other into the "Western" context, while at the same time discounting the vital role of cultural differences. Given that the constitution of the non-European other is filtered through Eurocentric colonial logic(s) (as well as historical-cultural biases that continue to dominate the visual culture of the Western world), the question arises whether the differences in specific epistemic and material positons make it possible to comprehend people in a way that would not end in reductive accounts, accounts in which possibilities for deeper engagement/inclusion are neglected.

In this sense, discursive and ontological formations grow out of actual social experience, which is to be understood in terms of the relations of power, historically speaking, in which such experiences take place. Philosophy, social theory, science, religion, law, and so on, are not autonomous or isolated, either conceptually or practically; however, their current idealization tends to couch them as if they were. At the same time, linked to this (ideological) autonomy, construing these disciplines as idealized rather than immersive allows us to ignore the problems that may give rise to their more problematic formulations—not just the fact that we are, in some respects, always making sense of our world, but also that we are, so to speak, making sense of our making sense of

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[63] Erinn Gilson, *The Ethics of Vulnerability* (New York: Routledge, 2014), *44*.

it. One way a society creates a specific national identity is by endorsing a social imaginary grounded in an evaluative frame which guides moral and political agency. This social imaginary functions as a tether that binds a given sociopolitical culture together, and renders the social conditions that surround its subjects intelligible. As such, social imaginaries are rooted historically in social conditions and relations of social forces which operate by establishing contexts wherein the subject recognizes herself and encounters the other. This encounter is conditioned by interpretative structures that govern the apprehension of others, and, through that apprehension, guide our moral faculties. As a discursive formation, encountering the other is not only an invitation to either associate or dissociate, but already from the beginning reflects and constitutes social relationships, wherein the participation of Non-Western other in such relationships is typically involuntary. Hence, as I have pointed out earlier, she is in an ungrateful position, wherein her perceptive (and subsequent normative) pacification not only leads to a diminished moral and political status, but such reduction also stands as a prelude to her subsequent marginalization and oppression. Not only does such asymmetry of power ultimately make the humanitarian impulse towards suffering of others dependent on the Western subject's capacity to acknowledge or deny her agency, but further, the difference in said capacity here also represents an exercise of domination over others, because their epistemic marginalization subsequently leads to a material, social one. These processes are interrelated and as such limit our potential to have reciprocal relationships with others because the agency and autonomy are always assumed to fall onto one side, the side of Western (European) agent.

Drawing on Foucault's account, Judith Butler expands this point further by analyzing the ways in which vulnerable people are presented to us, and more generally, how such presentations and public responses are the effects of social processes of subjection that operate through visual and discursive fields. In her recent work on visual and discursive framing, for instance, she draws

attention to conditions that allow someone or something to emerge as socially visible, and the reduction of a subject's capacity to withstand specific cognitive and material dispositions that in turn create and sustain a negative or indifferent response to the suffering of others. She writes: "The epistemological capacity to apprehend life is partially dependent on that life being produced according to norms that qualify it as a life or, indeed, as part of life. In this way, the normative production of ontology thus produces the epistemological problem of apprehending a life, and this in turn gives rise to the ethical problem of what it is to acknowledge or, indeed, to guard against injury and violence."[64] The moral lesson to be taken from this claim is that the figure of the other as a vulnerable entity always remains in discontinuity with the spectator. In this dialectic between exposure, articulation, ascription, and recognition the very subjectivity of the victim emerges in a process of dissimulation. She appears in this discourse as the subject without a choice, a quasi-agent for whom submission and death have already been chosen by others.

Such denial of agency is often accomplished through perceptual politics that determine what is worth noticing, what can be acknowledged, foregrounded, deemed valuable, and what is relegated to the background, and rendered invisible. This dynamic—wherein the success of an ethical encounter between two different moral perspectives tenuously hovers between an unclear ethical recognition of the claims that the other makes, and an attempted reduction of their complexity to some form of passive appropriation—builds a backdrop of our humanitarian reality. This lack of agency extends to representations of her experiences that usually are coerced and carried out with disrespect. When we reflect back upon the case of the drowned Syrian boy, although the photograph of his tragic end served as a powerful medium to force public attention, it's resonance ultimately depended on who wants to see it, and the political contexts that support its interpretation. Perceiving a photograph that depicts such a traumatic moment thus does not only raise questions

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[64] Judith Butler, *Frames of War* (New York: Verso, 2009), 3.

about the ways in which one represents tragic events, but also implicates the viewer in the helplessness and vulnerability of victims. Therefore such a perception may aestheticize Alan Kurdi's death and thereby surrender the image as spectacle, or it can politicize such representations by thinning out the experience of the spectators that may result in co-optable and sterile populist agendas and selectivism. Hence the agony continues: it shifts from knives, guns, bombs and drones to the lens of a photographer, television screen, and finally to an indifferent gaze and the general numbness of the Western public. To expose this dissimulation, it is necessary, as Butler gestures "to interrogate the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know, what we can hear, what we can see, what we can sense."[65] This call for the inclusion of the other (on her own terms) is not only essential for the reevaluation of epistemic and ontological processes that affect the construction of agency, but also draws the contours of a moral discourse that would link human vulnerability with justice. To avoid the trap of trivializing humanitarian appeals in the face of human suffering, current political culture must stage vulnerability not as an object of fleeting empathy, but as a demand for critical reflection and deliberation about historical processes that lead towards unjust conditions. It is only once we reverse the ways in which the victim becomes the site of her dehumanization that spectators can begin to perceive her as a moral unit with her own complex and challenging context of existence.

Orientalism: Humanitarian Present and Colonial Legacy

Before I conclude this chapter, I would like to point at another important aspect of Western moral selectivism and atrophied humanism. In response to the kinds of concerns about difficulties inherent in cross-cultural and intersubjective communication, as we have seen success of such communication will largely depend on what has resulted from an epistemic/ontological constitution

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[65] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (New York: Verso, 2004), 151.

of *alterity*.[66] The traditional notion of *the other* referred to a set of formal and relative differences in relation to the subject, whose formation and agency were determined by historical circumstances and political location (formations that have unfortunately often taken place under reductive, Eurocentric terms). Insofar as such understanding of subjectivity (and alterity) is encompassed by contingent formation of the self and entities around her, the relation to the other has often resulted in a fitting summary of the interpersonal relations that privileges Western values as paramount and maintain a frame of Western superiority against the target of the violence of Western imperialism and colonialism. With reference to insights offered by Foucault and Butler, the political and epistemological challenges of Western humanism in face of complex processes that constitute otherness seem to be a convenient starting point for elaborating another aspect of the relationship between different forms of injustice (e.g. epistemic, ontological, social, etc.) and material aspects of unjust social conditions.[67] We have seen that each society creates a normative fabric that socializes

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[66] Drawing on work of philosophers Levinas and Kristeva, Ofelia Schutte argues that at a conceptual level "the breakthrough in constructing the concept of *the other* occurs when one combines the notion of the other as different from the self with the acknowledgment of the self's decentering that results from the experience of such differences." She argues that such "breakthrough involves acknowledgment the positive, potentially ethical dimensions of such decentering for interpersonal relations and form of our ethical and political agency, in contrast to simply taking the decentering one might experience in the light of the other's differences as a deficit in the individual control over the environment." According to Schutte, acknowledgment of ways in which "cultural (as well as sexual, racial, gender, and other kinds of difference)" determine interpersonal and social interactions of individuals is necessary if we want "to reach new ethical, aesthetic, and political ground." (Schutte 1998, 54)

[67] In her recent work Kristie Dotson uses the notion of "epistemic oppression" to address practices of epistemic silencing and epistemic exclusion that result from both, set of individual choices and believes, as well as from biased social imaginary that reproduces continuous marginalization of certain social groups. Offering a substantial expansion of the work of Amanda Fricker (Fricker 2007), Dotson identifies three important features of epistemic landscape that are necessary conditions for the emergence of different forms of epistemic injustice and exclusion. These features concern "(1) the situatedness of knowers, (2) the interdependence of our epistemic resources and (3) the resilience of our epistemological systems." (Dotson 2014, *120*) The subject's social position and "interdependent nature of knowing" are straightforward, and both denote ways in which knowing is determined by social location (e.g. privileged group, marginalized group); cognitive resources, such as language, concepts, procedures, or standards, indicate that the resilience of an epistemological system refers to "operative, instituted social imaginaries, habits of cognition, attitudes towards knowers and/or any relevant sensibilities that encourage or hinder the production of knowledge." (ibid, *121*) Dotson's account of epistemic injustice is thus sensitive to context inasmuch as she maintains that certain forms of epistemic exclusions are tied to specific social contexts of epistemic agents. Thus, *the testimonial injustice* (1st order) refers to epistemic and ethical mistreatment of an individual, who due her contingent social characteristics is unfairly assessed as an agent with low credibility. Such identity prejudice is more or less safely couched as an effect of a broader and deeper epistemic injustice that subjects have to endure as interlocutors deemed cognitively inferior by virtue of belonging to disadvantaged social groups (i.e. racial or ethnic minorities, women, etc.). In difference to 1st order epistemic injustice, *Hermeneutical injustice* (2nd order) results from obstacles and limitations in the social imaginary that

its members into its culture, through a set of discursive norms and material practices that render certain forms of behavior socially acceptable and intelligible. The omnipresence of the normative framework sets a stage wherein social identity of social actors unfolds in relation to their "others" as a continuous negotiation of different epistemic and political perspectives. Retrospectively, one can argue that in order to be socially recognized, it is necessary for a subject to meet the normative criteria that determine her presence within the realm of intelligibility, even if this realm directly or indirectly works to exclude, or attempts to erase, the essential characteristics of diversity and particularity that some cultural milieus and individuals have. Such accounts of *othering* show how ontological determinations constitutive of social reality, ultimately occur against the backdrop of epistemological system whose phenomena cannot be reduced to the mere social manifestation of oppression and violence.

The difficulty with cross-cultural social interactions is that they take place under conditions of inequality between interlocutors, wherein knowledge and articulation of disadvantaged group is often lost in silences, misconceptions, misrepresentations, ascriptions and misunderstandings that

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produces forms of insensitivity that limit communicative and epistemic capacities of members of certain groups and preclude genuine understanding of their experiences, problems, and situations. For Dotson, the distinct contexts of epistemic oppression – the ethical, legal, political, and cultural – overlap and intersect in social practice, and yet there is a structure and hierarchy to their interrelation. For example, first order injustice raises a distinctive kind of concern, but ultimately its force and impact depend on a broader social framework and imaginaries that cultural and political configurations radiate into social environment. In addition to these two forms of epistemic injustice, Dotson also identifies 3rd order of epistemic oppression. Hence, for Dotson, this form of epistemic oppression is a kind of *threshold concept*. Political, legal and cultural reforms within a given social and cultural framework cannot contravene epistemological system of our globalized capitalist reality without overcoming dictates of a totalistic homogenizing system whose structure ultimately cannot be just. Epistemic resilience, then, implies that irreducible nature of epistemic oppression "can only begin to be addressed through recognition of the limits of one's overall epistemological frameworks. This generally means that one's epistemic resources and the epistemological system within which those resources prevail may be wholly inadequate to the task of addressing the persisting epistemic exclusions that are causing epistemic oppression." (ibid) While it is fascinating how Dotson recounts "the resilience" of epistemological systems, a different lesson to be learned here calls forth the ways in which reductive tendencies of our epistemological system seem to be the most effective long-standing instrument of social domination. If we want to extract ethical and political implications from it, Dotson's worries seem to be reflected in the fact that process of epistemic interaction takes place in the network of culturally asymmetrical relations of power, wherein inclusion of the subaltern is unavoidably reductive and, as such, a form of violence that ultimately dehumanizes her and situates her, necessarily, in a position of inferiority.

subsequently negotiate and inform their subordinated political and moral value.[68] Members of

groups that have been historically disadvantaged and oppressed (e.g. women, racial and ethnic

minorities, people with disabilities) are often considered as intellectually inferior and deemed less

credible compared to members of privileged groups.[69] This not only has direct impact on the cultural

and political climate within society, but also widens the gap between unprivileged interlocutors by

giving them "a distorted image of themselves as knowers." In such conditions, members of

marginalized groups are distinctly vulnerable to the epistemic disadvantages that have an impact not

only on epistemic relations to each other (e.g. lack of trust, weakening sense of credibility that

people ascribe to others), but also on epistemic relation to oneself (e.g. undermining epistemic

confidence and self-reliance). Furthermore, as Jose Medina conceives of epistemic disadvantages "as

a result of social injustices," such deficits are mostly evident in intersubjective relations wherein

epistemic biases impair cognitive capacities of individuals resulting in "lack of personal and

interpersonal knowledge" that ultimately limits "their capacity to learn, to teach, and to engage in

joint epistemic projects."[70] Success of such epistemic interactions (e.g. testimonial exchange, social

learning) depends on the capacity of social actors to negotiate their epistemic positions around the

axis of social classifications that codify differences between privileged and disadvantaged groups in

ideas of gender, race, class, ethnicity, sexuality or ability.

The problem with such formations of subjectivity is that discursive regimes and social

conditions have irresponsible agents as a product, because their epistemic deficiencies result in

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[68] Please see Olivia Schutte, "Cultural Alterity: Cross-Cultural Communication and Feminist Theory in North-South Contexts." in *Hypatia* 13:2 (1998): 53-72.

[69] In *Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing*, Dotson offers an account of epistemic violence that takes place in an intersubjective context of the testimonial transmission of knowledge. Taking into account that most of our knowledge about personal hardships of Non-Western humanitarian victims depends upon our capacity to facilitate safe space for them to communicate their experiences, it is important to disclose reasons why such space is often denied. "Epistemic violence in testimony," Dotson writes, "is a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange owing to pernicious ignorance. Pernicious ignorance should be understood to refer to any reliable ignorance that, in a given context, harms another person (or set of persons)." (Dotson 2011, 238)

[70] Jose Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28.

insensitivity and a lack of knowledge of themselves, of others, and the world around them. Taking into account that their knowledge is determined by ontological and epistemic differentiations and social relations of power that these agents sustain and reproduce through their agency, inequality and injustice within social conditions, is reflected in the inequality and injustice of an epistemological system that ultimately validates such conditions. This codification and situatedness, thus, has important consequences for the epistemic agency of individuals. While members of a society may differ in their capacity to equally participate in epistemic negotiations, and while such an inequality in regard to epistemic resources may be the result of ongoing social injustices and oppression, these differences nonetheless take place within a common epistemological landscape, regardless of whether the social actors are disadvantaged or not. The heightened dependence and increased centralization of individual and group identities that result from epistemological determinations constitute irreversible social-cognitive embeddedness that, in most cases, enables reconfigurations of ontological status and epistemic privilege.[71] In other words, despite the fact that disadvantage and marginalization are present within the society and a particular culture, different social groups are in position to contest conditions (and narratives) that result in their oppression. Insofar as they are part of social relations that are constitutive of social hierarchies, corresponding social groups are still members of the same culture and segment of the same epistemological system that ultimately allows them to negotiate better access to epistemological resources.

The difficulty for our purposes is that in the case of Non-Western humanitarian victim, such negotiation is not possible. Claims for such an epistemic agency are futile, because as "the other" to the epistemic community, the Non-Western other remains a target of knowledge ascribed *to* them by

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[71] Please see Walter D. Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," in *Coloniality at Large,* eds. Mabel Moraña, Enriqué Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 181-225; Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." in *Coloniality at Large,* ed. Mabel Moraña, Enriqué Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 181-225.

Eurocentric discourses—discourses which articulate humanitarian victims and represent them according to Western norms and values. Their epistemic agency is often diminished because they are seen as an alien part, and not full members of the broader epistemic community. Taking into account that the epistemological system is not confined to national borders, the discursive formations around culture, around the process of othering and articulation of their "humaneness," support for them is already burdened by previous articulations and formations that limit the range of alternatives how to make this translation and recognition of their ontological and epistemic values practical, possible and righteous. If we take into account that there is an incommensurable gap between their experience and the grasp of these experiences by the Western (humanitarian) agent, and taking into account the aggressive and reductive nature of the Eurocentric colonial gaze and discursive regimes that it relies on, every form of translation and mediation seems likely to end up as a form of violence. Being outside of epistemic and ontological boundaries of predominant culture, then, becomes an important issue for successful humanitarian management and inclusion, because Western concept of "self" and Eurocentric culture often reduces complex, multilayered, aspects of Non-Western diversity to fragmented and biased national narratives. What's worse, if traumatic experiences of humanitarian victims invoke moral obligations only if they are situated in and articulated through a resolutely selective cultural imagery of the West, then their moral acknowledgment ultimately depends on a successful mediation of their experiences and initiation into dominant culture and epistemic norms that guide valorization within Western societies.

What this "initiation" and "valorization" means, is that in order for the Non-Western other to be accepted, recognized or included, she has to transcend her position of a Non-Western object of humanitarian discourses, and negotiate her position as an epistemic agent in terms recognized by the dominant cultural framework. But in order to do this, the Non-Western other needs to give up her own particularity, and remain cognizant of the language and "epistemic maneuvers" of the

dominant culture, that in its everyday practice marks her as culturally "other." From an epistemological and ontological standpoint, she becomes an assuaged model of subjectivity, devoid of meaning, will, or purpose – other than the one given by the evaluative horizon of Eurocentric culture. When the Non-Western other acts as "herself" (in her reflexive and affective sense of Middle Eastern cultural upbringing) her new host environment immediately marks her as *the other*. Such a stance, however, arguably places insuperable epistemic obstacles on participants in cross-cultural encounters, and raises many difficult questions. Why does the subjective record of these experiences matter? Where, for instance, would the experience of being exposed to a horror of war be expressed or mutually felt, and for whose knowledge would this experience be important? If the child has no words to name it or if her silence is enforced discursively and physically, did nothing really happen? What are the reasons that are always present by omitting such knowledge? All these questions bring us to one of cultural incommensurability, and what range of obligations such incommensurability has on Western humanitarian agents when we take into accounts epistemic deficiencies and differences in epistemic agency between cross-cultural dialogue participants.[72]

In Edward Said's *Orientalism,* which unmasked oriental studies as an intellectual side of colonial domination, Said explains with a great historical detail the invention of the Orient as a crucial part of making the identity of the Western world. "Orientalizing" a culture, in this sense, implies a distinctive discursive processes of othering wherein Non-European culture is turned into *the other* of the Western world, portraying its members and their practices as alien and exotic. As he highlights this performative instance of colonial discourse:

> [N]either the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability; each is made up of human effort, partly affirmation, partly identification of the Other. That these supreme fictions lend themselves easily to manipulation and organization of collective passion has never been more evident than in our time,

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[72] Please see Olivia Schutte, "Cultural Alterity: Cross-Cultural Communication and Feminist Theory in North-South Contexts." in *Hypatia* 13:2 (1998): 53-72.

when the mobilizations of fear, hatred, disgust, and resurgent self-pride and arrogance – much of it having to do with Islam and the Arabs on one side, "we" Westerners on the other – are very large-scale enterprises.[73]

In the context of this dependence on a complex backdrop of political motives and social conditions that inform and necessitate epistemological positions of social agents, one of the most fundamental discursive logics of colonialism was to (mis)understand other cultures as ahistorical—that is, as immutable, exotic, backward traditions that were confining their members in "uncivilized" values, subsequently warranting Western interventions when colonial interests were requesting their enslavement or annihilation.[74] Obsessive focus on cultural differences and unfamiliar aspects of different traditions has often resulted in a numbness in the West for common values and similar ways of living, what has in turn made engaged relationship with Non-Western other difficult, if not impossible.[75]

One of the consequences of such mechanisms is that knowledge of Western humanitarian agent about other cultures is often unable to account for responsible relationship with Non-Western others, because all they can *see* is what their own imaginary has produced and so made intelligible. Following the work of Said (and also Elizabeth Spelman), Maria Lugones indicates how creation of the Orient by Western discourses is ultimately an exercise in *boomerang perception*:

> Racial/colonialist perception is narcissistic; it denies independence to the seen, it constructs its object imaginatively as a reflection of the seer. It robs the seen of separate identity… The Orient is a repetition of the West. The West acquires a sense of itself negatively through the setting of the "us/them" dichotomy; but it acquires a sense of its own value by constituting itself as the original which the Orient repeats, mimics monstrously, grotesquely.[76]

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[73] Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), xvii.

[74] Said identifies three major mechanisms of othering in regard to other cultures: *totalization of a culture, the erasing of history,* and *exoticizing of cultural traits and practices.* What these attitudes accomplish is an oversimplification of complex historical and political conditions that disregard the diversity of Non-European cultural identities and practices.

[75] This can be seen in recent selectivism who is prioritized for immediate and extensive aid among refugees and how is not. It seems obvious that better support is given to refugees who we deem similar to us (Football coach, pet friendly family, etc.)

[76] Maria Lugones, *Pilgramages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Oxford and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 156.

In other words, Western ignorance in regard to the distinctiveness of others is a byproduct of epistemic and ontological constitution of Western identity that takes place at the costs of the object that it ultimately renders invisible. It is not just that Non-West becomes a mirror against whom Europe chants its cheers of self-recognition, but it also renders everything and everyone to the mere means of Eurocentric discursive and ontological reproduction.

Conclusion: Humanitarian Melancholia

When we connect these insights with current humanitarian challenges, it seems like most of these challenges echo the colonial legacy of European societies in one way or another. This intersection of racism, sexism, cultural imperialism and other forms of exclusionary practices is one of the main obstacles for humanism and inclusion of those whose lives are affected by historical and present injustices (e.g. inclusion of refugees in European societies), and the adamant refusal of the latter in enforcing immediate humanitarian obligations. Given the widespread exploitations and injustices in which humanitarian thinking and its practices have been historically implicated, we should ask: why continue with idea of humanitarianism at all? If we do not want this idea to be exhausted by its historical misuse, it must remain aware of the horrors perpetrated in its name and to struggle consciously against the ambiguities and dangers inherent in humanitarian modes of thought and its public representations. The predicament of Non-European women, men and children is particularly difficult because they are the object of multiple, intersecting, and reinforcing forms of oppression.[77] What is even worse, the notion of the "Non-Western other" is in itself a Western construct that in itself tends to universalize and occlude differences based on e.g. gender, ethnicity and race among humanitarian victims themselves. Ignorance towards these sensitive layers of

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[77] Women among refugees are in some sense experiencing multiple layers of oppression and marginalization: as women in their own culture, and in addition as women and "the other" in respect to European culture.

diversity among targets of Western humanitarian efforts should be one of the main objectives of our efforts for redefining humanitarianism, because suffering and disadvantage are also unequally distributed among the vast body of gender, race and other issues that are not phenomena specific to the Western cultural milieu. Thus as European and North American societies become increasingly complicit in avoiding their humanitarian obligations by inaction, lack of concern or obvious indifference, one can directly ask: what is it exactly that they do not know, and should have known?

The first step towards answering that question is to find a more careful vocabulary that would allow us to distinguish between the conditions that result in human suffering and those that frame its appearance. Without an account of how we may recognize the immediate humanitarian appeal that our privileged position as spectators carries within it, there will be no real grounds for political engagement after witnessing intolerable instances of human deprivation. Ultimately, the argument that I am introducing throughout this chapter is that dominant forms of perception and subsequent knowledge of the other are failing to inform our ethical subjectivity. As I have explained above, the causes of this failure go as far as our most innate cognitive dispositions, because our agency is informed by knowledge shaped by standards that are often subject to systematic patterns of distortions and manipulation—patterns in which a Western liberal subject is historically embedded, and which she is unable to see or reflect upon. These epistemic and ontological blind spots especially affect the way we understand ourselves, and the ways in which this understanding impacts our relationship to strangers and to one another. A reasonable approach to enable different kinds of ethical relations with strangers and suffering they endure is to critically revisit our capacity to gain knowledge about ourselves and understand the burdens of our social context. One way to achieve that is to learn from the past and self-critical perspectives that have tried to change oppressive conditions and challenge homogenizing political institutions. It is a trivial fact that human knowledge is inevitably rooted in human experience of the world, and individuals will experience the

world differently based on their own material interests, ethical receptivity and cultural situation. These aspects of our agency are not independent of each other, on the contrary, they are mutually interactive and shape our subjectivity. In order to treat another person with sympathy and consideration, we may have to take some distance from our own interests and desires in order to consider the ways they impact our moral agency and deliberation. Success of such an attempt will depend on our capacity to challenge these norms and reflect upon the nature of their relation to the demands of others, consequences that follow from our action based upon them, and ways in which these norms situate us in a challenging moral landscape. Otherwise, as Adorno, Foucault, Butler and other critics still remind us, the political culture of humanism, as well as our own agency, will remain tainted by privilege, paternalism and ignorance.

In the end, the fact that the same ideological formation informs a desire to both give a voice to the tormented, and render other lives invisible, has several consequences. It conditions our capacity of becoming compassionate, but also leads to indifference and ignores or denies the obligations that bearing witness to the suffering of others entails. For what one experiences directly and indirectly about oneself and others always falls back to normative frameworks within which social fabric is woven. But, what if it turns out that compassion and coldness are not opposites at all, but rather two sides of a bargain that subjects of a globalized world have struck with structural inequality and works of political power? If we acknowledge the normative claims that morality places on us, the experience of the pain of others would trigger universal humanitarian norms and hence we would be obligated to feel a responsibility to alleviate it. But since some pain is more compelling to address than others, and since some groups of people are more likely to be grieved over than others, one is forced to ask a disheartened question: What does it actually mean to be ethically responsive, that is, to consider and attend to the suffering of others? As it seems our ethical foundations are already placed into question with the existence of people who die at the hands of

their fellow human beings. The importance of this statement lies in its displacement of the human value from our experience of such events to the specific historical event itself. It lies in a demand to interrogate what such an experience really entails and what could have been said on behalf of those who were silenced and killed. To render their presence intelligible for those who occupy the privileged position, the most one can do is to refuse to be depoliticized as a sheer statistic, or render the differences insignificant. As we have seen, recent public criticism has reformulated our historical exclusion as a matter of historically produced and politically charged alterity. Insisting that we're not merely positioned but instead fabricated by social and political contexts, one must acknowledge that our socially produced being (as marginal, deviant, privileged or subordinate) itself comprises the centrality and legitimacy of the social conditions that pave our political and moral capacities. It is only when the Western spectator ceases to articulate inhumane conditions through a spectacle of numbers, labels, and nameless bodies, that the voices of the oppressed can gain the capacity to speak for themselves. Unless we insist upon politicizing and criticizing the very form that contemporary humanism receives today, the encounter with the suffering of others will remain in a firm grip holding hands with death.

CHAPTER 3

LIVES RENDERED INVISIBLE: BEARING WITNESS TO HUMAN SUFFERING

The previous chapter raised important questions about mechanisms that constitute and regulate identities of Non-Western humanitarian victims. Several themes have emerged in my analysis of epistemic and ontological negotiations that materialize within this discursive frame that facilitates intelligible conditions and reactions thereof within society. *First,* I have argued that individuals stand in complicated relationship to social powers that form and manage social structures that shape their lives. These social structures embody specific historical forms as a result of individual agency, whose choices and actions serve as vessels of power. One lesson of traditional critical theory framework and its contemporary reiterations is that action of individuals is always conditioned in (and sustained by) multiple and fluctuating social contexts and configurations of power. In order to make sense of such contexts, an analysis must remain sensitive to this complex entanglement of individual agency and material and symbolic forces that lurk in the background. One (among many) of the deficiencies of liberal humanitarian discourse is the reductive focus on either the agency of individuals (often depicted through liberal legal dichotomy between victims and perpetrators), or on institutional structures and policies (i.e. diverse international humanitarian treaties, NGOs, state interventions, etc.). Neither of these approaches can provide an adequate analysis because their obsession with current social organization and political culture ultimately fails to confront liberal humanitarianism with its own failed normative commitments deeply reflected in cognitive and material dispositions of individuals. In order to evaluate every aspect of our humanitarian present, we must simultaneously be attentive towards both social agents and relations of power that manifest themselves in choices and actions that individuals make. *Second,* in our attempt to understand these underlying configurations of power, we must remain sensitive towards

the interplay between material and cultural dimensions of social life and human agency. One of the lessons of traditional and contemporary critical thought is to pay close attention to the complex relationship between representations and the material reality of the social word. Both aspects, social conditions and their discursive affirmation and validation, sustain structures of power. Unjust allocation of epistemic and material resources provide evidence for the intertwined epistemic and social nature of exclusion. Thus, in order to offer an analysis of humanitarianism that avoids making the same mistakes, it is necessary to consider both the symbolic and material circumstances that condition the representation and mediation of suffering. Pointing at such an interdependence of material and symbolic realities allows us to focus on multifaceted relations between the subject and her social reality. By construing the figure of the victim through fictional aesthetics of images that, in themselves, help articulate knowledge about instances of human vulnerability, contemporary liberal humanitarianism manages to sustain an unequal distribution of the "quality of humanity" among its objects that its representational mechanisms introduce for public attention. Reminiscent of historical divisions of Colonialism, liberal humanitarianism focuses is on humane dispositions of the benefactor, who is always situated at the center of the economic and cultural domination of the West, while the humanitarian victim is systematically dehumanized and kept outside of such centers of power and visibility. Hence, liberal humanitarian culture enacts a form of solidarity that negotiates inclusion and exclusion along the vocabulary of justice that is in itself a form of an apolitical and dehumanizing discourse of humanitarian activism and international "development" politics. Instead of enabling space wherein the screams of those who suffer under an unjust global order can be heard, it renders their lives and voices invisible and inaudible to a Western ear. In order to further articulate problems inherent in today's humanitarianism and Western moral subjectivity, I move towards a critique of the role of public representation in cultivating solidarity with distant others. Focusing on images and the ways in which media outlets instrumentalize evidence of human

deprivation, I hope to show how such essential practices of humanitarian imaginary does not make distance between spectators and victims smaller. Instead, mediated suffering reinforces the spectatorial position that increasingly removes the Western subject from historical causes of injustices and people whose lives demand support not only as a disposition of solidarity, but also as a question of justice.

Introduction: Adorno's Warning

In the aftermath of the atrocities of the Second World War, Adorno warned that aestheticizing human suffering reduces it to a state of banality. Referring to what he calls the "barbarism" of the post-Holocaust culture, Adorno doubts whether our familiar discursive practices can serve as adequate mediums to represent and understand these horrors:

> The so-called artistic rendering of the naked physical pain of those who were beaten down with rifle butts contains, however distantly, the possibility that pleasure can be squeezed from it. The morality that forbids art to forget this for a second slides off into the abyss of its opposite. The aesthetic stylist principle, and even the chorus's solemn prayer, make the unthinkable appear to have had some meaning; it becomes transfigured, something of its horror removed. By this alone an injustice is done the victims.[78]

Although Adorno's characterization has been criticized by some as excessive, his statement reveals an important aspect of representing atrocity and its ties to moral evaluation. To fail to acknowledge how interpretative and symbolic representations of atrocities may undermine the tragic depth of human brutality is to overlook the complexities of the human condition, which render guilt and public witnessing into its opposite, namely, indifferent spectatorship and apathy. Implicit in Adorno's critique of the depoliticization of the Holocaust and subsequent aestheticization of violence is perhaps a reminder of a much deeper problem that plagues the relationship between aesthetics, politics and ethics: How do we make sense of the cruelty captured in images of tormented

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[78] Theodor Adorno, "On Commitment," in *Can one live after Auschwitz? Philosophical reader,* ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 252.

human beings? What are the moral obligations aroused through exposure to visual representation of atrocities? How do stories of human suffering mobilize our emotional capacity to understand, to make us grieve, or even to forget and remain indifferent? Perhaps Adorno, who was eager to unmask this difficulty of subjects to reconcile their experiences with events that have eclipsed their conceptual grasp, bespeaks to an inherent inability of public representation to retrace the contours of atrocities in the form of a coherent discourse.

However, Adorno's initial realization of the difficulties tied to the entanglement between aesthetics and politics remains a bit ambiguous. It seems to rest on two distinct, though related, assumptions. *First*, it suggests that there are various moral issues involved in the nature of knowledge/information that the visual depiction and documentation of human suffering conveys. There seems to be a dark dialectic within these instances of horror that are contextualized in visual representation, and despite the fact that photography's broad resonance has a capacity to succeed in arousing public moral outrage and provoke questions of responsibility, there also lies a danger of effectuating what it seeks to resist, namely the normalization of atrocity. *Second*, although representations of suffering seem to have an instrumental value in capturing public attention by accommodating viewers' imagination and emotion, such images nonetheless tell us little about the nature of the political deliberations that surround them. They don't reveal how their effects on viewers are being channeled and transformed into a specific political consciousness. If we take into consideration that exhibiting such images reduces complex geopolitical conditions to shocking but simplistic visual frames, questions arise concerning the political nature of such processes and which instances of social powers create conditions of perception that constitute subjects' comprehension of the content that these images deliver. As a result of this dilemma, the ways in which public representation affects and shapes the political and moral agency of individuals calls for a closer examination of the patterns, problems and inconsistencies associated with the use of images of

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human suffering. It is commonplace to claim that people make sense of events in the world through the information that images convey; however, in order to foster an active engagement with reality there is a need to better chart the processes through which certain depictions emerge as critical landmarks of public knowledge and imagination.

In what follows, I take this troubling relation between the invasive representation of human trauma and the political nature of the public use of such images as a convenient starting point for the theme I wish to discuss in this chapter, namely, the ethical challenges involved in the ways public representation—through photography or other media—structures our experiences of atrocities and facilitates an adequate awareness and response (or a lack thereof) towards the suffering of others. In order to understand exactly what is at stake here, I point out that such an analysis should not exhaust itself in answering what makes public representations of human suffering ethically suspicious and intolerable, but should rather extend this task by clarifying how the public forms sentiments about their social and political reality by elucidating under which conditions public representation promotes broader political agendas. One of the central tenets of human rights advocacy is the widespread conviction that exposure to images and stories of human rights abuse has a mobilizing effect on western audience(s) whose exposure to such knowledge can motivate them to intervene and prevent future atrocities. In order to assess the basic implications of such a conviction we must answer at least three principal clusters of questions. *First*, how do public representations of atrocities affect individuals and their capacities to conceive and respond to social injustices and the suffering of others? Under which circumstances may agents respond effectively to shocking content? What are the limits of depicting violence and human trauma? There are various issues involved in the visual depiction and documentation of atrocities and suffering. Although images can be powerful mediums that force attention and involvement, their resonance ultimately depends on where they are coming from, who wants to see them, and political contexts that support

their interpretation. Perceiving a photograph that depicts a certain traumatic moment thus does not only imply an active engagement with the ways one represents a tragic event, but also implicates the viewer in the helplessness and vulnerability of others. Thus, such a perception may aestheticize the suffering of others and thereby surrender the image as spectacle, or it can politicize such representations by thinning out the experience of the spectators that may result in co-optable and sterile populist agendas and selectivism. *Second,* although the power of the image is built on emotional response, the specific emotions an image invokes are not predictable in themselves. They depend on topologies of social powers and the interests those powers aim to advance. Hence, what essentially undergird these relations are political processes that dictate malformed public responsiveness to instances of human suffering. Such distortions are evident, for example, in western humanitarian selectivism, which handpicks certain cases of suffering to represent and address. The question we must ultimately confront, then, concerns the role of society in facilitating a space wherein moral dilemmas healthily correlate to the witnessing of injustice and atrocities. How exactly do social powers organize the field of public perception? And how does this galvanize political support or opposition to concrete historical events? *Finally*, what can be said about the responsibilities of visual representation? Whose agency is it that images inform, and what reforms are necessary to make representations of suffering ethically effective means to encourage better acknowledgment of individual and collective responsibilities that would motivate the public to meet its moral and political obligations? For this chapter ultimately suggests that, in order for politically implicated images to have an immediate critical effect on individuals and their agency, they need to cultivate alternative modes of perception. Such modes, then, would challenge persisting cognitive and perceptual norms that sustain the lethargic consciousness of an audience and help induce new modes of subjectivity.

Images and the Contemporary Hollowness of Bearing Witness

How do images of human suffering affect us? How do they mobilize our attention, and elicit empathy, horror, enjoyment or anger? In spite of their moral straightforwardness, these questions are not easy to answer. Given that representations of atrocities have not only epistemological, but also ethical and political dimensions, the first step in answering these questions is to analyze how specific cultural, economic, and political conditions facilitate images as vehicles for collective knowledge and memory. Taking into account that these different aspects intersect and form the contexts in which public representation defines the standards of our social experiences, it is important to indicate the ways in which the relation between images, public knowledge, and individual agency (either through direct action, omission, or apathetic spectatorship) is constituted. In *Regarding the Pain of Others,* now a classic work on the uses and meanings of images of atrocities, Susan Sontag illuminates this complex relation between representations of traumatic events and an audience whose perception of violence or trauma is defined by exposure to such images. "One can feel obliged to look at photographs that record great cruelties and crimes," she writes, "to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show. Not all reactions to these pictures are under the supervision of reason and conscience. Most depictions of tormented, mutilated bodies do arouse a prurient interest."[79] Despite recent calls for a reconsideration of the validity of images of suffering as tools for socially and politically engaged photojournalism and art, there are many arguments that express doubts about the moral and political sentiments that gruesome or aesthetically appealing images of trauma may stimulate through public exhibits. On the one hand, photography can facilitate the articulation of a certain degree of moral indignation, responsibility, empathy, and compassion, forced by the fact that viewers need to decide where they stand in regard to the content that they see. On the other hand, it can generate

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[79] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 95.

more deleterious responses—voyeurism, shame, guilt, complicity, and indifference. The gravitation of their content towards the subject's imagination complicates both sets of emotions, for one of the most typical responses to images is an envisioned restriction of political possibilities, which needs to be contested critically.

When we consider the ordinary ways in which we think about our capacity to bear witness and understand the complexities of human conditions that result from states of vulnerability and exclusion, it soon becomes evident that how we conceive social reality and human deprivation is configured through the interpretative and symbolic dimensions of visual representations and the discourses that articulate them. As Barbie Zelizer has aptly observed, "[t]he compelling weight of the photograph, then, is determined by a linkage between its material and discursive dimensions, and the power created by that linkage draws us to a photo's many meanings."[80] This alone suggests that the multifaceted dimension of images not only helps to stabilize and support knowledge about specific events, but also fosters an alternative engagement with reality by guiding public imagination beyond the contours of mere witnessing. The use of images for political purposes relies on the assumption that complicated events can become visible and understandable through certain kinds of depiction. The graphic content of an image thus acts as a trigger for emotional release, regardless of which emotions these may be. And yet, most discourse regarding the informative role of images merits the assumption that seeing photos with gruesome content would be enough to promote action or responsiveness of some kind. The problem with this assumption is not only that it presupposes reactions in audience that are not obvious, but also that such a reduction of the political role, capacity and effect of an image to naïve spectatorship is an ideological distortion of a complex process of how images work in today's public sphere and the ways in which they affect subjects.

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[80] Barbie Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), *8*.

It is for these reasons that viewing photos of human suffering is both active and intervening, though these two aspects do not necessarily presuppose or lead to collective public action. As Jacques Rancière argues, "there is no straightforward road from the fact of looking at a spectacle to the fact of understanding the state of the world; no direct road from intellectual awareness to political action."[81] He associates the questionable political value of photos with the lethargic consciousness of the viewing public in order to disclose the problematic complacency of the postmodern subject in his long-overdue awakening of knowledge and compassion towards the suffering of others. As a result, Rancière suggests that although gruesome images are certainly hard to bear, there is no reason why their exhibition would make an audience eager to fight against powers that cause such harrowing conditions. "The stock reaction to such images," he writes, "is to close one's eyes or avert one's gaze."[82] Such a paradoxical situation, which defines the link between the intolerable content of an image to an awareness of the reality it expresses, is evidence of the need to challenge theoretical and political presuppositions that ground the public criticism that these images want to inform. Spectators share specific epistemic positions and they experience the content of images through their rootedness in contingent cultural, economic and political conditions that mold cognitive presuppositions that condition their perceptions of their social environments and the lives of others. Thus, Rancière's disturbing analysis of the political value of images of human suffering cannot be posed independently of the question of the political nature of the subject's comprehension and formation of his or her identity. Exposure to public representation of harrowing images is thus never a passive encounter with concrete historical events. Rather, visual content that is transmitted through images falls down on the backdrop of previous shared knowledge—both cultural and political. While such an encounter overlaps to a certain degree with previous experiences of similar events, and may even invoke sentimentality towards victims, the audience

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[81] Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image* (New York: Verso, 2009), *75*.
[82] (Ibid., *85*)

nonetheless preserves its own distinct perspective and interpretative framework, to which one has to pay attention if we are to remain critical about transmitted knowledge and how it may mobilize (or fail to mobilize) public attention/intervention.

As we live in a time in which acts of witnessing risk becoming distorted by various social forces that facilitate uncritical understandings of and responses to tragic events, we find ourselves challenged to apprehend the weight of knowledge that is facilitated through screened material. At the same time, displayed images offer a representational frame of human brutality and facilitate exposure and engagement more than understanding. Their reliance on effect and emotion become powerful impulses for judging such events in the public sphere. However, they are instrumentalized as effective ways to reproduce reality and shape popular imagination of atrocities, which not only enhances an acknowledgment of public responsibility regarding instances of human suffering, but also triggers "cognitive resistances" that may obscure or even make incomprehensible events that demand public attention. The capacity to presume, infer, and accept or reject meanings of images depends also on other, more symbolic forces that play an active role in diminishing individual capacity to become ethically responsive to the suffering of others. Racism, sexism, religious conservatism, national or cultural identities, and class-based stereotypes make witnessing a selective process, one that reduces complex events to a manageable size or allows us to employ our references to present-day political agendas. Referring to this selectivism, James Dawes suggests that exposure to systematic injustices and violence "triggers so many cognitive resistances, because its disorganization makes it so difficult to pack it into the standard narrative forms we use parceling knowledge of our worlds, we can be inclined to retreat into easy, familiar methods of regulative experience. For many, racism [or any other aspect of our habituation] can therefore begin to function as an almost indispensable enabling device, a useful and well-practiced response for

psychically organizing the unorganizable."[83] Such a radical contingency of reception, then, not only challenges how public representations of distant suffering can contribute to an acknowledgment of individual and collective responsibilities when confronted with human rights violations, but raises crucial questions about other possible responses to viewing and reading about violence and human suffering in general.

Despite continual references to atrocities in the media, there is a range of reasons for why such representations may no longer compel responsibility or move individuals and collectives to intervene. For instance, it is possible that, rather than motivating an audience to action, media coverage shocks and desensitizes it into a dazed passivity and denial of responsibility. As Stanley Cohen writes in his classic work on this theme:

> Witnessing and reproducing the truth are cognitive projects: how to convey a reality that cannot be denied. But what if continued exposure to this reality eventually deadens our moral and emotional receptivity to further images of suffering? The populist psychology thesis of "compassion fatigue" is built upon three overlapping concepts: *information overload, normalization, desensitization.*[84]

In other words, although we find ourselves relying increasingly on the media and its visual depictions to help us make sense of atrocities, with time the barrage of horrifying photos loses its resonance. This deterioration takes place not only because such images may overwhelm the audience with the magnitude of suffering, but also because constant exposure to human deprivation and an ongoing politicization of tragic historical events (e.g. the Holocaust, genocide in Rwanda, Civil War in Bosnia, diverse Colonial and Neo-Colonial atrocities, etc.) normalizes them, and numbs the western audience to recurring instances of human suffering. What "compassion fatigue" teaches us, then, is that indifference to the pain of others is not so incomprehensible after all; it relies on multifaceted political performances in which cultural predilection, together with public

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[83] James Dawes, *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), *35*.
[84] Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), *187*.

representation, lead towards the humanization or dehumanization of the Other. As public knowledge becomes increasingly dependent on technology and political mediation, the power of images to effectively generate public awareness and support of agonies of distant others is underscored by their capacity to end in the opposite: cultural denial and further hindrance of recognition and redress. Thus, rather than inducing compassion and sympathy, they may result in resentment and indifference. Even worse, as images of atrocities become more complex and "multimediated," their open-ended interpretative and symbolic dimensions may turn audiences into voyeurs of objectified human suffering in an almost pornographic way.

This brings us back to Rancière's question of the nature of the relationship between visual representation and the effects this has on the formation of public opinion. How does such exposure shape a subject's capacity to comprehend his or her environment and the environment of others? "Why identify gaze and passivity," he writes, "unless on the presupposition that to view means to take pleasure in images and appearances while ignoring the truth behind the image and the reality outside the theatre."[85] Interrogating the efforts of critical art to emancipate the spectator questions the attempt to traverse the abyss that divides activity from passivity by asking "if it is not precisely desire to abolish the distance that creates it."[86] Taking into account that the mass media has an uncontested monopoly on the dissemination of information, the dependency of subjects' knowledge on broadcasting, which necessitates a constant referral to technological mediation in the formation of experience and meaning, may cause not only a complete denial of recognition towards culturally distant values, but also lead further to the preservation of cultural and political stereotypes that often have fatal consequences for the acknowledgment of our own humanitarian/political obligations towards distant people in need. As these theorists remind us, "we have only got better more subtly in looking the other way." This ignorance is not a natural process; it instead depends on the linkage

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[85] Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 12.
[86] (ibid.)

between individual moral choices and the political powers that form and regulate them. A better understanding of these complex connections will help not only to uncover the network of intentions that guides injustices and clarify the unevenly shared responsibilities of those who cause these events (as well as those who witness or benefit from them), but also to collapse the distance between "us" and "them" and acknowledge how precarious human life is.

Social Ontologies and Politics of Perception

The previous pages suggest that there is no simple relationship between continual references to atrocities and public responses to the knowledge that such references convey. Despite the various ways in which representations of violence and other human rights abuses can affect an audience, the capacity to presume, accept or reject meaning from images is built into the image-making enterprise. Such ability to craft meaning regardless of an image's clear relevance to what is being depicted deserves further attention. Contrary to the popular assumption that "images are worth a thousand words," they actually tell us very little. Sometimes they exclude information that would otherwise be important in order to have adequate knowledge about a specific event. Thus, by leaving out cues of causality, impact, and historical contexts, and without a clear distinction between intention, neglect, accident or design that guides these events, images offer an atrophied depiction of reality. Their provocative and shocking content invites public engagement with human suffering without actually insisting that people comprehend tragedy on its own terms. In obscuring its complex historical, cultural and political aspects, public representation of atrocities usually offers a blended visual category of human-made and natural catastrophes that prevents reasoned deliberation and denies insight into the complex reality of injustice and tragedies. In this regard, although images of suffering mobilize an emotional landscape within which public reaction can take shape, this landscape is neither random nor spontaneous. One has to be sensitive to how and what kind of context is woven

around the image, because it is exactly this context that gives an image its meaning and dictates its reception. In other words, the complex relations that surround a given moment captured through the camera lens—whether social, cultural, legal, moral or political in nature—determine what the image is worth, as well as the nature of public exposure and engagement. Resolving how to display specific events and determining what kind of information is needed to recognize them in a certain way is in the interest of social forces that want to advance and protect specific agendas.

We have all grown accustomed to familiar representations of atrocities and we seem to ignore the fact that an image's contingent nature can be utilized by institutional powers by manipulating the cognitive and emotional dispositions of the viewing public. As Susan Sontag argues,

> (P)hotographs that everyone recognizes are now a constituent part of what society chooses to think about, or declares that it has chosen to think about. It calls these ideas 'memories' and that is, over the long run, a fiction. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as a collective memory—part of the same family of spurious notions as collective guilt. But there is collective instruction.[87]

This gives an image a strategic use value, and renders it an intrinsic component of what I have introduced in second chapter as a "frame" or "field of perception." Used equally to generate compassion and indifference, to accuse, distance, criticize, empathize, ridicule, manipulate, obscure, deny, neutralize, and dissociate, images thus do capture public involvement, but in strategic, and often deceiving ways. The public's capacity to make meaning out of these images therefore hinges on a nurturing of the imagination on the basis of social and political norms. To the extent that every society is defined by values and institutions that presuppose a capacity that enables social actors to influence the decisions of others, it is important to keep in mind the ways in which media outlets set up the contexts in which the interpretative and symbolic dimensions of an image form and guide

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[87] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, *85*.

individual knowledge and action. Drawing on both Foucault and Sontag, Butler's account in

"Torture and the Ethics of Photography", and later in her book "Frames of War," expands the

discourse on images by analyzing the ways in which atrocities and human suffering are presented to

us, and more generally, how such presentations and public responses are effects of social processes

of subjection that operate through visual and discursive fields. As she puts it:

> Prior to the events and actions that are represented… there is an active, if unmarked,
> delimitation of the field itself, and so a set of contents and perspectives that are not
> shown, never shown, impermissible to show. They constitute the nonthematized
> background of what is represented, one that can only be approached through
> thematizing the delimitating function itself, one that allows for an exposure of the
> forcible dramaturgy of the state and the collaboration with it by those who deliver
> the visual news of the war through complying with permissible perspectives. That
> delimitation is part of an operation of power that does not appear as a figure of
> oppression.[88]

Butler's claim brilliantly captures the ways in which social forces constitute human agency and

enable specific regimes of intelligibility. Being a spectator/bearing witness, then, becomes a complex

process wherein exposure to visual representation invokes not only an aspect of reality but positions

such representation into a broader interpretative framework that actively molds the context of

photography through social and political norms and practices. Since images are experienced as ways

of giving meaning to our social environment, the ethical resonance of such processes depends on

interpretative cultural and political codes of reference, which makes questionable the separation of

representation from ongoing political agendas. Indeed, photographs serve as evidence of atrocities,

but such pieces of evidence "are themselves a species of rhetoric. They reiterate. They simplify. They

agitate. They create illusion of consensus."[89] One can assume, then, that there lies a constant danger

that knowledge mediated through images becomes a vehicle of ideology under the guise of

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[88] Judith Butler, J. "Torture and the Ethics of Photography," in *Environment and Planning 715 D: Society and Space* 25
(2007): *953.*
[89] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, *6.*

representation, rather than that which references events that deserve genuine public concern and immediate action.

In order to fully grasp the weight of Sontag's and Butler's insights, one has to disclose how social ontologies work, that is, when and how one can claim a certain identity, and under which circumstances one can be visible as a human being worthy of moral concern. In the first instance, social ontology seems to be constituted within certain fields of intelligibility, fields that bring us back to questions about power, and how relations of power both sustain the subject's identity and subordinate her at the same time. Thus, as Butler argues, "there's always question prior to ontology, which is the question of power and what it orchestrates: who or what can be, has the power to be, and what allows someone or something to emerge into the field of ontology?"[90] In other words, we must ask, which conditions allow someone or something to emerge and become socially visible; which operations of these social powers decide in advance who will and who will not become a subject? If we start with the assumption that the individual is dependent on social recognition, and that his or her identity is constituted through cultural and political forces along with and in opposition to others, the failure to be recognized as a subject worthy of social concern, then, is not just a failure of civil society to successfully mediate between individuals and political powers. More fundamentally, it is the impossibility of separating the intelligibility of social actors from the social forces that both individualize and totalize a particular presentation of oneself. Thus, in terms of the ability of a social body to provide content for the realization of humanization (and dehumanization), disciplinary discourses alongside regimes of perception signify the totality of meanings that make any differentiation between social role and personal autonomy impossible. Such an increasing control of society over individuals results in diverse modes of behavior that are accompanied by the reduction

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[90] Judith Butler, "Accounting for Philosophical Itinerary: Genealogies of Power and Ethics of Non-Violence" in *Politics of culture and the spirit of critique: dialogues*, edited by Gabriel Rockhill and Alfredo Gomez-Muller (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), *86*.

of a subject's capacity to withstand specific cognitive and material dispositions which in turn create and sustain our response towards the suffering of others.[91]

Butler's gestures towards the comprehension of public imagery and politics of perception are helpful to reflect on the ways in which visual documentation of geopolitical events renders certain human beings invisible. As I suggested earlier, organization of the sensory landscape, that is, organization of how subjects perceive their environment, is not independent from the social relations that form and shape their sensory/perceptive/cognitive capacities. The invisibility of others, then, is not only constituted through the exclusion of certain social sectors that takes the form of widespread instances of disrespect (racial minorities, women, the LGBTQ community, immigrants, ethnic and religious minorities, etc.). Rather, their gradual dehumanization also depends on sensory inequality, where both aspects of social experience share the same ideological foundations of a single political process. Thus, in order to even initiate discourse on the political effects of visual imagery, one must disclose how a subject's perception is formed and sustained by social forces and the relations that they create. This is necessary because a subject's cognitive and perceptive capacities determine when and how interpretations of visual content take place and which effects it will have on a subject's agency and deliberation. This way of understanding how experience is constituted and sustained brings us back to what motivates Butler's account of ideological framing. Namely, many social and political mechanisms draw their validity and persuasiveness from symbolic cultural forces that are inherent in social upbringing, which in return strike agents as credible and usually beyond critical reasoning. Through a complex setup of representations (media, the Internet, public campaigns) the embodiment of these forces in public broadcasts are references not just to social constellations and events that unfold on a political landscape, but also to a situated

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[91] This is especially the case when the suffering one sees or reads about is happening to people living far away and with whom the audience is likely never to come into contact. How this political selectivism is grounded depends on the institutional capacity to mobilize public approval and convince their addressees to "rationally" endorse and apply these regulative norms in their everyday life.

practice of opportunities, performance and control. Although it may at first seem rather

unattainable, the reality which comes into being through news agencies and other forms of public

media transcends questions of mediation and transmission, and takes an active role in shaping public

knowledge and what subjects can conceive as social reality. Thus, it remains a constant danger that

those subjects whose behavior media exposure aims to affect remain vulnerable to the forces of

predominant political and cultural narratives that cognitively and emotionally structure individuals

according to particular, institutionally driven social contexts.

One way to grasp this process is to ask the simple question of what makes some images

work better than others, and what happens with public sentiments towards those lives that are

rendered invisible. The main challenge here consists in analyzing the ways in which such invisibility

results from cognitive, emotional and moral reductions facilitated through complex mechanisms of

visual and discursive framing.[92] We might, along these lines, think that within the frame, the context

of social relations postulates the possibility of political agents to be present, represented and

representable or in turn completely denied any social intelligibility and recognition. Thus, the

symbolic and structural dimensions of power condition subjects who are socially visible and

recognized as individuals with intrinsic worth and meaning from those who are not. There are a

variety of ways to account for such an emergence of the "subject" from the matrix of social

institutions, and such processes raise important questions about individual agency, moral

responsibility and the structures of institutional intelligibility. Who appears within the frame? Who is

recognized and what constitutes a subject who can be recognized in the first place? In an attempt to

address this problem, Butler makes a considerable effort to display how such processes of social

framing orchestrate subject formation. As she puts it,

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[92] This notion of invisibility does not have to refer only to people who are not present as a content of visual representation, but also those individuals who are centerpiece of such images and still remain ignored and violated through the subsumption of a universal conceptual gaze of the commodified western public.

> If recognition characterizes an act or a practice or even a scene between subjects, then 'recognizability' characterizes the more general conditions that prepare or shape a subject for recognition—the general terms, conventions, and norms 'act' in their own way, crafting a living being into a recognizable subject, though not without errancy or, indeed, unanticipated results. These categories, conventions, and norms that prepare or establish a subject for recognition […] precede and make possible the act of recognition itself. In this sense, recognizability precedes recognition.[93]

A close reading of these lines shows us how political forces, cultural standards and habits, forms of knowledge, procedures, spatial organizations and systems of monitoring have become the means for governing the unwanted. These categories and norms in collusion with media and other forms of representation become a field of negotiation that orchestrates the possible forms a subject may take. By introducing the notion of "frame," a notion that refers to intertwining epistemological and ontological horizons within which subjects come to *be* at all, Butler provides a fascinating testimony of the effects of political powers upon which a certain understanding of humanity projects itself. Such an ontological predisposition of epistemological intelligibility transforms the social space into a performative one wherein the intersection of visual control and an ethical preselection creates the conditions for the inclusion and exclusion of human beings.

The Public Beyond Witnessing: Towards a Different Politics of the Sensible

Throughout this chapter I have argued that images of human suffering have critically shaped our understanding of tragedies that result from human rights abuses. I have tried to show how exposure to evidence of atrocities can affect an audience in different ways, and that the act of bearing witness should not be understood naively as a one-dimensional, individual experience, but rather as a political process that uses images and other media to sustain or advance specific political interests. I have also argued that, even if we become aware of how such processes affect us, the real

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[93] Butler, *Frames of War, 5*.

challenge lies much deeper, namely in revealing how our subjectivity and agency are constituted through the effects of social forces that condition our capacity to perceive and understand. The main challenge that contemporary human rights advocates face, then, is posed not only by the controversial moral and political implications of the gruesome content of images, but also the ideological nature of processes woven within the images' use, reception and intentions that such exposure seeks to achieve. As I have suggested, public representations of atrocities may not only result in a fostering of humanitarian impulses; they may also numb public criticism and render agents unable to experience the world and other human beings in an engaged and caring way. The moral anxiety derived from witnessing distant suffering also brings us to another dilemma, namely, how we should understand this decay of human experience and whether there are ways to overcome the problem.

Given that patterns of exclusion feed on cross-cultural and historical contingencies, one can repeat Susan Sontag's concern that "our failure is one of imagination," and that the first step in overcoming the passivity of the viewing public may be to distance ourselves from the historical, cultural and economic structures that affect us.[94] This echoes what Rancière writes in regard to an increasingly deceptive relation between ideology and social critique:

> Forty years ago, critical science made us laugh at the imbeciles who took images for realities and let themselves be seduced by their hidden messages. In the interim the "imbeciles" have been educated in the art of recognizing the reality behind appearances and the messages concealed in images. And now, naturally enough, recycled critical science makes us smile at the imbeciles who still think such things, as concealed messages in images and a reality distinct from appearances exist. The machine can work in this way until the end of time, capitalizing on the impotence of the critique that unveils the impotence of the imbeciles.[95]

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[94] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 8.
[95] Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 48

However much one might take issue with Rancière's claim, it is at least clear that the different ways in which social forces condition specific segments of an individual's experiences and subsequently his or her identity, leave the question unanswered as to how we may avoid this trap of what we might call perceptual predeterminism, and actually regain the capacity of critical reflection.

The aim of this final section, then, is not to repeat the criticism. I am not interested in prolonging the trial to which discourse on the political nature of images seems to be reduced. "If we want to have a fresh look at what images are, what they do and the effects they generate," disclosing what social powers frame as standards of intelligibility is just a first step toward emancipation.[96] At stake here is not only a questioning of the privilege of the visual or an inevitable surrender to the inescapable nature of power, but also the hope of finding new paths to disturb the common ways in which perception is predisposed. In order to contest discursive visual norms that form a dominant system of experience and knowledge, an image needs to transcend, and at the same time remain part of, social experience. In other words, if aesthetic experience aims to have a critical effect on political conditions, it must disrupt the ways in which visual depictions of reality adhere to certain standards and functions. As Rancière writes, "The point is not to counter-pose reality to its appearances. It is to construct different realities, different forms of common sense." To contest mechanisms of domination and dehumanization, images, then, need to "help sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible. But they do so on condition that their meaning or effect is not anticipated."[97] Only then can the "intolerable" in images really be taken as a serious medium of representation of human suffering, and not simply as a walk on a tightrope between victims and perpetrators viewed at a safe moral distance within the comfort of the western living room. To unsettle the framing of a visual culture that blurs the line between complicity and witnessing, as well as foster a "renewed

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[96] Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator* (New York: Verso, 2011), *95*.
[97] (*ibid*, 103)

confidence" in their political capacity, images must overcome the ideological veil of our existence by challenging what we are willing to know and how we react. They must prompt a refusal to ignore the political nature and implications of our numb spectatorship.

In the end, however plausible the previous insights may be, one can still argue that we are confronted with the difficult task of articulating the practical aspects of the obligations they entail. The initial worry of how to prompt audiences to adopt a more active, engaged political role when exposed to evidence of atrocities, brings us back to the starting question of this paper, namely, how to overcome increasing social indifference towards the suffering of others and acknowledge responsibilities that representations/existence of such conditions invoke. The difficulty here, then, is to recognize that, despite the moral disposition that such representations may produce, there still are no guarantees that such exposures would compel individuals to fulfill their obligations towards people in need. Although resolving the problem of motivation is not an explicit aim of this chapter, I would like to conclude with a few brief suggestions of how representations of suffering may be made ethically effective means for better acknowledgment of individual and collective responsibility.

If Rancière and Butler's critique of standards of public representation poses the challenge of how to theorize the relationship between the political usage of images of atrocities and the formation of public sentiment about such events, their account of the situatedness of agency within interpretative frames only gestures towards possible sites of resistance. If we take such social and political structures as epistemological and ontological sites of subject formation, it remains unclear what direction a transformation of such agency should take and which normative implications should guide such processes. What we need here, then, is to take this moral residue that remains after we confront images of human agony and give the encounter a concrete political form. Acknowledging the tension between public representations of human suffering and the obligations that these representations place on spectators compounds the difficulties of formulating an ethics of

responsibility. We must require not only an historically and institutionally specific reading of contemporary geopolitical conditions that result in human suffering, but also a detachment of depicted events from their concrete political contexts in which the problematic interpretations of these events take place. Despite all the admirable efforts to disclose mechanisms that prevent individual or collective acknowledgment of responsibilities aroused by evidence of human rights abuses, we still need a more careful vocabulary to distinguish between the conditions that result in human suffering, the conditions that frame its appearance, and the normative implications that such encounters demand from the viewing public. Without an account of how we may recognize the immediate humanitarian appeal that our privileged position as spectators carries within it, there will be no real grounds for political engagement after witnessing such intolerable instances of human deprivation.

The pressing question, then, concerns what changes in our social setup are necessary in order to foster solidarity among people, even if we take into account a lack of commonality and complex geopolitical contexts that make some people more vulnerable to suffering than others. One way to address this issue is to conceive that the lives whose horrifying conditions we experience through visual representation of human suffering are already soliciting us both ethically and politically. Our visual apprehension of such imagery is an occasion in which implicit consent or dissent (engagement or apathy) to injustice and violence done to these people already formulates a social and ethical relation. If we take more seriously the complexity of this interconnection between spectator and victim we are compelled to extend our understanding of responsibility by indicating the privilege that spectators have, and what kind of obligations this privilege invokes. What most contemporary strategies of political activism seem to be lacking in the context of this relation between spectators and representations of atrocities is the insight that the moral appeal of human beings portrayed in their vulnerability is already part of the image. Put another way, moral

implications towards the agonizing other are already part of the scene that we appropriate either as subjects who make such images or as those who only observe them. More importantly, there is a radical opposition between two kinds of perspectives that such images invoke. Both a spectator and photographer are in the privileged position with regard to the events that unfold in these images. This is not only because the events that these images depict are delivered over to public interpretation, but also because this asserted asymmetry is manifested in another, more radical, sense: both spectator and the image always "survive" indifference to victims exhibited through the latter.

I assume that a more nuanced account of this epistemic and ontological privilege is necessary if we want to engage concretely with the particular events that images exhibit. Taking into account that we are inevitably situated in a globalized world, we are called by the other to take a stand regarding events of human suffering. There is an ethical moment in this relationship between spectators and victims that we cannot completely deny, and its moral charge is grounded in the fact that we are always already involved in representational systems that place us in a hierarchical relationship to the persons affected by violent events. Therefore, it is not only necessary to interrogate the subjects whom are recruited as vessels of social powers and the "knowledge" that such powers want to convey: we must also show how the victims of these horrors are constituted by the same political subjectivity. If we want to affirm the political use of photography as a form of political activism that prompts public attention, one has to go beyond the cultural, psychological, and political aspects of its appearance and recuperate its moral implications. The outcome of this is profound, for if we attend to the asymmetries inherent in representations of suffering, we would be confronted with the need to revise some of our most basic presuppositions. These presuppositions concern not only our own political culture, but also in general what is meant when we conceive of humans or humanity. Thus, an ethics of responsibility begins with the acknowledgement that

representations of others bear political and moral connotations, and that our reaction (or lack of reaction) towards the horrors depicted carries an inevitable risk that the choice we have made through our actions or disregard already constitutes a political stance that bears on moral evaluation. An image never stands alone, and once we come to terms with the inevitability of representation, both in terms of our own experience and the people mediated through them, then we must (and I suppose that "the must" here is the ethical moment) confront the following questions: how are we shaping others through those representations? Are we reinforcing the injustice done to them through our indifference and lack of commitment? What kinds of responsibilities are invoked? Do they go beyond our capacity to evaluate, articulate and engage with their sites of emergence?

For now, the problems persist. Maybe the lesson to be learned here is simply not to give up in the face of despair, to not remain blind to the lives that our inaction otherwise renders invisible. As Butler puts it, "(t)he precarity of life imposes an obligation upon us. We have to ask about the conditions under which it becomes possible to apprehend a life or set of lives as precarious, and those that make it less possible, or indeed impossible."[98] We must acknowledge, then, that human suffering is not just due to a chronic lack of reason and deviation from universal ethical norms. It is a complex social process within which subjects lose their ability to critically apprehend social maladies and identify their own complicity in sustaining the system. Ultimately, behind the façade of quasi-emphatic responses and presentations in media, and alongside the interplay of apologetics and condemnations, there lies a core of numb blindness. This blindness deepens the gap between the capacity to see and to feel, and hence turns human witnessing into an imprecise anthropomorphic figure, a fictive boundary for the outlets created and consumed by the political public machine. Becoming aware of this relationship between representation, individual experience and social conditions will keep the embodied character of human deprivation from being ignored and/or made

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[98] Butler, *Frames of War,* 2.

more palatable for collective reception. I am aware that this call to resist is neither new, nor without

its challenges, but I also believe that it has the potential to call attention to subjects' positions in a

web of historical and social conditions, and may contribute to their understanding of how

interconnected and morally sensitive our world actually is.

CHAPTER 4

"WRONG LIFE CANNOT BE LIVED RIGHTLY" RETHINKING ETHICS OF RESPONSIBILITY AND GIVING NEW FOUNDATION TO HUMANISM

Taken together, previous chapters draw attention to the ways in which public knowledge about others is informed and articulated. As I have argued, the problem of Western humanitarian agency cannot be addressed properly by pointing only at the imperative to act on vulnerable others. Previous chapters show how such a view must be complemented with an analysis of epistemic and ontological dimensions of the Western humanitarian agency. We have seen how these dimensions are multifaceted—social and relational in nature—and affect not just how we perceive others' lives, but also other affective instances of our agency as well. In particular, they delimit our capacity to empathetically engage with the conditions of others and to listen properly to what their suffering ultimately tells us about ourselves and choices we make (or fail to make). In the remainder of this dissertation, I turn to the questions of what reforms are necessary to make humanitarian appeals effective means to encourage better acknowledgment of individual and collective responsibilities amid a history of exploitation and injustice. Taking these goals into consideration, the following chapter suggests fundamental reorganizations of human agency that would nurture both the cognitive and affective capacities of citizens of Western societies. Such strategies would aid the Western humanitarian agents in becoming more tolerant, and also more actively engaged with objects of the humanitarian crisis at the same time. More importantly, it would create necessary space for epistemically marginalized Others to voice their own concerns, and guide their representation and articulation of their experiences on their own terms without being completely dependent on reductive accounts of Eurocentric discursive regimes of knowledge and ascriptions that they assign.

Introduction: Towards New Understanding of Responsibility

One of the common themes in social and political research over the past decade has been the notion of responsibility, and the myriad social and historical contexts in which this concept is relationally and attributively embedded.[99] Although philosophers differ in their interpretation of the normative scope of, and reasons for its justification, the general conclusion has been that responsibility, both as an ethical and political aspect of human agency, articulates an important standard of human autonomy and freedom— at least traditionally conceived. Running beneath this discussion of responsibility—and beneath this dissertation's chapters as well—is the intersection of social powers with the conditions (and subjectivity) that these powers generate. The real problem, then, is that such a nexus of the political and the cultural within society results in a complex *ontoepistemic* minefield for the moral agency of the individual, who is entangled in power relations that articulate both herself and the objects of her moral and political concern. Thus, the account I offer in this chapter is an attempt to navigate away from our social and cultural embeddedness and make sense of the appeals in the tragedies we see and hear about without inherent constraints of our situatedness. To pose the issue in these terms is to assume that we are able to confidently reflect on our embodied existence, and to understand what it is like to be in the position to be moved by the suffering of others and provide aid—not out of sense of charity and compassion but rather out of sense of obligation and solidarity. Ironically, however, we often fall into the trap of thinking that knowing about atrocity (and the experience such knowledge entails) is only a fleeting reminder of a terrifying and unjust world, whose articulations and perceptions are ultimately created and sustained

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[99] See David Miller, *National Responsibility and Global of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Thomas Pogge, *World Poverty and Human Rights* (Malden: Polity Press, 2008); Thomas Pogge, *Politics as Usual: What Lies Behind Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (Malden: Polity Press, 2010); Iris Marion Young, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Martha Nussbaum, *Creating capabilities: the human development approach* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

by monopolizing our attention, concern or disgust. Such knowledge has important implications for our moral and political agency, soliciting us to reflect upon the nature of the relations between ourselves, the suffering, and what obligations arise from such considerations.

Within the context of such implications, the events and theories described in this chapter help to answer important questions that have remained unanswered until this point: how do we make sense of individual and collective responsibilities in the face of social conditions, and the individual choices or omissions that result in grave injustices, and exclusions of others? What does it mean to ignore them, and what kind of consequences does such denial have, when we consider it in contrast to different conceptions of justice? How do we understand inhumane conditions that result from the actions of other privileged people we neither know nor control, and what does this tell us about our collective moral and political capacities and future? And finally, how can we mend the fracture between our knowledge about atrocities and our motivation for moral action, so that we can escape ethical compromises that plague today's humanitarianism? There is little doubt that one of the most enduring aspects of injustice has been insisting on the legal binary of "victim and perpetrator," and ignorance of the fact that violence, exclusion, and oppression receive their force from symbolic and structural inequalities that are discursively and materially entrenched in the social fabric and agency of individuals—regardless of whether they are perpetrators, or simply passive bystanders.

Taking into account that previous chapters uncover the broader details of distorted and reductive processes upon which our articulation of injustices rest upon, and that they have investigated what kinds of ethical, and aesthetical challenges stem from mediating humanitarian spaces in the neoliberal age, we are left with a worry about how to overcome limits of a failed account of humanitarianism (that is, accounting for the frequency of the conflicting goal of providing aid, and control of others). Our culture has done a lot in addressing the suffering of other

people, but our responses to the grave harm that others experience also show the limits of thinking about the harms done by dehumanization and abandonment only in terms of legal discourse, individual autonomy and freedom. Up to this point, the question of the source of the moral responsibility has seemed to be one of the capacity for a reasoned critique of unjust social conditions, and the possibility of disentangling the subject's individual accountability from the power relations that ultimately constitute it. To pose the issue in these terms is to assume, as most philosophers of the so-called "liberal" tradition have done in the past, that grave injustices can be traced back to the actions of a "few" individuals, whom the public can hold responsible for unjust outcomes and suffering of others. To the extent that "the accountability model" of responsibility focuses on the causal connection between an agent and the harm she causes, it remains an open question if such a model is adequate for understanding and evaluating the relational aspects of institutional, economic, and symbolic processes of exclusion that individual actors knowingly or unknowingly contribute to.

This realization about the limits of traditional accounts of moral agency and responsibility is especially evident when we take into account that many aspects of exclusionary practices (e.g. racism, sexism, humanitarian selectivism, etc.) depend on the participation in, and reproduction of, social conditions that occur as cooperative enterprises of individual or collective agents. Without the capacity to hold oneself responsible for the acts committed by others, and without the capacity to acknowledge how such states of exclusion often benefit us without our direct participation or intention to cause harm, the politics of resistance to racist, sexist and other forms of structural injustices remain confined to the prosecution of individual crimes committed by discrete subjects—leaving the broader social context that results in them mostly unaddressed. As Iris Marion Young reflects on this theme, "structural injustices are harms that come to people as a result of structural processes in which many people participate. These participants may well be aware that their actions

contribute to the processes that produce the outcomes, but for many it is not possible to trace the specific causal relation between their particular actions and some particular part of the outcome."[100] As Young eloquently suggests, injustice, when understood in this sense, presents a puzzle for the traditional understanding of responsibility; such an account cannot guide moral and political deliberation due to a lack of clearly identified actions and agents which cause the specific instances of the structural processes or their outcomes. Precisely because such systems of domination and violence are structural rather than individual, and because they rely on symbolic processes that establish and sustain a certain epistemic and political distance[101] between social actors and individuals who are harmed, it seems necessary that the struggle against social exclusion and oppression presupposes some capacity to feel implicated in crimes that one did not personally commit, but from which one has drawn benefits (or at least, refused to prevent or alleviate).

In what follows, I show inconsistencies tied with what has become a largely uncontested axiom within the current discourse in Ethics and Social and Political Theory, namely, that the notion of responsibility is exhausted in its depiction as mere accountability of social actors. In contrast, philosophers rooted, for instance, in the phenomenological vein of thought speak to responsibility's sense of burden, shame, or guilt. Thinkers like Emmanuel Levinas, Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben and others, who rest their accounts on Levinas' fundamental phenomenological framework, disclose the burdensome character of subjectivity, human vulnerability and inter-subjectivity (and how they relate to social conditions). Portrayals like this reveal that accountability is

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[100] Iris Marion Young, *Political Responsibility and Structural Injustice* (The University of Kansas, The Lindley Lecture, 2003), 7. https://kuscholarworks.ku.edu/bitstream/handle/1808/12416/politicalresponsibilityandstructuralinjustice-2003.pdf?sequence=1

[101] This is an important relation, wherein one aspect seems to cause and sustain the other. As long there is an epistemic distance between agents and targets of their moral agency, political action will not be possible. Framing moral agency under these terms means being sensitive to epistemic biases and how these limits of our cognitive dispositions affect our moral response to the suffering of others. In order to enable a different approach to current challenges on inclusion/exclusion, it is necessary to understand that social inclusion depends on epistemic inclusion. Taking into account that institutional efforts to enable inclusion of ethnic minorities, displaced people, migrants, etc. have for the most part failed to accommodate moral needs of these individuals, it is necessary to focus on ways in which our epistemic relation with others is determined, limited and as such open to criticism. In other words, social inclusion depends on epistemic inclusion.

but one aspect of the wider notion of responsibility. Similarly, early critical theory scholars such as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer have urged for a critique of cognitive and material dispositions that result in reductive accounts of moral agency. Both groups of thinkers call to attention a diversity in, and multifaceted nature of responsibility, and that our analysis of moral agency should be followed by an analysis of social conditions and discursive formations that are intertwined in moral and political formation of our moral and political subjectivity. Crucially, however, their theories are more than a distinctive intellectual critique of social reality; they also raise the question of "cosmopolitan solidarity," intended as a disposition to act towards vulnerable others without the anticipation of reciprocation. Focusing on the vulnerability of the human body as the clearest manifestation of "our common humanity" (i.e. manifestation which has historically informed the emergence of humanitarianism in the West), I build on their respective theories to argue that the mediation of vulnerability in the age of global technologies can be conceived of as a catalyst for the new forms of solidarity. Solidarity that ultimately depends on the redefinition of our understanding of responsibility and our own subjectivity, in a way that critically challenges the ways in which our cognitive apparatus offers a distorted image of reality - and as such guides are perceptions and comportments towards others.

In order to achieve that, first I give a historical account wherein our common understanding of responsibility reaches its impasse. Offering testimonies of victims of ethnic violence aims to show that the force and impact of violence depend on the collective agency, grounded in structural and symbolic power, wherein the perpetrator/victim binary is insufficient to explain how such events and agency arise within social reality. Second, after giving this historical account, I aim to contest common understanding of responsibility by referring to philosophical theory of Emmanuel Levinas. I argue that our autonomy and freedom, rather than being aspects of an isolated individual, are the result of processes that are intersubjective, and that operate at multiple levels of our social being.

This common conception of self - one that frames individuals as an atomistic, autonomous, rational deliberator, who acts intentionally and thus is held personally accountable for actions, habits, thoughts and character - avoids negative social and ethical burden about unjust conditions that others experience by conforming to dominant norms, and refuses to believe that there may be something questionable or problematic about practices in which we engage, and conditions which we ultimately sustain. This view of the "self" enables cognitive and affective avoidance of our entanglement and complicity in oppressive and exclusionary norms, beliefs and practices, and so upholds unjust social relations of power. Furthermore, it undermines our ability to understand the formative nature of relationality and the fundamental ways in which we encounter others. If we take vulnerability as a fundamental condition, then the practices by which we seek to avoid or repudiate its reality, and encounter others primarily as vulnerable entities, are in themselves oppressive— placing the validity of our moral faculties into question. According to Levinas our relationship with the "other" is essentially ethical, since it implies a relation with alterity before any form of ontological determination or epistemic articulation. Ethics is thus opposed to ontology, which is determined by social forces that are most of the time negating alterity (or determining alterity in reductive ways). This leaves us with a puzzle, namely: should we focus our criticism solely on ontology and the ways in which ontology is constituted through workings of social powers, or should we focus our criticism on cognitive dispositions and discursive practices that articulate ontological formations, with the hope that disclosing the ideological nature of our cognitive faculties and social reality will also frame different paths towards acknowledging the ethical nature of our intersubjectivity? With this question in mind, I turn to Adorno and contest ways in which our cognitive dispositions sustain the ontological formations that prevent us from recognizing the "primordial" ethical relationship identified by Levinas. While my reading of Adorno finds his work open to the possibility of ethics beyond the traditional accounts of moral agency and subjectivity, the

real force of Adorno's philosophy stems from his belief that the other has priority in ethical and epistemological relations—i.e., that the appalling conditions that others experience can provoke subjects to moral action, and not, rather, that the call for moral conduct is given through the universal frameworks that often obfuscate complex geopolitical contexts with the consequences of our specific epistemic and discursive embeddedness. While this approach to their respective theories may raise suspicion in some Levinas' and Adorno purists, I find it faithful to the motives and the general spirit of their work. ***Finally,*** with the help of these two philosophers, we can remap our understanding of ethical obligations, as well the kind of consequences this remapping would have for current political culture. What matters in ethics is who or what can interrupt the prevailing numb routine of indifference and spectatorship. Therefore, it is not so much abstract entitlements of the other (i.e. her rights) that matter in our ethical deliberation, but that the knowledge about conditions that she endures solicits in us feelings of obligation when we are confronted with evidences of her suffering. The strength of intertwining epistemology, ethics and politics, following Adorno's lead, is in recognizing one's responsibilities for and towards others, and realizing that our obligations always occur in tension between different moral positions, and historical inequalities that determine different spatial and discursive locations of agents. The analysis of this tension between inequality and solidarity, between a relation of domination and a relation of assistance, points at the moral gap that exists among seeing, caring, understanding and acting when we find ourselves confronted with horrors and agonies of other human beings.

Case Study: The Horrors of the Bosnian War

When the doors of The Hague closed behind Duško Tadić in May 1997, the former Bosnian Serb Democratic Party's local board president from northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina had already made a history. It was the first international war crimes trial since Nuremberg and Tokyo,

and just as important, it was the first international war crimes trial involving charges of sexual violence. The judges found Tadić guilty of cruel treatment and inhumane acts in the northwestern parts of Bosnia, where Serbian forces confined thousands of Muslims and Croats in camps, exposing them to torture, rape, and murder. Soon after the legal verdict had been made public, the Western world (and academia) celebrated such a success of the liberal international legal machine. The trial proved to the world that the international criminal justice system could hold actors of conflict liable for sexual crimes, and that punishing perpetrators was truly possible. Many other trials that followed paralleled that of Tadić, accompanied by a sudden proliferation of academic publications, and public debates about the nature of justice in the aftermath of severe violence and atrocity. But beneath all the media attention and the pride in the legal and media success of the International Crime Tribunal for Former Yugoslavia, lay the painful and indeterminate layer of vulnerability—the fate of a community whose members have committed and endured atrocities so brutal that it has few parallels in recent history.

The past century in the Balkans often has tragically asserted ways in which human lives are intrinsically bound together with their social and intersubjective surroundings. This has not only directly or indirectly dictated the conduct of agents during wartime, but has often dramatically showed the severity and longstanding impact such atrocities have on the lives of people, and the effective ability of their communities to function. Several testimonies of victims among various contexts of human rights violation in different parts of Bosnia reveal that the betrayal and atrocities committed by neighbors often remain written into the lives of people long after hostilities have ceased. Such betrayal is multifaceted, in ways that our resilience as members of a community depends only on the strength of the bond that we share with others. In the case of Bosnia's dissolution that bond had a costly price, and in spite of the many instances where individual altruistic actions of friends and neighbors voiced disapproval with the choices that their politicians and

soldiers have made, that was still just a drop in the Bosnian ocean of silence. Sadly, such silence and harms leave longstanding scars on the community and lives of people who share the troubling history of conflict. Twenty years after, the country is still plagued by the remnants of its violent past. Besides the direct devastation to the country's urban areas and economy, along with forced displacement and a history of murder, torture, and rape, much of the severity of the harm stems from the grave fact that the lives of these individuals are often tragically marked by the loss caused by the harm done by members of their community that they have coexisted with, and on whom they have ultimately depended on.

Along these lines, one of the main tasks of this chapter is to ask how far our understanding of the sovereignty of the individual can go, if our goal is to amend and understand the endemic nature of systematic violence and patterns of exclusion. Not only is this understanding of selfhood and individual accountability in direct contrast with the ways in which we are formed as subjects, and ways in which social conditions and others bear on our autonomy and lives that we live, but it also ignores an important facet of being a human: namely, that our lives depend on other people, and their capacity to respond to harm that is done to us. By restricting human autonomy to a set of individual rights and entitlements we not only ignore the fundamental dependency between people (and the ways in which these entitlements are part of the larger horizon of conditions necessary for coherent self-determination), but also it makes us blind to how such dependencies often create and give intensity to individual and collective choices that result and sustain a climate of murder and exclusion. Violence is a relational social phenomenon that thrives on distorted social conditions and choices that people make. These choices and conditions create a grid wherein actions and omissions of agents form a social reality that makes atrocious events possible and intelligible. Thus, while it is helpful and welcome to identify actions of people who are accountable for atrocities committed, it is also important to disclose the failure of social support systems, and cultural and historical contexts

that create and sustain such pathological behavior. If we want to understand the motives and drives that fuel harm done to individuals, one must understand that our autonomy (and vulnerability) remains intact, so long as others respect these boundaries. In order to show how today's legal and political accounts of responsibility distort the impact that our agency has on others (and that the agency of others has on us), it is necessary to take a look how human vulnerability is constituted, and to understand how recovery from trauma does not only depend on identifying victims and prosecuting perpetrators, but also depends on the capacity of the surrounding society to affirm when wrongness occurs. This relation between human vulnerability and harm done to subjects often results from apparently normal practices, habits, and patterns of thought. It is not only caused by extreme instances of dehumanization or abandonment, but also by the failure of right-minded people to act upon injustices that have been committed in their names, or for benefits from those who suffered. Failure to reflect upon the hardships that others experience will not only matter to those who are rendered invisible or ignored, but also because being acknowledged, helped or oppressed and marginalized, impacts how "the past resonates in the present," and tells us a lot about the current political culture that we all share.[102]

Despite the international attempts to amend damage done to Bosnian society by legal prosecution of individuals responsible for horrors committed, this approach consequently leaves the questions of the complex nature of shared responsibilities intact. Coming to terms with its violent past, society depends on the capacity of its actors to rebuild destroyed selves and worlds that are in themselves cooperative projects and achievements. Beside the roles that people like Tadić had in the destruction of the Bosnian community, there remains so much to say about the formation and causes of social and human relations that are equally necessary for torture and murder, but also for remorse, solidarity and the repair of lives and worlds that have been damaged. To illustrate this

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[102] Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness,* 2.

intertwining of human agency with social conditions and relations to others, let us consider some of the fates of people who were victims of Tadić's pathological politics, and the horrors that such ideology has ultimately perpetrated.

Disintegration of One World: Horrors of War and Rape in Former Yugoslavia

It was Azra's dream to become a doctor. This young Bosnian girl from rural the northwest of Bosnia, like many others, lived to see how war shatters not only dreams about a future, but also a sense of the present. "The sirens went off," she starts her tragic story, "we all took cover in our basements and bomb shelters. The shelters were packed with women and children. There was nothing we could do, in the enclosed space, to alleviate the children's fear and crying. We were trapped for two days. On Sunday, they started shelling Kozarac--first the adjacent villages and then the town itself. The shelling lasted 48 hours. The evacuation of the town started on Monday morning. Riding in cars and trucks, we started heading toward the forest. We reached Debeli Brijeg near Brđani as shells fell around us. We went deeper and deeper into the woods. We spent the night in Vidovići, a Serbian village. The villagers received us kindly, providing food and lodging. They said, 'We are all in this together.'"[103] After a night of safety, the morning was marked by the arrival of Serbian paramilitary troops who started threatening and rounding up people. "The villagers were silent. They went on with their daily chores, as if nothing had happened," Azra continued. What followed was a common practice in Bosnia: the men were separated from the women and children, often with no knowledge if they would meet again. Some were murdered, some were sent to the prison camps of Trnopolje and Omarska. Azra's father was in that group. "He cried as we were

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[103] Retrieved from: http://articles.latimes.com/1993-01-31/magazine/tm-857_1_serbian published January 31st, 1993. Some of the testimonies that follow are blunt, uncensored accounts, which came to media through United Nations human-rights workers. They were conducted by a Croatian women's group called Trešnjevka, and reflect only small part of atrocities that have plagued Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite the general tendency to make conflict in Bosnia seem as an aggression of Serbian forces, and suffrage of Bosnian Muslim population, dire record of the resembling form and intensity of atrocities committed by all sides in conflict against members of other groups helps us challenge a univocal understanding of human agency and moral responsibility that predominant canonical discourse wants us to believe.

saying goodbye. I had never seen him cry before." This was the last time that Azra has seen her father alive.

Struggling with her tears, Azra attempted to give an account of what Tadić's legacy truly means for the victims of its ideology. "They allowed us to go to the well in groups. They allowed the women to return, but they held back six of us young girls. Then they found four more. They took us to someone's home, a new house, neat. I don't know who it belonged to. There was a large yard. Soon a tank crew and a few Chetniks arrived. The group numbered about 30--butchers from the Croatian front. "Such fine cunts you are," they mocked us. "Too bad you're Turkish!" We were all crying. We felt great fear. They ordered us to take off our clothes. If we refused, they said, they would rip our clothes off our bodies. Three of us refused; their clothes were ripped with knives. We stood in a circle, naked. They just sat, drinking and smoking. They ordered us to walk in a circle. We did for about 15 minutes while they drank and feasted their eyes. Then the worst started." Azra was only fifteen years old when the assault on her happened. "It was about 11 o'clock. I screamed, implored, cried. One of them, he was around 35, lay on me, pressing the barrel of his automatic weapon against my temple, looking into my eyes a long time. A young fellow approached us--I used to see him in Prijedor. We went to the same school. He's four years older than me. He didn't rape me. He grabbed the older man's shoulder and told him to shove off. The older man looked at him, got up and left. The young man didn't take part in the gang rape. He just appeared, gave me his hand, helped me to get up. And I got up, naked as I was. The young man who saved my life was a guard in Trnopolje. I think he's still alive. He helped me gather my belongings. I put on my clothes. The maniacs looked at us but didn't stop us. As we were leaving, he told them, "Remember, you will face justice for this!" They just gave him dirty looks and said, "Like hell!"

Mirsada, another victim from the same area, spent days hiding in rural areas before she got caught by Serbian forces and dragged back to her home. "I could see from my window how they

rounded up people. They dragged my neighbor (a Serb) and his entire family out of the house. As he was not a member of the Serbian militia and refused to kill Muslims and Croats, they took his 21-year-old sister to the camp. Three Chetniks entered our house. They were drunk. One of them hit my mother, cursing and speaking in a threatening manner. He said that we would remember who they are and that we will regret the day we were born. I trembled. My sister Sanela clung to me, crying. When we went out, I realized that she had wet herself. We hiked for more than five hours. They were leading us into the forest, I didn't know where. We reached a clearing. It was very crowded. Only old men, women and children." In the darkness, soldiers were pushing them towards an abandoned motel in the middle of the forest. "This is where they separated me from my mother and sister." Mirsada continues, "They told us that we would later be together, but I never saw them again. I stayed with the girls and the younger women. The White Eagles would come to get us every night. They would bring us back in the morning. There were nights when more than 20 of them came. That seemed to be some kind of honor. They did all kinds of things to us. It cannot be described, and I don't want to remember. We had to cook for them and serve them, naked. They raped and slaughtered some girls right in front of us. Those who resisted were mutilated." Mirsada's agony ended when one night a Serbian neighbor's brother helped her and others escape. Running from their tormentors Mirsada and others spent days hiding in the woods, before finally reaching the safety of Bosniaks-controlled territory. "Sometimes I think that I will go crazy and that the nightmare will never end. Every night in my dreams I see the face of Stojan, the camp guard. He was the most ruthless among them. He even raped 10-year-old girls, as a delicacy. Most of those girls didn't survive. They murdered many girls, slaughtered them like cattle. I want to forget everything. I cannot live with these memories. I will go insane."

Recovery from such an experience is more than the healing of the wounds, or testifying; it is a process of disclosing a world gone mad, and the failure of the support systems that our lives are so

deeply dependent upon. The abnormality of Bosnian society strikes us all too familiar. Under normal circumstances you rely on the support of your community; you hope that the bonds created with others are strong enough to provide conditions of meaningful safety that are necessary for coherent self-formation. When such support disappears, or mutates into something else, as it did during the Bosnian conflict, a certain sense of abandonment turns a human being into an instance of simultaneous confirmation and denouncement. This dialectic between reliance, support, hope, and expectations brings us back to the point that both the possibility of harm and the possibility of recovery depend on broad social support (or lack thereof), and attitudes of other human beings that share the same environment. Kemal Pervanić, a survivor of the notorious Omarska prison camp, remembers the moment when in his captivity and among all the suffering and atrocities he was witnessing daily, he met a childhood friend. As he writes in his memoirs:

> When Milan came across me in the corridor leading to Room 24, I wanted to turn away and go straight back to my room. I was unable to. My former schoolmate was standing here in front of me. He wore olive-green army trousers and a shirt with sleeves rolled up above his elbows. In one of his hands, he held a rifle. Such a bizarre situation. 'Hi, Kemo.' He said. 'Hi.' Was this what the conflict was all about? Attack your neighbors. Kill your neighbors. And if somebody survived, you say to them: 'Hi. I know we have lived together, had attended the same schools together, had played football together, had had drinks together many a time, but you must understand – this is nothing personal. My loyalty to my people comes before humanity – before friendships.' Milan didn't have to say that. I knew that's what he meant. 'Is ['Expert'] in here? He was looking for another classmate of ours who had been given that nickname by our biology teacher many years before. 'He's in that room over there,' I pointed over his shoulder to room 15. 'I have to go now. I am not allowed to stay in the corridor.' I wanted him to go to hell. Before they attacked us, I thought we had had respect for each other. Ten days after the attack, I had talked to Milan – at the filling station in Omarska owned by his grandfather. He'd acted as everything had been normal, while at home he had probably been keeping the same gun he now held in his hand.[104]

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[104] Extract from "The Killing Days: My Journey Through the Bosnian War" by Kemal Pervanic, published by Blake, 1999. Taken from: http://av.hmd.org.uk/1256561497-101.pdf

These encounters were compounded by the fact that both the guards and the prisoners came from the same neighboring towns. Yet the fact that there was a history of kinship and friendship did not mean a return to normalcy – rather, that atrocities were so unambiguously brutal because they were perpetrated by people who were once members of the same community. According to Kemal, the truth about the world he has lived and shared with others came into the question once the human relations necessary for sustained self-determination and formation was taken away from him, and subsequently refused to be reasserted. "Some of the guards were unknown to me, but most were our neighbors, former schoolmates, classmates, even a deskmate. At first, they seemed ill at ease. There was some kind of hesitation and tension in their behavior. They asked no questions and didn't talk too much. They were neither aggressive nor abusive. I had known some guards personally." But that has abruptly changed. Some of the guards have used their position of power to settle "old scores," and the casual beatings and murders have begun. "It is weird, until April 1992, life in Bosnia was peaceful." Kemal continues his story with resignation. "Then suddenly neighbor turned on neighbor and the butchery began. Amongst those involved were Mlađo Radić, Miroslav Kvočka, Dragoljub Prčac, Zoran Zigić and Milojica ('Krle') Kos – now convicted as the Omarska Five, but then just regular men about town. Before the war I regularly encountered three of these men during my trips to Omarska. As a pupil at the local primary school, as a customer at a local barber below police station, they were familiar faces. That fateful spring of 1992 these same individuals became part of the most sinister policy one group can visit upon another – that of annihilation. During my stay in Omarska camp, I witnessed these three individuals behaving like gods, showing neither mercy nor restraint towards the captives. They had their own system of justice, which they believe they would never have to answer for. But they made one big mistake. They didn't kill us all. The policy of

annihilation was incomplete. And so, today, they face their former victims in disbelief: who would have thought those parchment-skinned captives would survive to tell this incriminating tale?"[105]

In the end, the fates of these people show us how difficult the process of recovery is, and show us how both realities (victims and perpetrators) are tightly linked in this grid of hazards and choices that people have made. By highlighting the embodied realities and mutual dependency of the lives of these people, one often becomes aware of the limitations of a canonical understanding of human autonomy, and the divisions that it reinserts. If a war threatens the threads from which the social fabric is woven, the recognition of our dependency on others depends on our capacity of situating subjectivity and its relation to alterity in ethical and political terms. By bringing about a better understanding of human embeddedness in their social surroundings and relations with others, we can understand and contest symbolic and material dispositions that remove groups of people from human community based on their ethnicity, religion, or gender. With this said, the experience of people that we have seen also points out a certain resilience that our intersubjective nature as human beings and members of the world have. One thing that surfaces in the experiences these people had endured is that even among conditions of total dehumanization, the ceaseless abuse by perpetrators seems to be addressed to someone. This may seem like a small consolation, especially to the victim, or for the families that have lost beloved people. But in reflecting on ways in which same conditions carry a potential for violence on one side and resistance to domination and dehumanization on the other, one can locate the point where the violence and domination encounters an impenetrable obstacle which prevents it from completing its project of totalization. This recourse to the alterity of the Other, in all her vulnerability and openness, leaves us with the task of rethinking our subjectivity and the choices we make. The vulnerability that we all share as human beings tells us that a person can be violated or denied humanity, but it can never be utterly

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[105] (ibid.)

destroyed, because even in the madness of Bosnian communal violence, pathological agency of perpetrators cannot help itself but addressing the other whom it ultimately seeks to annihilate.

Rethinking the Notion of Responsibility

For all their haunted and terrifying reality, all the previous stories from the former Yugoslavia are in themselves scenes of human vulnerability. What brings these different instances of suffering together is an account of human dependency and exposure that are in themselves pervasive, shared, and which point at unavoidable characteristics in our lives that are built by human interactions. Reading testimonies of the survivors reveals the dire complexity, diversity, and ambiguity of what it means to be susceptible to social conditions and choices that others make. We have seen that such choices often challenge our common understanding of human freedom and autonomy. They also make us question ways in which our current political culture deals with events that result in violence, exclusion or murder. Because the ways in which society comes to terms with its own violent past and present depends so much on the knowledge (and acknowledgement) of the social circumstances and motives that guide perpetrators and subsequent harms caused to others, recovery and moral repair ultimately depend on the capacity of the public to disclose broader details about how and why such atrocities occur, and more importantly, what kind of obligations arise from them.

If the traditional liberal account of responsibility relies on an understanding of the individual who is unsullied by power relations and actions of other social actors, then that conception seems to sustain an ideological account of subjectivity that is in direct conflict with reality --wherein our sense of self and worlds we build is formed in direct dependency on our relations to others. What's worse, rather than offering guidelines for moral agency, such accounts serve as vehicles of power that manage to support mastery of Eurocentric views and establish domination of one group of people

over the other, often ending up in the exclusion of alternative forms of discourse and being. Thus, by questioning an image of moral agency seen as an ethical nucleus whose actions seem to be undetermined by the social and discursive processes that ultimately form it, we may chart methods for redefining what responsibility means, and ways in which we can hold others and ourselves responsible for injustices that often remain ignored. This not only broadens the scope and obligations of moral agency, but also explains why we might bear duties beyond those that are determined by a legitimate legal framework. We live in a world that is plagued by the severity of inhumane conditions that invoke obligations which cannot be discharged through simple individual legal action (e.g. environmental change, violent conflicts, increased poverty, hunger, forced mass migration, etc.). Taking into account that a great many of us still inherit our sense of obligations from traditional accounts of the autonomous self that is responsible only for actions freely undertaken, it is not surprising that pitfalls of current ethical agency place in question the foundation of our morality and sufficiency to address the global scale of such social and political problems.

When ethical agency is measured by observing the effects of an action independent of cultural and social powers that articulate them and determine their intensity, it leaves us with an atrophied account of subjectivity; we remain blind to the underlying motives such an account conceals if we solely focus on surface phenomena manifested through the action of an individual (or collective) agent. While I agree that there are sites of human judgment where we should hold individually culpable persons responsible for their actions (i.e. acting from their own judgment and fully intending to cause harm or create social conditions that result in harm to others), the question remains: does such an understanding of responsibility correspond to the complex social circumstances that result in harm undergone to victims of sexual violence, or survivors of prison camps? Can such an instance of mass violence be explained through the actions of individual perpetrators? Even if we could find the person responsible for the years of abuse and

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dehumanization these people have endured, would finding them guilty be a final, just response to the hatred and indifference allowed to happen—to what befell Azra, Mirsada, Kemal, and other victims in Bosnia? And this is not just the prosecution of Tadić, or the members of the Serbian Paramilitary units; this is not just the indifference of UN troops or the everyday solider, regardless if it was Serb, Croat or Bosniak. This is the whole society standing by, saying nothing, doing nothing, many of the bystanders not being able to handle their own pain and loss, and turning to evaluate others based on the religion they practice, or the name they carry—remaining oblivious to their characteristics as persons and members of the same community. Such ignorance and lack of engagement with the injustice that others face allows the selection, deportation, and finally, the extermination of neighbors they have ultimately abandoned. Is mere accountability and prosecution satisfactory, or even desired? Recovery from that kind of harm doesn't come from a finding of individual criminal or perpetrator who has pulled the trigger (which is not to say that such finding of guilty individuals wouldn't be just or welcome contribution to a larger project of social recovery); it is but a step in the right direction, one which forces us to go beyond a focus on positive actions of individuals and focus more on what they ultimately omitted to do (e.g. provide aid to people in need, prevent groups from murdering targeted parts of society, support just trade organizations, help sustainable environment, and so forth).

In light of previous considerations, I come to the main question of this chapter: How should moral agents, then, think about their responsibilities in relation to others whose suffering solicits us both morally and politically, and whose conditions rupture our confidence in legal norms and institutional accounts of aid and recovery? To answer it, we need to do two things: first, we need to find a more nuanced account of the fundamental relationality of dependence that supports and nurtures us as physical and emotional beings. Second, we need to invert the ways in which our knowledge about the Other is formed, and rethink how to enable independence (or at least enable

critical insight into limitations of our cognitions and ways how such limits have impact on our relation towards others and social conditions that surround us). Both points locate us as subjects formed in terms of intersubjective relations that gesture towards a broader notion of responsibility than the one that I have (perhaps somewhat naively) identified as an individualistic account of liberal thought. If all social relations implicate us already as part of the conditions that differentiate people (e.g. privilege of one group and exclusion of the others), then it is necessary to show how subjects are the kinds of creatures who actively take up and enact the norms to which they are eventually subjugated, and how this enacting receives it validity and intensity as an unavoidable feature of our intersubjective world grounded on interaction with others. Since most of our actions and relations to other people seem to be determined by ways in which they are epistemically "couched" in certain discursive narratives, our ethical response to their lives and hardships depends on the way which we address the problem of how to differentiate subversive reiterations or reenactments of the actions of individual or collective perpetrators from social conditions and discursive processes that reinforce and uphold them. When we think about previous sections that have introduced ethical challenges tied with being a spectator to someone's suffering or death, it seems necessary to reverse current ethical tendencies of Western humanitarian culture, and offer an understanding of moral obligations that would no longer follow the freedom of choice of the subject (in this case the spectator), but rather arise out of the burden that inhumane conditions of others place upon us, spectators. In other words, many of the moral and political challenges would be resolved if we focus on an understanding of responsibility that is no longer a responsibility only to oneself or for one's actions, but rather a sense and endorsement of responsibility for the other—regardless of whether we are implicated in her suffering or not. To put this differently, what matters in humanitarianism is who or what can interrupt this numb routine of "Western" spectatorship, and make knowledge about suffering effective in soliciting our moral and political engagement. This can be achieved by thinking

of how (or what) can interrupt this form of subjectivity and provoke a sense of obligation, and not so much what political (or moral) criteria can be applied to the Others.

As we will see in the following pages, this alternative account of responsibility strictly follows an overturning of the subject from its privileged position as agent towards its assignation to the moral solicitation of suffering of others. What this means is that responsibility is no longer situated within the sphere of "the ego," but arises out of the intersubjective nature of our existence and conditions that mold us as subjects and objects of moral deliberation and social reality at large. In her recent book *Ethics of Loneliness*, Jill Stauffer reiterates a similar point with regards to recovery in the aftermath of severe violence, there she argues:

> No one is sovereign from the ground up. Selves can be destroyed because selves are also built, and built cooperatively, by human relationships of various kinds – rational, affective, intentional, unwitting, chosen and unchosen. Even if selves were more self-sufficient than this intersubjective definition would have us believe, it would still be the case that before a self court be rebuild her own sovereignty, she would need to feel safe. That in turn, requires a surrounding world where safety is possible, though that is also what is destroyed by violence… Thinking of responsibility in terms of individual culpability may mend discrete harm but will never fix a broken world.[106]

To mend what's broken we need to do the difficult task of rethinking how we understand ourselves, and acknowledge that who we are and what we do is not independent of our relations to others. Lastly, even if we succeed in acknowledging that our autonomy is dependent on our sociality and ways in which our vulnerability is recognized by communities where we live, a difficult task to challenge and critique our epistemic habits and biases remains. In order to liberate our perception and critical deliberation from the bondage of reductive forms of reasoning, ultimately we need to remain critical of our judgment and epistemic privilege that we so stubbornly uphold. If our moral receptivity and engagement is impure and corrupted by reductive (and exclusionary) ontological and epistemic foundations of our subjectivity, then the only hope to reverse our current moral atrophy is

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[106] Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness*, 80.

to critique constitutive aspects of our "selves." Only then we can chart possible ways of

emancipation that would result in cognitive and affective openness toward other human beings.[107]

Emmanuel Levinas: Autonomy, Subjectivity, and Responsibility

Although the preceding considerations point out that traditional accounts of autonomy and

responsibility are incompatible with challenges that plague moral and political landscape of our

globalized world, the question remains how to understand these problems, and what would be an

alternative. In other words: how can we understand different notions of subjectivity and

responsibility that seem necessary if we want to escape an ethical dead-end in the current liberal

political culture? I already identified as the first step towards a different understanding of moral

agency and responsibility, an urgency to leave behind a false assumption about the autonomous

nature of the subject, and reiterate her formation through an intersubjective lens of her dependency

on others. By reversing the primacy of the subject, so deeply ingrained in the Western, Cartesian

tradition of thinking, I elaborate upon Levinas' account of ethics and autonomy that is consequently

intersubjective. I don't aim to offer an analysis of Levinas' theory on its own; my motives are rather

modest. They consist in an attempt to show that the pitfalls of "Western" humanitarianism (and

humanitarian subject) are not only caused by historical instances of dehumanization, racism,

colonialism, sexism, marginalization, or oppression, but also through lack of public effort to reflect

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[107] To speak about "an ontology of the other" means to acknowledge that intelligibility of the other is constituted within grid of social mechanisms of othering which enable something to be recognized as a human (see chapter 2 and chapter 3). If we take into account that humanitarian agency depends on the capacity to humanize the other, while at the same time our image of the other is ultimately a product of social mechanisms of othering that make certain forms of life intelligible, then our notions of responsibility and moral receptivity are confined within an epistemic and ontological dead-end. What is worse, by displacing the notion of responsibility away from social conditions and exclusionary practices (i.e. from race, ethnicity, religion, body, etc.) that constitute agency of victims, perpetrators, and bystander, our moral reception becomes a site of contestation where idealized image of the other threatens to consume and transform our ethical deliberation.

upon their own implications as "innocent" bystanders in the formation and sustenance of such horrors.

Thus far, I have described not only instances of violence and injustice, but also an ontological condition of human existence. As I have argued earlier, human beings are vulnerable, and this vulnerability is in itself constituted as a social phenomenon that we share with other people within a specific geopolitical context. This succinct statement of our dependency on social conditions and other human beings locates us as already part of social relations, in which our subjectivity constantly encounters others. In the context of this dependence, when we describe things such as refugee crises, famine, poverty, crime, violence, and genocide, these things can happen not only to others or to people in desperate circumstances; it is a common feature of the human condition that abandonments and abuses affect us as deeply as they do. We are shaped by our social environments, and our moral reasoning and the choices we make are built by and around human interactions that are affective, rational, or instrumental, and our actions that stem from them are often beyond our conscientious choice. Our reliance upon each other is the backdrop to the "worlds" we build and in which we reside, in which we make choices, and act as moral and political agents.[108] Thus, autonomy and freedom have a meaning only in spaces where they are respected, and this respect and acknowledgment of one's autonomy depends on the intersubjective dimension of our lives and our social environment that we inevitably inhabit. It is precisely this point that Levinas so adamantly makes - the idea that selfhood is intersubjective – that shows how our deeply ingrained conviction of the individual sovereignty seems to be nothing more than ideological accounts of a political theory that often conceals underlying domination and oppression. As long ethical and political theories hold as a starting point this image of autonomy as a non-negotiable trait

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[108] Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness,* 2015.

of human beings we will end up in ethical conundrums regarding humanitarianism and ethical

agency in general.

Autonomy

Before exploring the notion of autonomy and responsibility in Levinas theory, let me first

say a few words about what precisely is meant here by the term "alterity." In its broadest terms, the

idea of the other in Levinas is altogether different from traditional accounts of subject-object

relationship. As Diane Perpich has argued, this notion of alterity is distinctively captured by the idea

of the singularity, rather than the notion of difference that is formed as a geopolitical set of

contingent attributes in resistance to me - the knowing subject. Moreover, and perhaps more

importantly, the otherness of another human being is endowed with "alterity 'constitutive' of its very

content" independent of the question of knowledge or subject's own epistemic situatedness in

relation to another human being.[109] The traditional notion of other, by contrast, referred to a set of

formal and relative differences in relation to the subject whose formation and agency were

determined by historical and political circumstances and location - formations that have often taken

place under reductive Eurocentric terms. Insofar as such understanding of subjectivity (and alterity)

is encompassed by contingent formation of the self and entities around her, such an understanding

of the relation to the world and other human beings has often allowed the subordination of the

unique and irreplaceable singularity of the other to the reductive universality of evaluative norms and

determinations of historical sociopolitical contexts (often exploitative and oppressive). Thus, when

Levinas argues how the other transcends every ontological determination,[110] he ultimately wants to

detach the appearance (and reception) of the other from the totality of ontological ascription and

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[109] Diane Perpich, *The Ethics of Emanuell Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 18.
[110] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1969), 39.

determinations that distort ethical solicitation inherent in the relationship that we inevitably have with other people.

A central argument of this section is that Levinas' insistence to understand the ethical relationship independent of the question of knowledge and ontological determinations, may instruct us how to understand systems of practical comportment towards others, and possibilities of moral agency beyond the limits of our cognitive and affective dispositions. The desire is to avoid grounding morality as a product of epistemic and ontological determinations, which grows out of current deficiencies of humanitarian ethics, that ineluctably depend on knowledge and understanding of others and conditions that they endure. No matter how sophisticated discourse is, as far as Levinas is concerned, the relation to the other exceeds the relations we have with them as objects or relations produced within discourse in which they are always a theme or the product of subjects' cognition (see chapter 2). As Levinas puts it in *Totality and Infinity*, every form of discourse that doesn't question relations of power and ontologies that such powers create and make intelligible is "a philosophy of injustice."[111] The attempt to avoid sustaining oppressive relations of power and pathologies that such social forces form and sustain, is only possible if the relation between the subject and the other does not appear as a relation of difference, but rather as "immediate and concrete presence", a form of openness that transcends "the all-encompassing and horrifying immanence of Being."[112]

The progressive reading of alterity that views our relation with the other as constitutive of our subjectivity, points out at social conditions in which the other appears not only as a thing among things or a force ranged against us, but a singular being whose meaning is not a function of a larger system of whole, but signifies relationship outside of every ontological horizon or historical context. In a passage in Totality and Infinity concerned with "the face" as the way in which the other

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[111] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 46.
[112] Perpich, *The Ethics of Emanuell Levinas*, 19.

presents herself to us, Levinas suggests that excess of the other over discursive and ontological

determinations points at the innate ethical character of such an encounter.[113] Although this ethical

character can be framed as an appeal or a demand, Levinas recognizes its imperative force as a

response to innate human vulnerability and destituteness. As he argues elsewhere:

> The relation with the face can surely be dominated by perception, but what is specifically the face is what cannot be reduced to that. There is first the very uprightness of the face, its upright exposure, without defense. The skin of the face is that which stays most naked, most destitute. It is the most naked, though with a decent nudity. It is the most destitute also: there is an essential poverty in the face; the proof of this is that one tries to mask this poverty by putting on poses, by taking on a countenance. The face is exposed, menaced, as if inviting us to an act of violence. At the same time, the face is what forbids us to kill.[114]

The reference to the face as both finitude and transcendence discloses two conflicting aspects of

ethical practice and deliberation. On one side, the face of the other denotes a human body in all its

destitution and vulnerability; and on the other, a certain sense of infinity understood here as an

immanent command that radiates from the other towards the subject prior to any contingent

determinations. These aspects seem to be deeply intertwined, and they underwrite two different

dimensions of the original ethical obligation that seems canonical for Levinas' thought. The question

of the relationship between human vulnerability and moral consideration calls us to be attentive to

the ways in which the human Other inhabits the horizon of subject's experience and present herself

as a demand for the subject to get outside the sphere of her own egocentrism. The heightened sense

of human finitude and increased decentralization of the individual (and collective perspectives that

result from such developments) constitute, for Levinas, the conditions of ethics as "the performance

of ethical life", rather than the set of rational principles that ought to guide our moral deliberation.[115]

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[113] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 50.
[114] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1995), 85.
[115] Perpich, *The Ethics of Emanuell Levinas*, 77.

This way of thinking about the relationship between the subject and the other, gives us some idea of how to conceptualize Levinas' phenomenological approach to subjectivity and an ethics of alterity in a way that is attentive to ontological impurities and its entanglements with power relations, without thereby sliding into ethical relativism. His account of the face systematically inverts the fundamental features of objectifying consciousness, and as such an inversion it has important consequences on ways in which we can conceive of ourselves, of others, and our relationships with them. Since subjectivity is born out of its relation to others,[116] the nature of these relations not only defines who I and the other are, but also underlines the horizon of cognitive and affective attitudes and possible modes of engagement between individuals. This relationality of the subject helps us identify the two main facets around which Levinas' understanding of intersubjectivity centers: namely, vulnerability and responsibility. If the other appears as preeminently vulnerable, in so far as she can be reduced to her countenance based on her appearing and on the ground of my perception of her general appearance, then such a state of vulnerability does not only point at susceptibility to harm, but also foregrounds certain sense of "openness and affectivity."[117]

Vulnerability

The degree of such openness and affectivity refers to subject's locatedness in the web of social and intersubjective relations that allow individuals to take part in social world and be formed as social agents. This notion of vulnerability becomes a shared reference point in theoretical discussions within Levinasian philosophy. Vulnerability is regarded primarily as an experience that roots us in the corporeality of our existence. It is also a state that is ultimately tied to violence, acts of which render us more vulnerable while also laying bare a preexisting vulnerability of which we have been ignorant, especially if we don't share spaces that is occupied by marginalized others.

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[116] Levinas, Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 96.
[117] Gilson, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas*, 127.

Across the diverse instances of vulnerability, a common sense of destituteness is underscored

wherein vulnerability is defined as openness to being affected, and affecting, in ways that one cannot

control. We can take this vulnerability as an ethical disposition. Wherein intersubjective vulnerability

is a matter of social relations and material practice. As such agents can be vulnerable in many senses:

physically, legally, and psychologically. From previous sections we can see why vulnerability is of

ethical importance and also why it poses ethical problems.

Our finite nature is defined and made possible by such an openness and interactions with

others, which are defining aspects of our common humanity (receptivity, porosity, and

impressionability of being vulnerable bodies as we are). If we understand human vulnerability in this

way, then openness to the world and other human beings are not only modal aspects of social

reality, but also conditions of subjectivity itself. Going back to Jill Stauffer's book, she seems to draw

attention to such a relation between self-formation, human vulnerability and breakdowns of human

communities, when she talks about her interpretation of selfhood in Levinasian philosophy. As she

puts it,

> Levinas's description of the human "self" helps to counter a tendency to accept an
> unproblematic autonomy as the defining feature of humanity. If the self just is
> defined as exposed, vulnerable, and formed in part in relation to others, it may make
> it more intelligible for us why human beings are able to destroy the selves and worlds
> of other human beings. It also does justice to the depth of the attachments we form,
> since vulnerability is not only a negative asset: it may be open us to abuse,
> oppression, and death, but it also makes possible friendship, solidarity, and love. It is
> deeply engrained in the Western self to define its relation to others in terms of its
> autonomy: others are out there and I choose to interact with them from within the
> protected site of myself.[118]

In being open to the world, Stauffer reminds us that we are constitutively and necessarily

interdependent with others and so find ourselves defined by these relations of dependency. In taking

common experiences of precarity and interdependence, she highlights an important fact that no

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[118] Stauffer, *Ethical Loneliness, 24*.

being can exist independent from constitutive relationships and cognitions that give us knowledge about our social environment. But she does more than just that. Insofar as Stauffer echoes Levinas' assumption that we are subjects formed through and within a web of social interactions with other human beings, she also exhorts us to remain attentive that such interdependency not only results in instances of oppression, dehumanization, or domination, but also as we have seen from our examples from Bosnia, that harm and trauma are so devastating exactly due our subjectivity that is formed in such intersubjective contexts of dependency. Acknowledging that we are formed intersubjectively in the presence of others (regardless how contingent that process may be) brings us closer to understanding how lives (and in the Bosnian cases, communities) can be destroyed. There are harms that are rendered utterly incurable if we limit ourselves to thinking that a human being can experience meaningful autonomy separately from the social conditions and other individuals that surround her. If Stauffer's reading of Levinas is correct (and I believe it is), then seeing human autonomy as an outcome "of the relation between human beings rather than as a predetermined boundary between them" demands from us not only to rethink the nature of human agency and autonomy, but also forces us to question range and nature of our commitments towards others that such shift in understanding imposes on us.

Responsibility

Stauffer's acute observation makes possible a better grasp of the ethical significance of Levinas' attempts to counter a common tendency of liberal political culture to accept as unproblematic traditional understandings of human freedom and autonomy. Instead of describing a subject as a self-sufficient monad that is, by definition, free to make decisions more or less unaffected by others or social conditions, Levinas gives us a vision of a subject framed in heteronomy in regard to social conditions and the demands that other human beings make on her.

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Such an account that our autonomy is not set of universal entitlements, but is rather created over time through interaction of vulnerable human beings with each other, reflects Levinas' insistence on the primacy of the other in all her destituteness. If "I" am for another, then according to Levinas, subject becomes the site wherein other's needs and concerns not only challenge inherent egoism, but also compels us to be ethical or rational. In other words, I am inevitably placed in a relation wherein my actions already presuppose certain rational activity and ethical choice, regardless of whether I ignore my environment (and the others) or not. Thus, when he writes how human vulnerability implicates subject with "the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others"[119] or when encounter with the other subsequently commits the ego to acknowledge herself as a sensibility unable to ignore the other who "is abandoned to me without anyone being able to take my place as the one responsible for him"[120] Levinas also challenges our ordinary, overly reductive sense of responsibility. As he writes,

> It is because subjectivity is sensibility – an exposure to others, a vulnerability and a responsibility in the proximity of others, the-one-for-the-other, that is, signification – and because matter is the very locus of the for-the-other, the way that signification signifies before showing itself as said in the system of synchronism, the linguistic system, that a subject is of flesh and blood, a man that is hungry and eats, entrails in a skin, and thus capable of giving the bread out of his mouth, or giving his skin.[121]

It isn't that I find myself at the start fully self-sufficient and capable of deciding for or against solidarity with others. Vulnerability of other human being calls me to respond (simultaneously reminding me of my own precarity), and even if I decide to ignore that call, that refusal to acknowledge always occurs with an effort. This way of conceptualizing intersubjectivity and obligations that such relation between agents invoke, not only gives us a richer sense of what it means to be human being in general, but it also confirms that root of responsibility is not so much

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[119] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise then Being or Beyond the Essence* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne, 1998), 15.
[120] Ibid., 153.
[121] Ibid., 77.

in being accountable for actions I have done myself, but rather that binding force of responsibility stems out of the ordinary situation of witnessing the destitution of others and impossibility of being indifferent to the other in all her misery.

The sense of responsibility Levinas uncovers here is much deeper and more radical than the common understanding that considers responsibility as the extension of individual autonomy and freedom. We have already seen how traditional notion of subjectivity depends on an understanding of a social actor conceived as a human monad with certain entitlements. This subject can be part of the culture, can be part of social conditions, yet it is conceived as an autonomous agent that has certain rights and entitlements. Blanchot, thinking about Levinas, contrasts these two senses of responsibility:

> Responsible: this word generally qualifies – in prosaic, bourgeois manner – a mature, lucid, conscientious man, who acts with circumspection, who takes into account all elements of a given situation, calculates and decides. The word 'responsible' qualifies the successful man of action. But now [in the philosophy of Levinas] responsibility – my responsibility for the other, for everyone without reciprocity – is displaced. No longer does it belong to consciousness; it is not an activating thought process put into practice, nor is it even a duty that would impose itself from without and from within… Responsibility which withdraws me from my order – perhaps from all orders and order itself – responsibility which separates me from myself (from the 'me' that is mastery and power, from the free speaking subject) and reveals the other in place of me, requires that I answer for absence, for passivity.[122]

This "withdrawal" that Blanchot is talking about refers to necessity to take distance from ontological determinations and leave cultural differences aside. European modernity has created a habit to conceive of subjectivity and rationality in terms of mastery and control. With Levinas' argument in mind, my focus on questions of responsibility and the source of subjection seem to depend on a conceptual reversal of such a predominant understanding of subjectivity conceived as agency of a free subject who is responsible for her actions. In itself this freedom is highly suspicious, if not

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[122] Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 25.

impossible; one of the lessons of post-modernity is that the self is formed, determined and sustained by relations of power that more or less determine our cognitive and material dispositions, and subsequently guide our moral faculties.

Inasmuch as Levinas' understanding of morality unfolds in an inescapable relation to the other (rather than as an autonomous disposition of the moral subject), one can grasp the contours of an alternative notion of liability that no longer designates the subject's authorship over her actions, but rather becomes a response to our common vulnerability and the demands that others (and their conditions) make on us. In order to make sense how this intersubjective vulnerability operates as an ethical resource (i.e. both as a fact about the human condition that forms the basis for ethical obligation and as an experience we undergo that can compel moral response to others), let us consider following passage from Levinas' *Ethics and Infinity* where he writes:

> Constituting itself in the very movement wherein being responsible for the other devolves on it, subjectivity goes to the point of substitution for the Other. It assumes the condition – or the uncondition – of hostage. Subjectivity as such is initially hostage; it answers to the point of expiating for others. One can appear scandalized by this utopian and, for an I, inhuman conception. But the humanity of the human – the true life – is absent. The humanity in historical and objective being, the very breakthrough of the subjective, of the human psychism in its original vigilance or sobering up, is being which undoes its condition of being: disinterestedness… To be human means to live as if one were not a being among beings… It is I who support the Other and am responsible for him. One thus sees that in the human subject at the same time as a total subjection, my primogeniture manifest itself. My responsibility is untransferable. No one could replace me. In fact, it is a matter of saying the very identity of the human I starting from responsibility, that is, starting from this position or deposition of the sovereign I in self-consciousness, a deposition which is precisely its responsibility for the Other. Responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what, humanly, I cannot refuse. This charge is a supreme dignity of the unique. I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable I. I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me. Such is my inalienable identity of subject. It is in this precise sense that Dostoyevsky said: "We are all responsible for all for all men before all, and I more than all the others."[123]

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[123] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity,* 101.

This way of interpreting the ethical relation of responsibility gives us a much needed account of moral agency that emphasizes responsibility imposed on social agents by the conditions (e.g. pain, trauma, illness, etc.) of the Other and stresses an imperative demand on them to be open for and impassioned about the diversity and uniqueness of the other despite its embeddedness in the web of social, cultural, economic, and political circumstances. The starting premise of Levinas' notion of responsibility (i.e. ethical primacy of the other) calls us to get outside the sphere of our own self-satisfaction and preoccupations, and calls us to remain attentive to the epistemic determinations in which the human Others present themselves to us and become part of our social experience.

This alertness towards dangers that reductive accounts of rationality and ontological differentiation do to moral capacity of social actors motivates Levinas to insist that the innate ethical relationship between two human beings precedes the realm of meaning (e.g. any form of discursive articulation, reasoning, knowledge, etc.). Such demotion of our social reality, with regard to our relationship with others, places the ethical character of our intersubjectivity as prior to the order of knowledge and ontological determinations. This situates Levinas in opposition to traditional ontology and the privilege of epistemology in Western philosophy. We have seen in previous chapters how such privileging always reduces our relationship with the other to a problem of representation and ascription. Taking into account that such processes occur under the authority of norms and values that often aim to erase difference, complexity, and particularity of the other (and simultaneously reduce complexity of conditions that surround her), Levinas comes to a conclusion that discursive mediation of intersubjective relationship is inherently violent, and as such denotes a reduction of the other to socially acceptable ontological confinement. In difference to that, he adamantly argues that ethical responsibility takes place beyond knowledge, indeed beyond ontological determinations that validate, or are validated, by the latter. It isn't that I find myself at the start fully self-sufficient and capable of deciding for or against solidarity with others. Rather,

others have already laid claim on me, called me to respond to them before I had time to choose to be affected. At this point, a different question arises: how is this even possible if we take away our reasoning, our resort to social and cultural norms of evaluation, of our material existence and locatedness?

The Face

To answer this question, we need to understand that Levinas' motivation to ground the relationship with the other outside of social and epistemic determinations (i.e. as essentially ethical) rests on his attempt to liberate ethics (and our relations towards others) from reductive accounts of ontology and rationality, which result in violent or oppressive determinations of alterity, and the restrictive comprehension of it. Perhaps counterintuitively, nonetheless correct, Levinas wants us to understand that an encounter with the vulnerability or suffering of others solicits us morally, regardless of whether we acknowledge that or not, or if we choose to provide aid or remain indifferent to such a humanitarian encounter.

What do we know about this encounter? First of all, the other doesn't disappear in a set of attributes that come front to our cognition; she is not a phenomenon that resists adequate perception and articulation, but rather the other who addresses me, whose presence places certain weight on me. This encounter with the other unfolds through an encounter with face. When we hear the word 'face,' we spontaneously associate it with "countenance," that is, with conventional aesthetic and social determinations that render the other person intelligible for us. The face of another human being, thus, seems to correspond to her appearance and behavior that receives its articulation through our perception and ascription of certain standards and norms. In other words, the presence of other incites us to define her whereupon such process of articulation simultaneously delimits our reaction and behavior towards her. For Levinas it is not important if other person is

similar or different from me, rather her contingent features do not affect the sense in which her innate humanness provokes me to respond to her ethical particularity in a way that constitutes us both as poles of social and ethical relation.

What I understand by Levinas' "face of the other" is not her physical appearance, but precisely the noteworthy fact that the other does not coincide with her image, photograph, representation, or evocation. The dignity (or humanness) of the other is irreducible to the ways in which she is represented to the knower. Obviously, the other is indeed visible; she appears and so calls up all sorts of impressions, images, and ideas by which she can be described. And naturally, we can come to know a great deal about her by what she gives us "to see" (or what society allows us to see in her). But the other is more than a photograph, more than a product of social imagery, more than a concept; not only is she factually more (there is always more for me to discover about her), but she can never be adequately reproduced or summarized by one or another image or public representation. In his interview with Francois Poirie, Levinas reiterates this relation between epistemology and ontology in regard to the nature of an ethical encounter with the other. There he argues that "The face is not of the order of the seen, it is not an object, but it is he who is appearing… is also an appeal or an imperative given to your responsibility: to counter a face is straightaway [d'emblee] to hear a demand and an order."[124] The same point is made in an interview with Philippe Nemo. There Levinas claims how one cannot "speak of a 'phenomenology' of the face, since phenomenology describes what appears. So, too, I wonder if one can speak of a look turned toward the face, for the look is knowledge, perception. I think rather that access to the face is straightaway [d'emblee] ethical.[125]

I will leave aside the question if Levinas' account given here is correct or false; rather, I want to focus on this encounter with the other that takes place without any epistemic or ontological

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[124] Quoted in Perpich, *The Ethics of Emmanuel Levinas,* 51.
[125] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, *85*.

mediation; and as such makes me an intrinsic part of an ethical relationship that I can't escape (I can ignore it, or be unaware of it, but that doesn't mean that it's not there). Paradoxically, the other's appearing as a social phenomenon is executed as a withdrawal, or literally, a reduction of her infinity to an ontologically fixed image (or meaning, representation, actualization, etc.). And yet, it is precisely in this insurmountable irreducibility of alterity that we encounter other as the vulnerability of the face,[126] and through which the appearance of its ethical significance manifest itself. She is vulnerable, as the "countenance" inherent in her geopolitical and ontological situatedness contributes to a reduced image or meaning for the other, which can very easily be further reduced to her social position, to the racial determination of her body, to gender determination, and to a public image that falls back upon a complex set of norms and values that should be contested. The appearance of the face as countenance, as it were, invites the subject ("I" or "the Ego") to reduce the other to an image or an identity that may prevent acknowledgment of ethical value of such encounter to take place. In this respect, Levinas conceives of this paradoxical position that the other presents herself to me as the 'temptation to murder.'[127] In other words, the encounter with others is determined by susceptibility of the "face" that is delivered to our "shameless gaze" which observes, explores and ultimately reduces her to a social abbreviation (i.e. her ontological and epistemic determination). But in this very fascination there lies the ethical significance to the face. At the moment in which I am attracted by the appearance of the other to reduce her to that countenance, I simultaneously realize that the other ultimately escapes the identity that I award to her. This is the core of the fundamental ethical experience beginning from the vulnerability and openness of the other – namely, the prohibition to reduce the other solely to articulation and reception of her countenance (i.e. the ways in which she becomes intelligible to the subject). This invitation to

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[126] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 275.
[127] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 90.

reduction depends not only on the vocabulary of the face but also on the way of being of the subject to whom the face appears.

This brings us back to earlier identified issues of ways in which we encounter and approach the other person. On the basis of my perception, I strive to grasp the other in an image and to articulate her based on my own evaluative framework or social determinations. This perception/evaluation takes place not out of "contemplative" consideration that respectfully lets her be seen on her own terms, but rather according to my epistemic situatedness and self-interest. Thus, when I succeed in discovering or "disclosing" the other person, I can also know how I can interact with her, and how I can include her in the realization of my autonomy and freedom. Hence the face appears as preeminently vulnerable, insofar as the other can be an instrument, reduced to appearing on the grounds of my perception. To avoid a reductive understanding of the other (based on ontological determinations and epistemic habits that level our articulation of the other based on social interest and cultural biases), the face is stripped of epistemic and ontological reduction; it transcends every idea of it, and is, for Levinas, an expression of infinity. Moreover, all other entities exceed our ideas about them. It is not possible to exhaust the details of an object of our knowledge in a conceptual description. Let us elaborate on this point further by reflecting on my own experience with my daughter Maya. I can describe her as an eight-year-old girl, with long curly hair, brown eyes; I can draw contrasts between her and other children by stating that she is a talented painter, that she doesn't like to read, but loves to play ukulele. All these details do not fully describe everything that Maya is. She can receive descriptive articulation and as such be epistemically tamed and socially thematized, but this description doesn't explain the complex web of relations with and around her—for example, that I miss her, that her being away causes pain in me, that such pain and her absence confronts me bodily and determines choices I make, that when I am with her I need to take into account her needs, her desires, her moods and the ways in which she relates to the world

and deals with other people and myself. Thus, the bareness of the other in terms of a lack of thematization allows us to understand the ways in which others demand from us to move beyond discursive narratives that articulate them, and determine ways in which they appear to us. Only then we can talk about morality, and what kind of obligations such morality invokes.

It is through ontological differentiation and its articulation that the other remains a target to harm. In this sense the ethical appeal of the face is not an ontological or natural necessity. The moral solicitation of the face doesn't mean that such moral appeal can't be ignored, suppressed or denied. As Roger Burggreave articulates this part well: "The commandment against murder does not make murder impossible," even when its authority is maintained despite brutalities that occur, "the face as command does not force compliance, but only appeals."[128] As we have seen from the example that I gave regarding my daughter, such an appeal contests subjects to override their own self-interest, and to be open to the other without certainty that this appeal will be addressed or ignored. As such, it mitigates the social vulnerability that comes from a history of exclusion, epistemic oppression, racism, sexism or any other form of exclusionary practices. Despite all challenges, I remain sympathetic to this account because the success of our moral agency as humanitarian subjects depends on the capacity to be moved by the suffering of others, regardless of their distance, and through the exposure to their vulnerability and destitution to lose our egocentrism, and experience something like an impulse of the sheer humanness in the other human being. Despite all possible criticisms towards such an understanding, the suggestive (and seductive) power of Levinas' phenomenological account helps us question our humanitarian commitments. Exactly because the destitute conditions that some human beings endure puncture our indifference before we can cognitively process the broader social meaning of its presence and the responsibilities such presence

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[128] Roger Burggraeve, "Violence and the Vulnerable Face of the Other: The Vision of Emmanuel Levinas on Moral Evil and Our Responsibility" in *Journal of Social Philosophy* 30:1 (1999): 31.

invoke, we are inclined at least to reflect on ethical solicitation that takes place without any recourse on contingent features of an unjust world.

Theodor Adorno: Morality of Thinking

Despite the intuitive appeal of Levinas' thought, in reflecting upon his arguments we are faced with a difficult question about the emancipatory potential of his account. It is one thing to state that there is an ethical relationship; less tangible (and equally important) is to argue that this vulnerability can cultivate attentiveness and imaginative capacities beyond totality of the other. Why should we believe that our respect for *the face* amounts to more than a bias for what ultimately resembles us? How can we know that egoism, or any other culturally conditioned preference for the individual human, above all else does not motivate the intuition and color our moral phenomenology? If we detach away from concepts (and ontological differentiations that they ultimately sustain) how can we know at least one ontological property of the Other that is charged with an inexhaustible ethical force? In other words, can the de-ontologized existence of the other ground the moral imperative, and if our fixation on the alterity can be of any use to ground ethical or political agency of subjects? After all, the question of the fracture between rationalism and motivation for ethical action is not answered, but rather moved aside. One reason why such a motivated account of responsibility may be prone to difficulties is because our cognitive and affective dispositions are preventing us from achieving that state. Levinas' account of the ethical-primordial relationship, prior to any ontological or cognitive determinations, is only comprehensible if we challenge the ontological formations and cognitive dispositions that prevent us from acknowledging it. After all, it matters little to a person who is facing her executioner if the ethical relation and command, "thou shall not kill," exists or not—rather if the person will recognize it and act upon it.

This brings us back to the problem of the rift between knowledge about the suffering of others, and the motivations for concrete ethical action. The central theme of this final chapter is initially instigated by challenge voiced adamantly throughout this dissertation, namely, whether the ethical relation between human beings who undergo hardships and privileged spectators can be reached amidst structures of violence and exclusion. Within the context of previous analysis, it would seem obvious to contend how contemporary humanitarian subject lacks the conditions for responsiveness that allow her to apprehend the other in the midst of this social and political life that she is embedded in. Although the worry is maintained, critics signal what I perceive to be a central tension in current ethical agency of the Western humanitarian subject—the question of how to reconcile limited capacity for the ethical, non-violent relation with the Other within the representational, violent world and demands that human vulnerability and inhuman conditions seemingly invoke. On the one hand, we have seen how Levinas' work makes the first step towards that goal. He gives us an alternative understanding of subjectivity and confronts us with a notion of human autonomy grounded in interpersonal relationship that can help us accept obligations that we as subjects have towards each other. This understanding prompts our realization of the Other as a fragile life vulnerable to harm, which at once inspires in us a visceral call to protect this fragility by refraining from doing violence to her and welcoming the potentiality of providing aid and support to people in need, regardless of their contingent formation through relations of power.

While these aims are in themselves necessary and welcome, we should not forget that our encounter with the vulnerability of the other immanently and inevitably unlaces scores of avenues for violent social relations. This occurs because the encounter with the other human beings (and the subject's articulation of them) rests upon the knower's sense of values, which determine an acknowledgment of the fragility of the other. The subject's epistemic and ontological locatedness within a specific social framework often results in a discomfort, when she realizes that her safe

appropriation and articulation of the world may be challenged by the needs and destituteness of another individual. Levinas explains that, in response to this discomfort, the subject is ineluctably incited to contend for the individual good necessary for her immediate and future survival. I argue, first, that the cost of this procuring necessarily transgresses and determines the ethical relation that existence of suffering simultaneously upholds, and thus introduces an inherent paradox within a predominantly liberal culture, whose values the contemporary subject for the most part endorses. To make a step further and tackle problems inherent in liberal accounts of moral agency, at this point I want to draw foremost attention to ways in which explication of the realms of human vulnerability depend upon our capacity to leave our own epistemic and ontological position, and reflect upon the values and norms that often manifest themselves as subordinating and exploitative, and as such give rise to the degraded relationships that we form with others, when we form them.

When we look back on the work of early Frankfurt School, we can see that the question of moral agency is situated and arises out of the very nature of social conditions and cognitive capacities that are mournfully defined by their instrumental nature. Proponents of this vein of thought make it clear that, despite its setup of institutions that seemingly encourage non-violent behavior, the individual, exactly because it is treated as an anonymous citizen, remains subjugated to the general frameworks of institutionalized norms and laws that determine its interactions with one another. The problem, then, is that today's political culture considers it a sufficient effort to expose certain injustices in society, on the basis that it violates well-founded values and norms. The question why those affected do not themselves problematize or attack such moral evils is no longer seen as falling within the purview of social criticism. Thus, what is necessary at this point is to distil the system of convictions and practices that has the paradoxical quality of concealing the very social conditions that structurally produce the conditions and agency of the individuals in question. One

way to achieve that end is to disclose the predispositions and processes that constitute and nurture such form of subjectivity.

Taking into account such an ontological and epistemological entrapment of agents, Adorno protests that individuals seem to be unable to acknowledge others and engage with them as objects of moral concern. Underneath the cognitive and material dispositions of a damaged social world, lays a form of subjectivity that is unable to awake to an immanent call for solidarity towards others who endure inhumane conditions. To elaborate how this awakening is possible, Adorno points to instances of our reality that lead us into such a moral and political quandary. An alternative strategy, Adorno suggests, is to avoid undermining the severity of the struggle that would apparently require an agent first to discern the ways in which she is indoctrinated into a sociopolitical system that, by its very nature, compels individuals to award certain social status (i.e. ontological and epistemic determinations) to one another. An ensuing question, I suggest, is duly warranted: wherein lies the truly practical reference of the claim that the ethical relation can be found within a complex system of power, that from the outset maintains such a tenacious stronghold on individuals' perceptions of and engagements with the world? If we take cognition (and the knowledge that we gain from it) as a way of approaching the world in such a way that its otherness in relation to the knowing subject vanishes, (a process which Adorno recognizes as an inherent aspect of our common rationality), how is then a morally engaged relationship with other even possible? If Adorno is right—if our instrumental drive in conceptualizing our environment results in such a subordinated status of objects of our perception—then our cognitive dispositions not only immanently lead towards a reduction of the other to our own biases, but also, that within such oppressive and reductive ontological conditions of human existence, our subjective capacities to engage with our social surrounding and others cannot comprise authentic ethical relations at all. Pointing out that individuals are under such a stronghold, I believe, demands from us to descriptively locate the

conditions necessary for enabling an ethical relation. Adorno argues that these conditions stem from an integral aspect of contemporary capitalist society, one that depends on the distinction between affectivity and representation. This stronghold of the current state of subjectivity corresponds to a form of representation that inculcates subjects to norms and laws on a conceptual level. For, after all, Adorno maintains that engagement with others is possible only once subjects have been inaugurated by a sensible affectivity, and that is only possible after we detach from distorted forms of cognition that currently mediate the encounter and recognition of the other. But considering, first, the role of the social conditions in the formation of subjecthood, and, second, the function of human rationality to determine and guide sensible affectivity in this formation, provides a compelling pretext to overcome the current pitfall of moral agency of spectators exposed to human suffering. I hope that by highlighting Adorno's understanding of human rationality and its ties to sensibility in this way, however, it may also prove to be a potential solution to our overarching issue, for we can then claim that apathy arises inevitably from the social circumstances and cognitive predisposition that remain throughout the subject's life as a predominant factor of our comportments towards others, in both the ethical and political senses. To illuminate this issues further, it is necessary to look in more detail at Adorno's views of both (a) modern society and its workings and (b) modern thought forms. Both are directly implicated in the conditions that plague our global reality today.

Pathologies: Social Conditions and Thinking

We have seen that questions about ways in which vulnerable others are represented in our media-saturated culture, and whether such spectacle of suffering has the power to move us to action, point out at broader social contexts and invoke issues tied with social forces under which our subjectivity is formed. What I find important in my reading of Adorno is his insistence that any

redefinition of interpersonal relationships depends upon our capacity to detach from social norms that instill us with a specific cognitive system that is inherently reductive and oppressive. This not only follows what Levinas argued as the possibility of ethics beyond its understanding that is subject centered, but rather that such a possibility depends on the crucial insistence that ethical relations depend on an ontological and epistemic priority of the Other. What Adorno shares with Levinas is that the only way to escape the dead-end of the current ethical conundrum is to become aware how the other is thematized, and how such conceptual determination prevents us from endorsing obligations towards her. What this means is that the ethical burden of interpersonal relationships precedes and grounds epistemic and ontological determinations, which are in Adorno's view products of a false system of rationalizations and products of a capitalist world plagued by ideology, coldness, and alienation. This understanding joins our cause in challenging the predominant liberal understanding of ethics and responsibility that conceives of the subject's action as actions regulated and determined through universal frameworks that often obfuscate complex geopolitical contexts and reductive discursive accounts that validate and solidify such contexts as those in question.

What this also means is that his insistence on the epistemological and ethical primacy of the Other leads to a demand to redefine ways in which our perception and comprehension of the other (and reality around us) receives a completely new turn. Taking the other on its own terms and being careful about conceptualization is one way to redefine what responsibility and ethics mean. This somewhat echoes Levinas and his insistence that the subject has a responsibility to the other, regardless of what characteristics the other is awarded.[129] If we start from her and ask ourselves what circumstances and vulnerability of the other demands from us, rather than what have we done to them, the situation for ethics radically changes. While Adorno would remain cautious of fully endorsing a Levinasian stance on the primordial ethical relation between subjects and objects, and

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[129] That means that the other ethically solicits us before putting it through conceptual and ontological differentiation guided by our second nature.

while he would disagree with him that the other is addressing the subject without being conceptualized, nonetheless our relationship towards her would drastically change if the perceptive evaluation and normative burden would shift from our egocentric position, back towards the other. In other words, Adorno argues for epistemic sensibility wherein we need to be able to interrupt the discursive norms that we apply while articulating the other. The goal of every ethical relationship is to interrupt these formations subject applies to social circumstances and other people around her. This requires from us to prevent that our view of the world becomes a totalizing vision in which we encounter only our own ideas. That means that we should not do violence towards the other by subsuming it to our norms that depend on an evaluative framework that gives them meaning, rather than challenging that framework, allowing the object (or "other") speak on her own terms.

In fact, there is a more general point here that helps us address issues with contemporary humanitarianism. According to Adorno, the experience of suffering reveals that identity thinking, and its presumption of fixed, enduring essences, should be rejected. Even the smallest trace of meaningless suffering[130] is a ghastly indictment on the way we cognize and approach the modern social world and thought forms cannot help but produce it. Taking instances of violence, human rights abuses, extreme poverty, racism, genocide, sexism, and so forth, as ruptures of modern culture, is one way to reveal ideology that supposedly eternal ideas are in fact not indifferent to time, social conditions and history, but rather formed and altered by them. Need to reveal the social nature of most fundamental truths and concepts that act as eternal and unaffected by history, brings us back to the relation that Adorno has towards a Marxist understanding of modern society, insofar as he thinks that it is structured fundamentally by the workings of social powers. This social rootedness of human knowledge serves Adorno as a placeholder for a more general phenomenon of

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[130] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* 203.

human interaction with each other, and the ways in which humanity comprehends and appropriates its environment.

The main aspect of Adorno's social theory centers around the claim that dominance of social powers has become so pervasive that there is almost no aspect of human life that is not affected by it. As Adorno articulates this point: "everything socially existent today is so thoroughly mediated, that even the moment of mediation is itself distorted by the totality. There is no standpoint outside of the whole affair which can be referred to..."[131] Put differently, when everything is mediated economically, or mediated through an evaluative framework that distorts our experience of the other and social conditions and our own role in them, then this mediation is no longer clearly visible, because (a) the inequality and privilege that drive humanitarianism are often not seen as social relations (and hence not seen as the social relations grounded in inequality and domination which they are); and (b) there is no external standpoint from which the mediation could be detected. In this way, society forms an all-encompassing totality. Despite the fact that we are shaped by our social and natural environment from the very beginning of our lives, we still think that most of the time we are determining our lives based on our own values and beliefs. While there is still so much that we could do to make the world a better place – volunteer, give more to charitable organizations, take better care of our loved ones, and so on – we are still confident, wrongfully so, that normally we meet at least a minimal threshold of morally acceptable, decent behavior.

What one can characterize as Adorno's understanding of the current situation of an ethical agent that is prone to being caught up in ideologies, is to say that there is a tendency of ethical agents to hold a set of beliefs, attitudes, and preferences which are false in ways that benefit the present social order (and privileges of those who draw the power from it) at the expense of the satisfaction of real interests of humanity. The structure of our social world is such that by sustaining

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[131] Theodor Adorno, "Late Capitalism or Industrial Society." p. 10; taken from http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/AdornoSocAddr.html.

the behavior or social position or privilege that we have drawn from it, we sustain what should actually be criticized (i.e. this social world, or central pathological elements thereof, such as its property system, distribution of wealth, inequality, etc.). In other words, instead of challenging social conditions that result in inequality and injustice we tend to accept such social arrangements as inevitable formations of historical development. Why this occurs is for the most part due our inability to resist ideological distortions inherent to social organization within capitalism and our ways of life that unavoidably sustain it (this is often true even of those who are most disadvantaged by these social conditions and arrangements). In fact, Adorno argues that everything can become ideology within such conditions that are determined by norms and values inherent to a capitalistic society – even when we consider what is the right thing to do, if viewed in isolation, turns into violence when employed under the pressure and influence of unjust social structures (we could see that from the analysis of compassion that I have introduced in chapter 1). But even if we take as undisputable truth that social and global conditions are free from antagonism and contradictions, there is an in-built tension within capitalism between the conditions of augmenting human suffering, and the conditions for humanitarianism generally. Moreover, this tension is aggravated, since why we fail to recognize the call of the other, and ignore her vulnerability, is because we tend to be caught up in ideological discourses and material conditions. So when we reflect upon humanitarianism, we cannot fully justify our behavior – being implicated in ignorance to human suffering undermines any legitimacy to which we might lay claim in our behavior. As a consequence, any justification we do offer will be ideological, at least in part. If our agency is constituted by our capacity to comprehend reality, and if this fundamental ability is in itself a product of distorted social influences, then one way to explain and change such a relation to the world and others is by addressing this fundamental disposition of being a human embedded in a web of social determinations. In our current predicament we cannot actively determine our life. In other words,

we lack freedom and autonomy. We have seen in the previous chapter how Levinas conceives

autonomy as our dependence on others. We can follow this line further.

> The contradiction in which philosophy has entangled itself, that is, that humanity is inconceivable without the idea of freedom while in reality people are neither internally not externally free, is not a failure of speculative metaphysics but the fault of the society that deprives people even of inner freedom. Society is true determining factor, while at the same time its organization constitutes the potential for freedom.[132]

The contradiction to which Adorno refers here is alluding to elusiveness of the ideal of human self-

determination. While in pursuing one's individual interests, one feels free; this feeling of freedom,

ultimately, is for Adorno (and Levinas too) largely illusionary, since the individuals sustain in their

behavior a society which has its own imminent telos, to which it subordinated all human purposes.

Moreover, society determines the individual also internally, in the very depths of allegedly self-

sufficient independent ego. As Adorno puts it in following passages,

> Society destines the individuals to be what they are, even by their immanent genesis. Their Freedom or unfreedom is not primary, as if would seem under the veil of principium individuationis. For the ego, … makes even the insight into its dependence difficult to gain for the subjective consciousness. The principle of individualization, the law of particularity to which universal reason in the individuals is tied, tends or insulate them from the encompassing contexts and thereby strengthens their flattering confidence in the subject's autarky.[133]

and also:

> The coercive state of reality, which idealism had projected into the region of the subject and the mind, must be translated from that region. What remains of idealism is that society, the objective determinant of the mind, is as much an epitome of subjects as it is their negation. In society the subjects are unknowable and incapacitated; hence its desperate objectivity and conceptuality, which idealism mistakes for something positive. The system is not one of the absolute (Free) spirit; it is one of the most conditioned spirit of those who have it and cannot even know how much it is their own.[134]

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[132] Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), *85*.
[133] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* 219.
[134] Ibid., *10*.

If Adorno is right about this, then his claim provides another piece of the puzzle explaining why individuals do not immediately recognize the way society restricts their freedom: they have internalized this restriction to the point that it has become so much their second nature, that they struggle to see it as a heteronomous imposition that it actually is. Nevertheless, it is not the case that these internalized dominations leave no trace; rather quite the opposite. The high prevalence of individual and collective pathologies (most notably various forms of racist, sexist, anti-Semite, or nationalist group behavior) within contemporary societies are a clear index of the reality that lacks real freedom. Pathological states indicate that inner self is not the realm of freedom that we normally assume it to be. If reflected upon, these states show us that our freedom is, in fact, a state and a byproduct of relations of subjugation and domination. Thus, the challenge is not only how to relate to situations and possible alternatives, but also how far can we control them if any form of control is even possible under circumstances of capitalist social reality. If one focuses merely on the individual choice, not the conditions that result in such choices, one has already let ideology in and we have left the realm of "freedom" or autonomy. Essentially, our current society according to Adorno is not allowing us to change our social circumstances (at least not fundamentally) and our rootedness in relations of power are sustaining their grip with external and internalized forms of domination.

Thinking

The relation between social organization and historical contingency of our cognitive dispositions seem to determine the ways in which our agency unfolds and affects lives of others. While this may sound like a trivial statement, the problem for Adorno is that such a structure as the genesis of our cognitive dispositions affects not only how subjects conceive of others, but also why often social injustices remain unaddressed and why there seem to be a deep moral gap between unjust conditions, their representation in public knowledge, and any individual or collective effort to

do something about them. This has dire consequences for our relation to other people and our capacity to determine the form our ethical and political agency should take. Besides, thinking is more than a distinctive aspect of human capabilities, it is also a reflection of power relations and social circumstances that they create and sustain. According to Adorno and other critical theorists, our rationality often serves as a tool of domination that has practical and political aims of perpetuating and sustaining conditions that benefit privileged group based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, etc.. This deficiency of our cognitive faculties should be challenged and reflected upon if we want to liberate thinking from the shackles that have been placed by ideology and distorted social conditions of capitalism.

Moreover, as Adorno's work shows, the material and ideological consequences of our cognitive dispositions is not only the way in which different relations of power position others as less developed (and therefore serves to rationalize and justify often unjust conditions in its formal guises); it also overlooks and obscures the extent to which our cognitive faculties and discursive formations of "West" are in themselves distorted and inherently oppressive and racialized. Herein lies the difficulty—insofar as the ways in which our thinking operates, and the norms that we apply are foundational for constitution of ethical and political agency of Western subject - and the morality of the subject remains confined to already predetermined normative field, wherein her actions threaten to be self-sealing. The epistemological problem, then, goes to the heart of humanitarian subject and our attempt to offer an imminent, reconstructive critique that would offer a new sense of responsibility and avoid collapsing human agency into an abyss of Eurocentric selectivism and relativism of global geo-political interests of privileged social actors.

Along these lines, in his introduction to Negative Dialectics, Adorno makes what may strike some of the philosophers as an outrageous claim:

(N)o philosophy can paste the particulars into the text as seductive paintings would hoodwink it into believing. But the argument in its formality and generality takes as fetishistic a view of the concept as the concept does in interpreting itself naively in its own domain: in either case it is regarded as a self-sufficient totality over which philosophical thought has no power. In truth, all concepts, even the philosophical ones, refer to nonconceptualities, because concepts on their part are moments of the reality that requires their formation, primarily for the control of nature. (and subsequently control over humans, example of the author) What conceptualization appears to be from within, to oen engaged in it – the predominance of its sphere, without which nothing is known – must not be mistaken for what it is in itself. Such a semblance of being-in-itself is conferred upon it by the motion that exempts it from reality, to which it is harnessed in turn.[135]

The context for this claim helps to reveal Adorno's specific sense by which he considers the failure of modern forms of thought, and hints at ethical and political consequences that result from such problematic state of human rationality. Before turning to a possible solution I find it necessary to elaborate further on Adorno's attempts to reconstruct the limitations of reductive accounts of human reason.

The question of the relationship between universal concepts and the object is central to Adorno's account of rationality—specifically, to whether his insights about the ideological, oppressive nature of our rationality can explain the ethical deficit of the contemporary moral subject. The passage quoted above seems to suggest that something takes place with the way we appropriate the world around us, and that this elementary process of appropriation is in itself a link between the ideological character of such a process, and coming to an understanding of what kind of consequences it has. Adorno himself conceives of thinking as an operation of identification—that is, of assigning the particular to a general class into which it falls. This process involves bringing something specific and particular (the manifold given to us through the senses) under something general (concepts). However, this way of thinking overlooks the simple fact that our cognitions unavoidably proceed by way of reduction, wherein we never cognize the thing in itself as such, but

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[135] Ibid., 11.

only how it appears to us - mediated by our spatio-temporal frame of reference (forms of intuition) and our conceptual scheme (categories).

This does not mean that Adorno argues that we could do without a conceptual scheme whatsoever. Adorno himself notes that to think is to use concepts and thereby to identify, and hence, the identity thinking of which he speaks frequently and critically seems to be the only thinking there could be. However, what Adorno thinks about identity thinking is more than just emphasizing the inevitable fact that thinking is conceptual. While all thinking intrinsically has this structure, only dominant instrumental form of rationality holds that the synthesis performed by conceptual subjugation of the sensible world actually captures its all essential properties. Arguing about the limits of such rationality, Adorno complains about something that is more fundamental. It is the thought that any form of being subsumed under concepts, even the most apt one, misses something about its object—and if this mismatch is not reflected upon, then thought unavoidably does injustice to objects of cognition. Instead of saying what something is, identity thinking says what it falls under—what it is an example or representative of, what it consequently is not, or what social powers want it to be. If we take into account that our perceptions of the other follow the same dynamics, Adorno's suspicion into the cognitive adequacy of our experience leads to general suspicion about our capacity to act morally regarding injustice done to others. If we translate this into our position as spectators of injustices or instances of suffering, it seems that we unavoidably apply reductive standards to such conditions, because in our perceptions we follow our own standpoint in evaluating circumstances that objects of our knowledge experience. These standards go right at the heart of problems that I have addressed earlier, namely, that we experience others in a way that is predetermined and as such subsumes complex social circumstances and the lives of others to values and an articulation that is in itself devoid of acknowledging the weight and standpoint of people who are the target of our cognitive and affective ascriptions.

To state the problem even more succinctly, for Adorno (as for Horkheimer and Marcuse) the conceptual schemes with which we operate given our historical and social embeddedness, are what might be called "historical apriori." We approach the world and think of it in certain ways. The way we are formed as subjects is always determined by social and cultural norms that ground social fabric which in turn constitutes our perceptions, judgments and determine our experiences. Both the object of experience and the way we experience it are shaped by the social conditions that we inhabit, and the forms of thought that sustain such conditions. As we have seen earlier, these ways in which our knowledge and experience are constituted take on a necessary and universal character within a social world, but historically speaking human beings have been (and still are) subject to a series of incommensurable frameworks that serve as ideological tools that legitimize and justify an unequal distribution of power within society and world at large. This is particularly acute within late modernity, articulated by a set of social circumstances and against the background of the difference of cognitive positions (and their dominance over one another), wherein the objects of our knowledge themselves are distorted and cannot reveal their true nature.[136]

Such a stance, however, highlights once again the interrelation between the social ontology of human beings, and the limits of our cognitive apparatus. The fact that our social world tends to produce consciousness in a way that is exclusionary and discriminatory, makes the process of witnessing a peculiar endeavor. This in itself explains why current humanitarian culture grounded in the culture of "witnessing" and compassion remains a borderline ethically questionable endeavor. The problem is, thus, not only that we face limits of our rational apparatus, but also that our perception and subsequent recognition of others ends up being caught in ideological claims. The jigsaw puzzle of the failures of our current humanitarianism is in our failure to see the world and our

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[136] See Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

place in it for what they are; this is not conducive to having the capacity for moral agency, because if our moral capacity depends on our epistemic capacity to recognize others and award them with specific ontological status by applying norms determined by social circumstances, this process not only results in us perpetuating the conditions we should criticize, but also places under question the nature and possibility of humanitarian agency. As Adorno puts it, "The individual who dreams of moral certainty is bound to fail, bound to incur guilt because being harnessed to the social order, he has virtually no power over the conditions whose cry for change appeals the moral ingenium."[137] In other words, the problem, in Adorno's view, does not only lie in our role in sustaining social conditions that should be changed (namely, our radically unjust social world), but rather that our moral humanitarian credentials will always be tarnished by whatever we do, or refrain from doing. We are implicated in a 'guilt context', and this implication in itself discloses the burden of our current humanitarian agency and principles, and the dramatic level of its selective and inappropriate application.[138]

Moreover, taking distorted cognitive dispositions and ideology as the main obstacles to realizing moral and political potential of humanitarian subject, Adorno ultimately strives to articulate and reflect ways in which we can escape the grip of historical and conceptual determinations of our subjectivity. Implicit in our current social configuration, these dispositions make it possible for social forces to sustain themselves by making subjects believe in the illusions that they inextricably embody and perpetuate. Lack of freedom is not blind fate or natural occurrence, regardless how much it might present itself in this way; it is a product of human choices and social conditions that constitute them. Reflection upon our predicament would be the first and crucial step towards realizing potentials that are attenuated by regressive tendencies of subject's inevitable entanglements with

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[137] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* 243.
[138] As I have argued in chapter 1, thinking about freedom leads Adorno to politics, not merely to a morality for individuals. In this sense it becomes a collective problem. If freedom requires a free society, then the quest for freedom requires the quest for a free society and so in itself becomes a political quest. (Adorno 2001, *176*; Adorno 2005, *299*).

power. We are so caught up in a web of material and cognitive determinations that acknowledging obligatory force of the suffering of others remains beyond what we are individually capable of doing.

Non – Identity and Constellations

The conclusion we should draw from this is not that all thinking is illegitimate; rather, that the difficulty, for our purposes, is that the assumption of the reductive rationality and unavoidable reductive features of our experience (however much that assumption is attenuated by Adorno's acknowledgment of the contingency of subjectivity and its agency) arguably places insuperable cognitive obstacles on Western participants in humanitarian context. Put differently, Adorno's philosophical commitment to understanding distorted cognitive capacities as the outcome of processes of social development in modernity, positions the modern subject at odds with professed needs and challenges of an ethically sensitive world. The way in which Adorno attempts to respond to this kind of challenge is by discerning object of thought that is decentered, historically conscious, attuned to the fact of pluralism, and recognized in its specific particularity despite all forms of identification. As he puts it: "To change this direction of conceptuality, to give it a turn toward nonidentity, is the hinge of negative dialectics. Insight into the constitutive character of the nonconceptual in the concept would end the compulsive identification which the concept brings unless halted by such reflection. Reflection upon its own meaning is the way out of the concept's seeming being – in – itself as a unity of meaning."[139]

When used to analyze relations of cognitive accounts of oppression and domination, this way of conceptualizing thinking, according to Adorno, implies that what is inherently missed in the object is called variously 'the non-identical' or 'the non-conceptual.' As formulated, the central idea behind Adorno's claim is that there is always a remainder that we should be aware off when we

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[139] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* 12.

apply our concepts to the world around us and other people. When we contrast this claim with what for me seem to be the foundations of modern epistemology (and philosophy in general), it seems that philosophical tradition thinks that the world is rational, so long as we look at it in a sufficiently rational way. The danger in this assumption, however, is that instead of knowing the world, we know only what we bring to this process of ascribing knowledge. In other words, instead of knowledge of something other than thought and its categories, we might be saddled with a big tautology. This is what is going on in our perception of others: we see in them what we want to see, or rather our knowledge about them always takes place at the intersection of individual values and social circumstances that condition them. Thus, the mistake of identity thinking is not that it involves identification and concepts – all thinking does this inevitably – rather that it rests on the assumption, whether explicitly or not, that the outside world is completely and immediately accessible to such process of human reasoning.

Insofar as our perceptions and understanding of others is from the start exiguous in its capacity to articulate complex manifold of features, it is not immediately clear how can we change this discursive performance in a way that would unseal the grip of social conditions, and the relations of power that loom within. With reference to Adorno's insights, our cognitive dispositions do not sufficiently attend to the fact that identifying always involves disregarding what is non-identical and incommensurable in the particular object of our thinking. It thereby violates a commitment inherent in its conception of concepts itself: concepts are directed towards capturing what they are not. "Nonidentity is the secret telos of identification." Adorno writes, "It is the part that can be salvaged; the mistake in traditional thinking is that identity is taken for the goal. The force shatters the appearance of identity is the force of thinking: the use of "it is" undermined the form of that appearance, which remains inalienable just the same. Dialectically, cognition of nonidentity lies also in the fact that this very cognition identifies – that it identifies to a greater

extent, and in other ways, than identitarian thinking. This cognition seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself. The more relentlessly our identitarian thinking besets its object, the farther will it take us from the identity of the object? Under its critique, identity does not vanish but undergoes a qualitative change. Elements of affinity – of the object itself to the thought of it – come to live in identity."[140]

What Adorno considers as the main deficiency of human rationality is that predominant cognitive model does not consider as a problem its disregard of what cannot really be subjugated and conceptualized. What's worse, since such a cognitive model of thinking does not consider what is left out as essential about the object, or rather it is not conceived or recognized as essential, we are left with an ideological understanding of the world and its entities. We have seen in previous chapters that most of our perception of others unfold under certain evaluative frameworks that often reduce objects of our perception to our representations. This not only leaves our knowledge of others incomplete and false, but also creates background wherein ontological formation and recognition of other people takes properties of sociopolitical manipulation that serves intersts of power. What we have seen is that such processes of objection assume a certain image that simultaneously determines what is essential about objects and about the ways they are accessible to us. Adorno, of course, questions this understanding. There are deep problems with ways in which our comprehension of the "essential" are often just a mask for the formation of the other that generalizes and locates her within already predetermined horizon of values. This not only often conceals marginalization and oppression of those whom we conceive alien and unwanted, but also keeps us in a state of lethargy because our own reflective capacities obscure rather than illuminate

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[140] Ibid., 149.

relations of power that cause and sustain unjust conditions. This by itself does not show that

essential reality has its own nature; rather, that our comprehension of others and social conditions

can, in the end, be just a manipulating fiction – i.e. an ideology.

Claiming universality for this understanding of rationality thus involves claiming universality

for a Eurocentric view of the world that has historically served as veil to conceal and justify ongoing

domination of Non-Europeans. Adorno draws this predicament of European modernity and

contests the sense of identity in which the modern understanding of the world traditionally

rationalized its claims for universal validity. No matter how much thinking does not seem to involve

a privilege, it ultimately reflects power. As he writes,

> Identity is the primal form of ideology. We relish it as adequacy to the thing it
> suppresses; adequacy has always been subjection to dominant purposes and, in that
> sense, its own contradiction. After the unspeakable effort it must have cost our
> species to produce the primacy of identity even against itself, man rejoices and basks
> in his conquest by turning it into the definition of the conquered thing; what has
> happened to it must be presented, by the thing, as its "in-itself". Ideology's power of
> resistance to enlightenment is owed to its complicity with identifying thought, or
> indeed with thought at large. The ideological side of thinking shows in its permanent
> failure to make good on the claim that he non-I is finally the I: the more the I thinks,
> the more perfectly will it find itself debased into an object. Identity becomes the
> authority for a doctrine of adjustment, in which the object – which the subject is
> supposed to go by – repays the subject for what the subject has done to it.[141]

Of course, this connection between modern cognitive model of thinking and its inner structure to

identify does not yet fully justify the claim that thinking constitutive of contemporary human agent

can be considered unable to stop being ideological. Arguing for that would make a contemporary

agent incapable of escaping ideological grips of modern rationality, and making such a claim would

take any form of resistance away from human agents what is not what Adorno ultimately wants to

argue or achieve: namely, to reach thinking that validates its own rational standards. "The critique of

ideology" he writes, "is thus not something peripheral and intra-scientific, not something limited to

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[141] Ibid., 148.

the objective mind and to the products of the subjective mind. Philosophically, it is central; it is critique of the constitutive consciousness itself."[142] This means that such critique of constitutive aspects of our cognitive dispositions depends on an effort to reconstruct intuitive, pre-theoretical knowledge of subjects whose agency is deemed constitutive of the hierarchies that are consequently proved to be the most effective and long-standing instrument of social domination. Insofar as the subject's cognitive dispositions articulate and sustain social identities that are inherently product of social relations that are being configured as relations of domination, the first step in overcoming this mutually reinforcing relation between social conditions and cognitive dispositions is to disentangle one from another.

Given that thinking will involve conceptualizing (and hence always be a too blunt of an instrument), there will always be a mismatch between the determination and coherence in the object, and the determination and coherence that comes out of the subjective synthesis: 'While doing violence to the object of its synthesis, our thinking heads a potential that waits in the object, and it unconsciously obeys the idea of making amends to the piece for what it has done."[143] Such making of amends would require a reflection on thinking itself, and the problematic nature of its orientation towards identity what Adorno calls *the second reflection*. It would require a reorientation of thinking away from fitting the world into conceptual schemes and others in already predetermined values within an evaluative frame constituted by the subject towards giving the object priority.[144] Indeed, in *Minima Moralia* Adorno even speaks of adhering to a 'morality of thinking':

> Even when sophistication is understood in the theoretically acceptable sense of that which widens horizons, passes beyond the isolated phenomenon, considers the whole, there is still a cloud in the sky. It is just this passing-on and being unable to linger, this tacit assent to the primacy of the general over the particular, which constitutes not only the deception of idealism in hypostazing concepts, but also its inhumanity, that has no sooner grasped the particular than it reduces it to a through-

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[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid., 30.
[144] Ibid., 183 – 8.

station, and finally comes all too quickly to terms with suffering and death for sake of a reconciliation occurring merely in reflection – in the last analysis, the bourgeois coldness that is only too willing to underwrite the inevitable.[145]

Although Adorno correctly (and dramatically) objects to this understanding of thinking as an immanent reduction and equation of truth with immutability, a wider tragic aspect of identity thinking (of which this equation is one characteristic) should form the basis of critique of distinctively pathological tendencies of modernity that still plague our postcolonial, humanitarian present. If thinking is to avoid collapsing into ideology, it must draw its normative motivation from within the existing social world, not from an abstract metaphysical account as such. One can capture this stance well if we reflect on his understanding of non-rational cognitive experiences that are rooted in somatic awareness of the finitude and contingencies of human vulnerability.[146] Such experiences (e.g. suffering of living beings) may provide impulses for thinking that may result in heightened reflexivity and increased individual and collective decentralization from historically known forms of control and discursive cognitive models from which they draw their validity and justification.[147] This reflexivity, in turn, facilitates a willingness to have one's own commitments destabilized in the encounter with others and their own diverse forms of life. Along these lines, for Adorno, thinking itself, at least when it is liberated from its reductive tendencies, can capture more about the object than the *identity thinking* ever could. In fact, if what is essential about objects is not their enduring or fixed character given through social and political determinations, but rather their changing historical role, the way to think about them, then, is to encounter the Other-Object with a

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[145] Adorno, *Minima Moralia,* 74.

[146] Even in the face of increased dominance of identity thinking in our modern world, that is not the only way to relate to our environment and others. While reality might never be fully captured in human cognition, we have at our disposal more means than just subsuming particulars under concepts. Human experience also depends on the forms of experience that are not fully conceptualized, but rather immediate and somatic. While it is true that most of human beings experience consists in rationalization and internal differentiation of our world and other people, Adorno remains confident that it also consists of non-rational experiences which Adorno ties with human suffering and art that triggers or expresses them.

[147] One difficulty with this claim is what I have identified as the crux of this project, namely, what if we are so deeply embedded in our cognitive model that we are unable to relate with objects of dehumanization. This still does not address selectivism in acknowledging and addressing instances of human suffering and ways in which our public responds to knowledge of same. In other words, this still doesn't answer why some lives matter and some not.

specific epistemic, meta-normative stance, which demands the acceptance and acknowledgment of contingency of our own epistemic, normative position, as well as the suspension of the assumption that our epistemic position is superior or all-encompassing.

Adorno's way to achieve this pivots on two fulcrums: it both addresses epistemological (and ethical) primacy of the object, and at the same time offering conceptual strategy for allowing that primacy. First, in conjunction with his critique of identity thinking Adorno insists that the priority of object is not in itself the denial of the necessity of the subject's contribution to knowledge acquisition. Rather, it is a way of correcting the tendency of a distorted cognitive model to ignore its reductive processes and ideological contribution. This has implications not only in the ways in which we perceive and articulate our environment, but it also redefines the terms under which we conceive others (and subsequently our acknowledgment of obligation and our approach to conditions that they experience). This has major implications for our current rethinking of what responsibility and global morality is. Adorno's careful exposition of the relation between epistemology and ethics brings him to the position wherein he elicits in us that only through subject's own self-reflection and effort to detach from the evaluative framework, can objects or the other fully unfold their potential. Whatever is contained in the others-objects themselves requires human subjectivity to be voiced, either through acknowledging their own needs or creating adequate space for them to be heard. In this way, the vulnerability of others is unlocked by the subject by acknowledging the historical dynamics and relational character of the objects and conditions they cognize.[148] And yet, there are no guarantees. Interpretations can miss their object or fail to be illuminating; only the successful ones realize the difficult balancing act of achieving obligatory force without a difficult hermeneutic system between society and subjectivity it engenders. This cannot happen by stubbornly applying our own categories, values or norms to them. Objects require interpretation and this, in turn, requires the

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[148] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics,* 52.

subject to move beyond her own epistemic situatedness in order not to reinforce fixed

categorization of her own norms and cultural standards, but to remain open to more fluid forms of

gathering concepts into relational clusters.

One way to achieve this, Adorno believes, is to employ a multitude of concepts, while at the

same time acknowledging the diversity of historical contexts that they are embedded in, and

reflexively bring them into what he, following Benjamin, calls *constellations*. The reference to Walter

Benjamin's notion of constellations helps Adorno reconstruct modern thought forms by taking this

epistemological metaphor, and bringing into focus the temporal and historical tensions between

concepts and objects that they are referring to. Adorno describes the mediating function of

constellations in terms of discontinuous dialectical critical mediation, and emphasizes the abrupt

irruptive appearance of the constellation as a dialectical image that disrupts the homogenized

continuum of history. As he puts it,

> The constellation illuminates the specific side of the object, the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden… It lends objectivity to them by the relation into which it puts the concepts, centered about a thing. Language thus serves the intention of the concept to express completely what it means. By themselves, constellations represent from without what the concept has cut away within: the "more" which the concept is equally desirous and incapable of being. By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object's interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking.[149]

The basic significance of this conceptual strategy lies in its connecting or mediating power—that is,

in its potential to bring together material objects with overarching discursive narratives, without

reducing one to the other. In other words, the constellations become a conceptual tool that rethinks

and situates phenomena in a way in which detaches them from predominant narratives and by being

sensitive to their configuration, these phenomena gain a new kind of actuality.

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[149] Ibid., 162.

The central notion here is the reflexive disclosing effect of decoupling objects from their sedimentary meanings and ideological representations. Such a process enables the subject to comprehend a broader conception of social conditions and other people, and at the same time preventing the singular specificity of the historical phenomenon from being dominated, eclipsed or incorporated in reductive accounts of articulation. The distance between the two—phenomenon and concept—is mediated and awarded actuality in terms of the configuration that they have in a specific historical and geopolitical context. Drawing on social genesis and the dynamics of cultural and geopolitical change, Adorno explains the significance of this strategy as follows: "The history locked in the object can only be delivered by a knowledge mindful of the historic positional value of the object in its relation to other objects – by the actualization and concentration of something which is already known and is transformed by that knowledge. Cognition of the object in its constellation is cognition of the process stored in the object. As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but to a combination of numbers."[150] The ideal toward which this reconfiguration of thinking aims is disclosure of ways in which discursive framing is related to historical objects, and exactly through their configuration and discursive interrelationship they receive meaning and recognition. This is not a gradual process of recurrent synthesis; it is much more discontinuous. It is a dialectic whose interrelations and tensions are realized all at once, in a single moment, as if through its continued unfolding. In other words, object of our knowledge is not simply a result of the work of immersion or reconstruction, but rather the collection and juxtaposition of heterogeneous historical elements with one another and with the specific situatedness of the subject who is doing the thinking.

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[150] Ibid., 163.

In the end, at least as far as Adorno's understanding of constellations goes, if our understanding of events that result in human suffering aims to detach from reductive accounts of evaluative frameworks and ontological differentiation that separates humanity from privileged and those inferior, it should be located at the intersection of tensions and relations between different historical processes. Thus, to understand conditions that some human beings endure, we need to understand how these people are situated in an epistemic and ontological vortex that positions the articulation of their lives against the backdrop of broader historical and political phenomena: violence, environmental changes, influence of global market, religious radicalism, colonial past, humanitarian selectivism and various symbolic manifestations of power like xenophobia, sexism, and racism. Whether one agrees with the details of this strategy, Adorno's insights help us to think differently about objects of our knowledge. This not only helps us understand all the pitfalls of current moral agency of the "Western" humanitarian subject, but helps us also understand that as much as objects of our knowledge, we are also product of the same relations of power and social, gendered and racist classifications that pervade different dimensions of our existence. With this said, one should not be ignorant of the fact that though our ontological and epistemological genesis stems from the same set of ideological processes that positions different individuals within the same modality of global power, one must be clear about differences in these positions, and the obligations that such differences entail. Recognizing such differences and remaining aware and conscientious, however privileged our position may be, allows us to see it is as historical and deeply connected to its genesis; it is relational, and not isolated with regards to other people. It is changing and inherently tensional; it is dynamically connected to other objects, and as such not something that can't be changed through social reorganization of our ethical and political faculties. Social emancipation and abolition of an unjust world are processes that explore the relationship between different objects in their historical complexity, and as such they receive actualization in constant tension between our

cognitive, ethical and political agency and social conditions that are directly or indirectly the result of relations of power that we must be able to contest.

Towards a New Humanism

In response to the kinds of concerns about the entanglement of our moral dispositions with power relations that I have raised throughout this chapter, Adorno and Levinas offer a radically different way of thinking about the ethical agency in relation to the liberal discursive construction that dictates how Western agents understand their moral obligations towards distant others. Both Adorno and Levinas reject any form of universalistic, abstract moral laws, but they do so in order to critically problematize the present. We have seen that the central puzzle of current humanitarianism is to bridge the gap between uneven and unequal representation, the knowledge such representations invoke, and the subsequent moral actions and omissions. Through these complex issues, I have argued that the understanding of responsibility and the closely related account of subjectivity, as we have seen from their philosophies, offer substantial resources for solving this puzzle. Offering a different way of thinking about subject's autonomy (grounded in an account of vulnerability and intersubjectivity as a common feature of human subjectivity), rethinking our understanding of what responsibility means with the primacy of the other, and giving an evaluation of our cognitive dispositions while at the same time charting necessary ways in which non-instrumental relation with the objects of knowledge can take place, both Adorno and Levinas, ultimately offer an image of ethics that draws its normative content from within the existing social world what seems necessary in face of today's moral challenges.

Although there are disagreements regarding the priorities and relationship between cognition and ethics, for both thinkers these are entwined with material conditions that result in human suffering. Though for Levinas the ethical imperative famously precedes cognition, and for Adorno

ethics is founded in a non-instrumental (non-violent) relationship between thought and the object of thinking, for both ethics ultimately means an overcoming of difficulties tied to the possibility of the non-violent comportment with the others (Levinas with his notion of responsibility, and Adorno with his notion of non-identity). As a result, the entire motivational structure for undertaking philosophy and comprehension of moral commitment shifts. By their accounts, their philosophies can be seen as an attempt to rethink the problem of the other and rethink what kind of implications that has on our understanding of alterity and what kind of moral implications derive from it. As incommensurable and irreducible to its conceptual reduction and forms of articulation and representation, the other ought to be resistant to all forms of generalization despite tendencies to systematically drain her of her moral status due ideological constructs that end up in reduction of her humanity. If we want to extract ethical and political implications from it, Levinas' and Adorno's worries are reflected in the fact that process of subsuming the particular into the universal is in itself a form of violence that shares the same drive that reaches its practical apotheosis in exclusion, dehumanization, or murder, wherein perpetrators dehumanize their victims to the point where they are nothing more than embodiments of their ethnicity, race or gender. This leads Adorno and Levinas to articulate the limitations of current political subjectivity, wherein both of them express impossibility of ethical agents to have a non-instrumental conduct with others – a metaphysical impossibility for Levinas and sociological impossibility for Adorno.

With this said, the central puzzle of Adorno's and Levinas' work is how to bridge the gap between epistemic reductionism and motivation for ethical action on the one hand, and how they actually accomplish their aim of putting their respective theories on a secure normative footing, on the other. Leaving aside straightforward Kantian constructivism (and Neo-Hegelianism), Adorno and Levinas maintain that rather than abstract moral laws, the concrete real conditions of the world ought to have normative authority. In other words, our moral attention should be redirected from

abstract ethical argumentation to the injustices and suffering that are embedded in practices of social actors, institutions and our modern form of life in general. A fundamental ethical posture that comes from their theories rely on the form of knowledge made possible by that very ethical posture and our critical capacities that are moved by material reference in suffering of others. We can ignore this material reference of human suffering, but such ignorance always comes with an effort. To be harmed, excluded, murdered, tortured, raped, etc. are permanent possibilities of our world woven into the dynamic of historical realities that are the choices social actors have made. We can no longer escape the blame for the possibility of pathological social phenomena and exclusionary practices such as racism, sexism, etc. and the temptation to endorse them, because both are born in the dynamics of our own being as non-reciprocal determination of the other which is precisely the kernel of liberal accounts of freedom that both authors want to overcome. Living in an age where values are turned upside-down, the most one can do is to disclose pathologies of our own upbringing and move beyond the limitations that such a reality imposes on us. Given the necessity of such a task, the question remains if we can do so.

I take both Levinas and Adorno to answer this worry with a commitment to reforming the type of reductive thinking that leads to atrophy towards others and the horrors that they endure. Both thinkers exhort us to remain attentive that objects of our cognitions exceed the thoughts directed at them. For both of them, a reductive account of cognition is a form of violence, and it is entwined with conditions and agency that results in exclusion and suffering of others. The limit of conceptual knowledge marks the source of the other's articulation and meaning, with Levinas more inclined to described the other as overflowing the limits imposed by the subject's situatedness in reductive accounts of ontology and epistemology, and Adorno likely to emphasize that the epistemic recognition of our cognitive limits can liberate the Other from shackles of reductive thinking and social conditions that limit range of our comportments towards them. While for Levinas the ethical

imperative of innate human vulnerability and dependence precedes cognition and ontological determination, Adorno asks rather a different question: how do relations of knowledge and power both structure our experience of ourselves and of the world while providing resources for their overcoming? His account of the causal relationships between identity thinking, instrumental rationality, and domination contextualizes alterity in a manner unavailable to Levinasian ethical phenomenology. Perhaps most importantly, Adorno pieces together how identity thinking enables the coldness necessary to compete within the ruthless struggles of capitalism and ongoing suffering that it engenders.

In the end, our active effort to overcome the limitations of epistemic and ontological norms that guide our recognition of others can help us direct our articulation of others in a way that will help them reveal themselves as inevitable objects of our moral concern. The success of such moral solicitation depends on the success of creating space wherein the other can present herself independent of any thematization. Cultural conditioning too often drowns out the call of distant others, so that their voices go unheard. As I understand the lesson drawn from Adorno's philosophy, if we do not first approach ways in which we comprehend others, we will not be able to recognize them on their own terms, and the Western subject will remain locked in a self-identifying imaginary. Only if we detach from reductive forms of thinking, we will be able to approach others ethically, and be aware of the responsibilities that our position in the world demands from us (position of privilege, and historical circumstances that have led to inhumane conditions). When the others are approached in a dialectical constellation, the subject's judgment of the capacities of the other is suspended, and our thinking focuses on the complex moral and political contexts prior to our inevitable categorization of the other. While thematization cannot be completely suspended, since all our perceptions are culturally conditioned, apprehending the other through multiple angles and possible interpretation can help us encounter them in their humanity and historical locatedness.

We need to invite the other into a reciprocal relationship, and in this relationship the other can teach us something about ourselves too. They can teach us something new if we invite them and breach these limits that our epistemic and ontological reality create. The recognition of the other depends not only on her representation, as we see from previous chapters, but rather on our openness to her, to our welcoming of her. If we question the self as a self-determining subject, and an agent who is determining the selves of others through a process of self-reflection, then Adorno seems right to see the second reflection as a tool of emancipation against social and individual constraints. In a similar fashion, I conclude with the words of Levinas that echo Adorno's concern, "Freedom consists in knowing that freedom is in peril. But to know or to be conscious is to have time to avoid and forestall the instant of inhumanity. It is this perpetual postponing of the hour of treason – infinitesimal difference between man and non-man – that implies the disinterestedness of goodness.[151]

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[151] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 35.

CONCLUSION

TOWARDS A NEW ETHICS OF SOLIDARITY

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that by invoking human vulnerability and suffering as the moral cornerstones of solidarity, humanitarianism collapses important political questions of responsibility and (global) justice with moralizing discourses, around which the Western public is called to organize a charitable action towards the misfortune of Non-Western others. Ironically enough, compassion and the representation of human suffering—the two structural aspects of the humanitarianism—have failed to mobilize and sustain moral dispositions to act on the vulnerability of others. We have seen from preceding chapters that compassion cultivates a flawed disposition of solidarity, which often ignores the historical injustices and contemporary inequalities sustained by a dehumanizing logic of the global market and neoliberalism (this is most evident in the widespread indifference and moral selectivism of the Western humanitarian public). Whereas the analysis of compassion discloses the limits of liberal discourses of care and responsibility, the suspicion towards public imagery of human suffering (and knowledge that such imagery forms and articulates) raises another set of problems. In the case of media representations that expose Western subjects to human vulnerability and gruesome atrocities, the extent to which such portrayals make available the normative discourses that subtly regulate moral and political threshold of the Western spectator, such practices are ultimately instruments of power. Amnesty appeals, celebrity activism, social media activism, journalistic reporting and academic reiterations all set the frame that articulates and enables the encounter with vulnerable others, and yet what these practices actually do is impose a homogeneous ideology of solidarity that ultimately fails to move Western public beyond narcissistic and increasingly corporate interests.

By analyzing the entanglement of moral impulses with the economy and ways in which such entanglement is manifested through the diverse mechanisms that form what we can understand as

our humanitarian present, I sought to demonstrate how humanitarianism has capitalism as its necessary condition of possibility. In other words, humanitarianism manifests all communicative, representational and institutionalized paradoxes and ideological tendencies of neoliberalism, which ultimately thrives on inequality, suffering, militarism and moral selectivism. As we have seen from previous chapters, these paradoxes and ideological tendencies ultimately disclose two intertwined moments of social processes that constitute and sustain humanitarian agency, namely, epistemic and ontological negotiations within a representational structure that systematically differentiates those lives who are worthy of Western concern, from those lives that are silenced and rendered invisible. Thus, rather than directing my analysis at limits of current international law and international institutions, avoiding a naïve denunciation of humanitarian management has helped me focus on the inner mechanisms of the production of "humanity" under inhumane conditions of an unjust global order. This is why reflecting on calls for cultivating compassionate dispositions towards distant others discloses the underlying logic of economic domination of all spheres of social life, wherein solidarity is not only rendered a matter of consumerist choice, but it has also prioritized the pursuit of self-assertion and pleasures of the Western identity over the morality of otherness and justice.

This pervasive instrumentalization (and commodification) of solidarity, however, does not occur in a vacuum. The formation and articulation of knowledge about suffering of others take place in public sites wherein images, news broadcasts, diverse "artistic" renderings of human deprivation on social media, etc. are entangled with relations of power that deploy epistemic and ontological mechanisms of othering according to the hegemonic logic of Eurocentrism. Thus attempts to ground normative commitments through public renderings of lives situated in a spiral of historical (and present) injustices not only emerge within a particular discursive and historical context, but they also unavoidably realize exclusionary structures of power that form and sustain identity and existence of the West at the cost of the rest of the world. According to this understanding, when we

reflect on humanitarian efforts we can see that processes aimed at helping humanize victims (albeit still selectively), ultimately contribute to the reproduction of global hierarchies that recall the lethal legacy of colonialism and imperialism.

By giving very complex accounts of how such hierarchies form and sustain our agency in a way that prevents us from looking at others without the reductive lens of Eurocentrism, I have tried to go beyond a figure of the humanitarian victim, and problematize the subjectivity of the spectator. Instead of despairing for the inhumanity of perpetrators and social conditions that their agency brings into existence, my intention was to call into question the historically invariable role of bystanders. Similarly entangled in ontological formation and defined by, often, unexamined certainties of 'objective' knowledge that aims to vindicate the history of the West (and present choices that West makes), the bystander often becomes arbitrarily collectivized in the hegemonic figure of the Western actor, who remains blind and ignorant about her own role in perpetuating historical inequalities and injustices done to others whose agency is commonly ignored or rendered insignificant. This is why I have strongly defended a return towards traditional accounts of ethics and epistemology of otherness portrayed through work of Levinas and Adorno. The reconstruction of their respective theories has shown that regardless of how much the subjectivity remains a product of historically layered inequalities and injustices, our cognitive dispositions remain a vehicle of emancipatory social processes. Taking into account that one of the claims throughout this dissertation was that our cognitive capacities guide our affective reactions, but also that they are determined and sustained by ideological powers within society, Levinas' and Adorno's critiques of reductive accounts of ontology and epistemology has a subsequent important emancipatory implications. By incorporating a critique of epistemic elements and placing somatic impulses in regard to evidence of human vulnerability at the forefront of political agency, both thinkers envision a moral force that helps us redefine the sense of responsibility, individual engagement, and solidarity

among people. This is the reason why Adorno insisted that answering the calls of human misery is only possible if we cultivate our capacities in a way to make that feeling sensitive to determinations and limitations that remain an inherent aspect of our political culture. Any attempt to ground ethics in universal principles will be too abstract and too weak to guide our actions amidst different geopolitical contexts. Furthermore, it will separate morality from the non-discursive, materialistic motive, which Adorno thinks is necessary for a successful moral response. For Adorno, the role of judgment remains important, but this judgment would not be about the application of a principle, but rather a recognition of which core features of deplorable crimes against humanity are present in specific situations. This way moral agency receives the kind of foothold in human beings that universalism of Enlightenment culture and Kantian ethics evidently lack.

Now, how should we understand this claim? One thing is to demand that our moral deliberation should not prioritize abstract norms, but the other is that instead of resorting to the guidance of moral principles we should look at structural causes and manifestation of human suffering and our experience of them. But what if we don't see (or don't want to see) and are not moved by the suffering that takes place in front of our own eyes? What if we simply don't give in to the tragedies that are for the most part caused by the choices and actions of a violent and oppressive global order? In a word, what if we resist that invitation to imagine? As we have already seen, witnessing is in itself a fragile process wherein the self-validation of the spectator simultaneously leads to the reduction of the victims, often diminishing their status to an instance unworthy of moral concern or political action. Dehumanization and the othering of people depend upon the capacity of the public to remain insensitive and indifferent towards their agonies. In that sense, even if we are in a position to experience tragedies and struggles of others, and reflect upon conditions that cause and sustain such agonies, it does not follow from this that such knowledge would, in fact, lead to a lasting practical commitment among bystanders. While Adorno speaks of identification with others

and their plight, of solidarity with tormentable bodies,[152] such solidarity involves the capacity to

identify with the suffering of another human being to the extent of reacting with the same

immediacy and spontaneity to her suffering as to our own. How is that even possible? When

considered in light of critical ideas that have guided my analysis here, one can wonder if Adorno's

and Levinas' insistence on this inevitable moral recoil in spectators of human suffering escapes the

same criticisms that their theories have helped me articulate in relation to present humanitarian

practices. With respect to their arguments, one can argue that they may simply not be convincing

enough, and that postmodern humanitarian public is desensitized far beyond any moral threshold

that Levinas and Adorno find sufficient for the constitution of moral and political agency in an

attempt to challenge phenomena of an unjust world.[153]

In response to this criticism, it seems to me that both Levinas and Adorno could simply

reply how such an objection itself only confirms the problematic forms of life and reductive

ontologies and epistemologies of an inhumane global order that they see as the main obstacle for

recognizing and exercising our innate moral and political responsibilities towards others. Their call

for leaving robust subjugating attachments of capitalism in itself invokes the possibility of

overcoming constitutive aspects of "modern" ways of life and social organizations that rationalize it,

whether those be understood in terms of knowledge, culture, technology, consumerism or political

organization. Despite insurmountable obstacles that an inherently inhumane system places upon

subjects, the system itself confronts us with pathologies whose sheer existence generates an

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[152] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 286, 203-4.

[153] Throughout this dissertation we have seen that neither physical impulses or knowledge about the suffering of others seem reliable as a moral compass – they can be manipulated and distorted. Indeed, racism and sexism might operate less at the level of belief and rational deliberation than at the emotional level by mobilizing certain strong reactions like disgust, anger or resentment against the groups in question. Adorno is very aware of the phenomenon in question – much of what he says about anti-Semitism is about how repression of impulses leads to the projection of one's fears and anger on others, which in turn leads to aggression against them. He also admits that we need to respond to these phenomena with reflection-inducing critical questioning so as, among other things, to unveil the mechanisms at place in the psychological manipulation and social distortions of political events and lives of others. Indeed, the physical impulses of that sort that Adorno has in mind are not completely unconnected to critical theoretical insight. They have legitimacy but become one-sided and potentially problematic, if there is no reflective scrutiny. The only worry that remains is will agents be moved to critically reflect upon their choices and others, or not?

imperative to interrogate causes and mechanisms that sustain them (regardless if that imperative is acknowledged or not). Disclosing ways in which contingent historical processes result in mechanisms of subjugation, domination and control, help us also become aware of the entanglement of our moral faculties with power relations, and how this entanglement constantly rejuvenates historical and contemporary pathologies. In other words, it enables us to cultivate dispositions to reflect on present regressive tendencies of an order that mistakes its own creations for incommensurable necessities, and by doing that helps us break through its own limits, simultaneously gesturing towards a society that would reconcile present inequalities and injustices. Implicit in Levinas' and Adorno's survey of the reductive inclination of our thinking and inevitable complicity with structures of domination, then, is an emancipatory potential of human thinking. This potential is realized first by recognizing its own limits, and second, by revealing the entire framework of social powers that are responsible for regressive tendencies of neoliberalism and human agency that it engenders.

Thus, going back to the relation between the evidence of human suffering and our moral obligations, what lessons for the solidarity with others can we draw from this analysis of our epistemic dispositions, and how they guide our moral and political faculties? Levinas' and Adorno's insistence on the moral-political imperative of sheer human vulnerability and somatic reactions that exposure to instances of human suffering entails, seems to serve a twofold purpose here. First, somatic reactions escape rationalization, and as such avoid pitfalls of an atrophied reason— simultaneously pushing us to reflect upon causes that result in such conditions. Second, such impact on our faculties and subsequent reflection on the meaninglessness of human suffering at the same time illuminates pathologies and limits of our agency, thus, enabling us to transcend them. When we consider this in light of critiques of liberal notions of humanitarianism that I have developed throughout this dissertation, such a reading of Levinas and Adorno could itself be seen as a call to or

gesture of solidarity with the suffering of the marginalized subjects who have suffered so much due to historical and present injustices perpetuated in name of progress and lethal ideals of monological worldview of Eurocentrism. Taking into account that solidarity and moral engagement with others depend on the humanity that we recognize in the appeals that their inhumane conditions make on us, the first step towards a new form of solidarity is the disenchanting enchantment of the humanitarian imaginary and values that are created by an environment that thrives on exclusion and historical inequalities. Hence, as Adorno reminds us, one cannot distinguish the analysis of morality from questions of the proper form of politics. Earlier chapters highlighted mechanisms under which something becomes human and how that "humanity" gets lost. The problem with solidarity today is that human suffering and human vulnerability are mediated by processes that, rather than closing gaps, create and sustain distance between different cultural, moral and political perspectives. In order to approach the Other ethically, such a process for Adorno and Levinas requires recognizing not only the vulnerability of the face that stares at us, or the violently subjugated particularity of the non-identical, but also the mask that conceals its moral appeal and an account of reason that ultimately dehumanizes the other into an object of our perception and environment that mercilessly negotiates her ontological (and subsequently moral) value. Thus, such a critical notion of solidarity suggests that the blind faith of our political culture in compassion alone is an insufficient condition for grounding an ethics of solidarity insofar as, without critical judgment and self-critique, our affective dispositions tend to collapse either into self-absorption or voyeurism – both narcissistic engagements with distant others that fuel injustices rather than overcoming them.

By indicating different layers of epistemic and ontological determinations that reduce the European capacity to include Non-Europeans in their sociopolitical environment, I wanted to show how questions of humanitarianism and solidarity cannot be properly addressed without raising questions of justice and responsibility. If we want to discuss the reach and limits of the existing

humanism, it is necessary to interrogate the implications of our situatedness, wherein every

normative negotiation takes place within a normative frame that enables epistemic and ontological

negotiation of different social groups and different cultural contexts. Thus, one consequence of my

analysis is that forms of structural injustices such as racism, sexism, homophobia, xenophobia

cannot be addressed without addressing ways in which they are normalized and sustained through

various discursive narratives that are part of broader social imaginaries and the cognitive and

affective deficiencies that sustain them. Analyzing historical, social and global injustices without

addressing specifically epistemic forms of violence and oppression, would fail to address and

overcome the complexity of such processes of domination. As we have seen from critical accounts

of Adorno and other social theorists, such epistemic forms of violence ultimately limit the capacity

of agents to escape the marginalization that occurs as an effect of the epistemic biases and epistemic

domination that each sustain, and reinforce, for each other. Drawing on their respective accounts, I

have identified different social phenomena that sustain such forms of exclusion. Each form of

oppression has its own manifestations and ways of targeting specific sociopolitical contexts and the

agency of individuals. Referring to the intertwining of cognitive deficiencies, material conditions and

lack of public interest to address social maladies, we have seen that these forms of oppression are

inevitable parts of the social structure of our globalized capitalist world, and as such should be a

primary target of an analysis of present humanitarianism and humanitarian agency.

Taking into account my findings in the second and third chapters, one can easily conclude

that there is no such thing as an epistemic innocence[154] because we always operate within grids of

intelligibility that determine what can be intelligible, and what is rendered invisible. I intentionally list

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[154] Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing." In *Hypatia* 26:2 (2011): 236 – 257. Kristie Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression." *Frontiers* 33:1 (2012): 24 – 47; Kristie Dotson, "Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression." *Social Epistemology* 28:2 (2014): 115-138; Maria Lugones, *Pilgramages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Oxford and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); Jose Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

these grids as plural because they are an inherent aspect of every culture and every discourse, regardless of how dominant or marginalized these discourses are. Retrospectively, looking at the exclusionary logic of Eurocentrism, the legacy of colonialism, and the forms of agency that echo and sustain them, I have referred to ways how the colonial "hangover" and present requirements of the market force humanitarianism to remain discursively confined within a dehumanizing and violent past—one plagued by domination, exploitation, and annihilation. Finally, by understanding the intertwining of epistemic and ontological processes in the background of our political and ethical deliberation, we must overcome reductive epistemic accounts that obscure their ties to concrete material conditions and to political choices that we and our governments make. At the very source of our current difficulties regarding the inclusion of subaltern others in Western European and North American societies, one can ultimately find failures in both basic human self-understanding and in the understanding of others. Such failures account for false ontological formations regarding others, and they show how our ethical and political agency often falls prey to cultural biases, the incommensurability of experiences, and the reductive, violent nature of mediation and ascription of knowledge towards epistemically disadvantaged agents such as refugees, immigrants, asylum seekers, etc. If our aim is to envision and create new forms of social relations between West and global South, we must stop relying on discursive and normative commitments to what is essentially an ethnocentric solidarity that imagines otherness and historicity from the position of a subject, that is ignorant of and indifferent to her own complicity and privilege.

Finally, we can now ask what remains of the idea of humanitarianism once we have taken into account the ideological tendencies and pathologies that I have outlined in preceding chapters. Far from offering a comprehensive guide to public action, this dissertation has modest emancipatory aims. Building upon the insights of philosophers and social theorists, it invites us to carefully consider how we may develop a kind of solidarity that enables persons to realize how and when

their sentiments become ideological and inappropriate. For these reasons, we may consider how the social imaginary of contemporary humanitarian culture is composed of ambivalent moral and political perspectives, which in turn rely on violence, the economy, and the media to inform and regulate how our epistemic practices govern articulation of others and how formation of their ontologies bears on political dispositions. Overcoming such determinations requires the difficult cognitive and affective work of trying to understand our constitution and to unlearn biases that are deeply couched in our knowledge and values. At the same time, we need to ensure that this does not jeopardize the autonomy, individuality, and dignity of less-fortunate others. This is not an easy task, because it requires us to surrender the epistemic and ontological spaces that we comfortably inhabit and to venture beyond our social immediacy.

The first step towards this goal is to add an epistemic dimension to the analyses of humanitarian crises and social exclusion and inclusion. This in turn demands civic engagement at a point of intervention, both individual and institutional. Humanitarian institutions and policies that are unable to provide guidance or to ethically and politically solve social circumstances in which epistemic exclusion occurs are insufficient, since they do not acknowledge the difficulties tied to the formation and support of public sentiment, and the articulation of opposing cultural perspectives. If public support for and successful management of displaced people depends on the capacity of social institutions to facilitate humanitarian intervention, then the capacities of its citizens to regard the cultural and racial diversity of refugees and migrants must achieve a point of shared meaningfulness; the development of social programs which would cultivate social imagination, compassion and tolerance towards cultural, gender, racial and ethnic diversity cannot develop otherwise. Of course this is not enough, because most of the effort falls back on the epistemic agency of individuals, and the fact that responsible epistemic agency carries with itself an obligation to resist epistemic biases. This obligation invokes many epistemic duties that mirror moral and political ones: to address and

fight arrogance, to be aware of limitations concerning how and what we know about ourselves and others, to facilitate reciprocal dialogue between different cultural positions, to resist epistemic vices, and to work on ameliorating epistemic habits and attitudes that are the main obstacle in the pursuit of epistemic (and social) justice.[155]

This form of epistemic activism engages us in different ways we can challenge epistemic violence and marginalization. By saying this, we should remain attentive to crucial limitations inherent in how we are situated in a specific culture and how our epistemic agency is vulnerable to epistemic vices associated with the dominant ways of producing knowledge. Yet, these constraints should not justify our apathy and pessimism. One way to challenge these hegemonic discursive regimes is to cause epistemic friction by contesting these overpowering narratives with alternative forms of knowledge and alternative forms of being.[156] In some cases, as in case of the humanitarian victims, refugees, and migrants, we are trying to empower the voices of these subjects, and this may require that we acknowledge them and create space where we can address different ways how can we think about them as subjects, and what it means to be a subject with a voice. Thus, epistemic activism engages in connecting different subjectivities with different discourses by uncoupling the understanding experiences of others from norms that often mirror our own evaluative tendencies. This, of course, demands that we form alliances that would help these people who have been excluded from using epistemic resources, and occupy a marginalized position within the epistemological system. This process in itself is not without its own dangers. Due to our social situatedness and force and scope of dominant culture and its narratives, we may produce new forms

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[155] See Jose Medina, "Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter – Memory, Epistemic Friction, and Guerrilla Pluralism," in *Foucault Studies* 12 (2011): 9 – 35; Jose Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Walter D. Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," in *Coloniality at Large,* eds. Mabel Moraña, Enriqué Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 181-225; Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
[156] See Jose Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

of oppression and marginalization, or cause new forms of epistemic harm by reinforcing undisclosed epistemic harms from the past. There is not an easy way to speak on behalf of other people, and the role of the representative entails that by bringing all these different perspectives together, we ultimately rely on the same epistemic resources that are responsible for their exclusion and unintelligibility. In the face of such dangers, it is important to make explicit what one's own position is, what is one's own "voice," as well as recognizing the other voices that one is trying to represent by speaking for them. If we are able to do this in a responsible way, by acknowledging the limitations on what we can do, we may be in a position to challenge and resist ways in which subalterns are silenced, excluded or discredited. This is only possible if we choose not to ignore our social positionality and relationality, and remain epistemically humble in knowing that our articulations and representations are not identical with the complexity and particularity of those whom we hope to represent.

In essence, such a political project is difficult—and it should remain difficult, because making such amends would require profound self-reflection, the problematic nature of which is its orientation towards hegemonic values and perspectives. It would require a reorientation of thinking away from fitting the world and others into already predetermined values towards giving the other certain priority. In my opinion, this is one of the most important lessons that traditional critical and contemporary decolonial thought has taught us: of adhering to a "morality of thinking."[157] This call for self-reflection and affectively engaged relations toward others has implications not only for the ways we perceive and articulate our environment, but also how we conceive others (and

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[157] See Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia* (New York: Verso, 2006); Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Verso, 2005); Walter D. Mignolo, "The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference," in *Coloniality at Large,* eds. Mabel Moraña, Enriqué Dussel, and Carlos A. Jáuregui (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 181-225; Walter Mignolo, Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Mabel Morana and Carlos Jaurequi, Revisiting the Colonial Question in Latin America Iberoamericana / Vervuert, 2008).

subsequently, our acknowledgment of our obligations and our approach to conditions that they experience). This has major implications for rethinking what responsibility and global morality is, and echoes what previous chapter has offered in regard to views of Levinas and Adorno. Whatever is contained in the others themselves requires human subjectivity to be voiced, either through acknowledging their own needs or creating adequate space for them to be heard on their own terms. Still, as we have seen, there are no guarantees; interpretations can miss their object or fail to be illuminating, and only the successful ones realize the difficult balancing act of achieving obligatory force without a difficult hermeneutic system between society and epistemic subjectivity it engenders.

In the end, our understanding and knowledge of human suffering must avoid the reductive epistemic and ontological assumptions that separate "humanity" between privileged and those inferior. We must avoid this at the intersection of tensions and relations between different historical processes. This not only helps us understand all the pitfalls of current ethical agency of "western" humanitarian subject, but helps us also understand that as much as objects of our knowledge are product of social processes, we are also part of the same relations of power and epistemic biases that pervade different dimensions of our social existence. In short, we must recognize these differences and remain conscientious that, despite how privileged our position may be, such a position is still historically and deeply connected to its social genesis. Our lives, and our autonomy as social, political and epistemic agents, are relational—not isolated, without regard to other people. We have obligations, with respect to people who living under the burden of Europe's colonial past were stripped of their own meaning, interests and culture. When looking back at those who have lived under slavery, at the victims of genocides, at those tortured and killed in the name of "progress," and many others who are rendered as a sheer statistic of an unjust global political system, we must give their suffering, their lives and deaths our critical attention. Giving a moral recognition to dispossessed subjects (refugees, victims of human trafficking, people locked in forced labor, etc.)

imposes the moral burden of taking their experiences and perspectives seriously. Such a moral burden raises an important concern for which addressing our epistemic capacities and social conditions is just the beginning. While there is an undeniable urgency in addressing the unjust conditions that some people endure, it is also important to challenge the distorted ideological global political system itself that allows such injustices to occur. By doing this we are making a first step towards living a wrong life rightly.

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