

Precarious Life and the Obligations of Cohabitation

Judith Butler

Nobel Museum, Stockholm

May, 2011

I am very honoured and pleased to be here today. I hope to offer you a set of thoughts on the ethical obligations that are global in character and that emerge at a distance and within relations of proximity. The two questions that concern me are at first quite different from one another. The first is whether any of us have the capacity or inclination to respond ethically to suffering at a distance, and what makes that ethical encounter possible, when it does take place. The second is what it means for our ethical obligations when we are up against another person or group, find ourselves invariably joined to those we never chose. This happens at the border of several contested states, but also in various moments of geographical proximity – what we might call “up againstness” – the result of populations living in conditions of unwilled adjacency, the result of forced emigration or the redrawing of the boundaries of a nation- state. Of course, presumptions about far-ness and near-ness are already there in most of the accounts of ethics that we know. There are communitarians who do not mind the local, provisional, and sometimes nationalist character of the communities to which they consider ethically bound, and whose specific community norms are treated as ethically binding. They valorise nearness as a condition for encountering and knowing the other,

and so tend to figure ethical relations as binding upon those whose face we can see, whose name we can know and pronounce, those we can already recognize, whose form and face is familiar. It is often assumed that proximity imposes certain immediate demands for honouring principles of bodily integrity, non-violence, and territorial or property rights claims. And yet, it seems to me that something different is happening when one part of the globe rises in moral outrage against actions and events that happen in another part of the globe, a form of moral outrage that does not depend upon a shared language or a common life grounded in physical proximity. In such cases, we are seeing and enacting the very activity of bonds of solidarity that emerge across space and time.

These are times when, in spite of ourselves and quite apart from any intentional act, we are nevertheless solicited by images of distant suffering in ways that compel our concern and move us to act, that is, to voice our objection and register our resistance to such violence through concrete political means. In this way, we might say that we do not merely or only receive information from the media on the basis of which we, as individuals, then decide to do or not to do anything. We do not only consume, and we are not only paralyzed by the surfeit of images. Sometimes, not always, the images that are imposed upon us operate as an ethical solicitation. I want for the moment to call attention to this formulation, since I am trying to underscore that something impinges upon us, without our being able to anticipate or prepare for it in advance, and this means that we are in such moments affronted by something that is beyond our will, not of our making, that comes to us from the outside, as an imposition, but also as an ethical demand. I want to suggest that these are ethical obligations which do not require our consent, and neither are they the result of contracts or agreements into which any of us have deliberately entered.

To make this view plain, I want to suggest as a point of departure that images and accounts of war suffering are a particular form of ethical solicitation, one that compels us to negotiate questions of proximity and distance. They do implicitly formulate ethical quandaries: Is what is happening so far from me that I can bear no responsibility for it? Is what is happening so close to me that I cannot bear having to take responsibility for it? If I myself did not make this suffering, am I still in some other sense responsible to it? How do we approach these questions? Although what I have to offer today will not be focused on photographs or images, I want to suggest that the ethical solicitation that we encounter in, say, the photograph of war suffering brings up larger questions about ethical obligation. After all, we do not always choose to see the images of war, of violence, and death. They may appear on our screen, or we may flash upon them (or they may flash upon us) as we walk down the street by the kiosks where newspapers are sold. We can click on a site as a deliberate act in order to get the news, but that does not mean we are actually prepared for what we see, and does not even mean that we have chosen to expose ourselves to what impinges upon us visually. We understand what it means to be overloaded or overwhelmed with sensory images, but are we also ethically overwhelmed at such instances, and would it be a problem if we were not? Susan Sontag made the point that war photography overwhelms and paralyzes us at the same time, and she actively wondered whether we might still rely on the image to incite a political deliberation on – and resistance to – the unjust character of state violence and war. But can we be overwhelmed and *unparalyzed* – and can we understand the as the working of an ethical obligation upon our sensibilities? Must we, in fact, be overwhelmed to some degree in order to have motive for action. We only act when we are moved to act, and we are moved by something that affects us from the outside, from elsewhere, from the lives of others, imposing a

surfeit that we act from, and upon. According to such a view of ethical obligation, receptivity is not only a precondition for action, but one of its constituent features. Media names any mode of presentation that relays to us some version of reality from the outside, that impinges on us, making it possible to register a reality, and so to be moved by it toward some responsive action. In this sense, ethical obligation imposes itself upon us without our consent, suggesting that consent is not a sufficient ground for delimiting the global obligations which form our responsibility.

My second point, however, is that ethical obligations emerge not only in the contexts of established communities that are gathered within borders, speak the same language, and constitute a nation. Obligations to those who are far away as well as to those who are proximate cross linguistic and national boundaries, are only possible by virtue of visual or linguistic translations. These confound any communitarian basis for delimiting the global obligations that we have. So, neither consent nor communitarianism justify or delimit the range of obligations that I seek to address this evening. I think this is probably an experience we have in relation to the media when it makes suffering at a distance proximate, and makes what is proximate appear very far away. My own thesis is that the kind of ethical demands that emerge through the global circuits in these times depends on this reversibility of the proximity and distance. Indeed, I want to suggest that *certain bonds are actually wrought through this very reversibility*. If I am only bound to those who are close to me, already familiar, then my ethics are invariably parochial, communitarian, and exclusionary. If I am only bound to those who are “human” in the abstract, then I avert every effort to translate culturally between my own situation and that of others. If I am only bound to those who suffer at a distance, but never those who are close to me, then I evacuate my situation in an effort to secure the distance that allows me to entertain ethical feeling. But if ethical relations

are mediated – and I use that word deliberately here – confounding questions of location such that what is happening “there” also happens in some sense “here” and if what is happening “there” depends on the event being registered in several “elsewheres”, then it would seem that the ethical claim of the event takes place always in a “here” and “there” that are fundamentally bound to one another. In one sense, the event is emphatically local, since it is precisely the people there whose bodies are on the line. But if those bodies on the line are not registered elsewhere, there is no global response, and also, no global form of ethical recognition and connection, and so something of the reality of the event is lost. It is not just that one discrete population views another through certain media moments, but that such a response makes evident a form of global connectedness, however provisional, with those whose lives and actions are registered in this way. In short, to be unprepared for the media image that overwhelms can lead not to paralysis but to a situation of (a) being moved, and so acting precisely by virtue of being acted upon and (b) being at once there and here, and in different ways, accepting and negotiating the multi-locality of ethical connections we might rightly call global.

Can we, then, turn to some versions of ethical philosophy in order to reformulate what it means to register an ethical demand during these times that is reducible neither to consent nor to established agreement and that takes place outside of established community bonds? I will, then, consider briefly some arguments by Emmanuel Levinas and Hannah Arendt on these vexed relations that hold among ethics, proximity, and distance. My choice of two thinkers who are in part formed either through Jewish intellectual traditions (Levinas) and Jewish historical situations (Arendt) is not accidental. As I seek to articulate a version of co-habitation that follows from the account of ethical obligation I am describing, both of these thinkers offer views

that are both illuminating and problematic for this task. I hope to make matters more concrete by turning to Palestine/Israel toward the end of my remarks, when I hope it will become possible to understand an alternative set of Jewish views on co-habitation, ones that not only demand a departure from communitarianism but that may serve as a critical alternative to the views and practices of the state of Israel, especially its version of political Zionism and settler colonialism.

Levinas

There are two dissonant dimensions of Levinas' ethical philosophy. On the one hand, there is the importance of the category of proximity to his idea of ethical relations. Indeed, it seems that the ways that others act upon us, without our will, constitutes the occasion of an ethical appeal or solicitation. This means that we are acted on, and solicited, ethically, prior to any clear sense of choice. To be impinged upon by another assumes a bodily proximity, and if it is the "face" that acts upon us, then we are to some extent affected and claimed by that "face" at the same time. On the other hand, our ethical obligations extend to those who are not proximate in any physical sense, and do not have to be part of a recognizable community to which we both belong. Indeed, for Levinas, those who act upon us are clearly other to us; it is precisely not by virtue of their sameness that we are bound to them.

Of course, Levinas sustained some contradictory views on this question of the otherness of the Other who makes an ethical claim on me: he clearly affirmed forms of nationalism, especially Israeli nationalism, and also held to the notion that only within a Judeo-Christian tradition were ethical relations possible. But let us, for the moment, read him against himself, or read him for the political possibilities he opens up, even

those he never intended. Levinas's position allows us the following conclusion: that the set of ethical values by which one population is bound to another in no ways depends on those two populations bearing similar marks of national, cultural, religious, racial belonging. It is interesting that Levinas insisted that we are bound to those we do not know, and even those we did not choose, could never have chosen, and that these obligations are, strictly speaking, *pre-contractual*. And yet, he was of the one who claimed in an interview that the Palestinian had no face,ⁱ and that he only meant to extend ethical obligations to those who were bound together by his version of Judeo-Christian and classical Greek origins.ⁱⁱ In some ways, he gave us the very principle that he betrayed. And this means that anyone and everyone are not only free, but obligated, to extend that principle to the Palestinian people, precisely because he could not. His failure directly contradicts his formulation of the demand to be ethically responsive to those who exceed our immediate sphere of belonging, but to whom we nevertheless belong, regardless of any question of what we choose or by what contracts we are bound, or what established forms of cultural belonging are available.

Of course, this raises a question of how there can be an ethical relation to those who cannot appear within the horizon of ethics, who are not persons, or are not considered to be the kind of beings with whom one can or must enter into an ethical relation. Here is where a most painful division within Levinas's work continues to haunt those of us who seek ethical resources there. On the one hand, he tells us that we are claimed by others, including those we have never known, those we still don't know, and that we are born into this situation of being compelled to honor the life of the other, every other, whose claim on life comes before our own. On the other hand, he claims that this very ethical relation depends upon a specific set of religious and cultural conditions, Judeo-Christian, and that those who are not formed within this tradition

are not prepared for ethical life, and are not included as those who can make a claim upon those who belong to a narrow conception of the West. It is an agonizing contradiction at the heart of Levinas's writing. But is it possible to take the ethical philosophy formulated there and deploy it against the very exclusionary assumptions by which it is sometimes supported? Can we, in other words, use Levinas against himself to help in the articulation of a global ethics that would extend beyond the religious and cultural communities that he saw as its necessary limit?

Let us take as an example his argument that ethical relations are asymmetrical. In his work, the Other has priority over me. What does that concretely mean? Does the other not have the same obligation toward me? Why should I be obligated toward another who does not reciprocate in the same way toward me? For Levinas, reciprocity cannot be the basis of ethics, since ethics is not a bargain: it cannot be the case that my ethical relation to another is contingent on their ethical relation to me, since that would make that ethical relation less than absolute and binding; and it would establish my self-preservation as a distinct and bounded sort of being as more primary than any relation I have to another. For Levinas, no ethics can be derived from egoism; indeed, egoism is the defeat of ethics itself.

I take distance from Levinas here, since though I agree in the refutation of the primacy of self-preservation for ethical thinking, I want to insist upon a certain interwinement between that other life, all those other lives, and my own – one that is irreducible to national belonging or communitarian affiliation. In my view (which is surely not mine alone) the life of the other, the life that is *not* our own, is also our life, since whatever sense “our” life has is derived precisely from this sociality, this being already, and from the start, dependent on a world of others, constituted in and by a social world. In this way there are surely others distinct from me whose ethical claim

upon me is irreducible to an egoistic calculation on my part. But that is because we are, however distinct, also bound to one another. And this is not always a happy or felicitous experience. To find that one's life is also the life of others, even as this life is distinct, and must be distinct, means that one's boundary is at once a limit and a site of adjacency, a mode of spatial and temporal nearness and even boundedness. Moreover, the bounded and living appearance of the body is the condition of being exposed to the other, exposed to solicitation, seduction, passion, injury, exposed in ways that sustain us but also in ways that can destroy us. In this sense the exposure of the body points to its precariousness. At the same time, for Levinas, this precarious and corporeal being is responsible for the life of the other, which means that no matter how much one fears for one's own life, preserving the life of the other is paramount. If only the Israeli army felt this way! Indeed, this is a form of responsibility that is not easy while undergoing a felt sense of precarity. Precarity names both the necessity and difficulty of ethics.

It is surely hard to feel at once vulnerable to destruction by the other and yet responsible for the other, and readers of Levinas object all the time to his formulation that we are, all of us, in some sense responsible for that which persecutes us. He does not mean that we bring about our persecution – not at all. Rather, “persecution” is the strange and disconcerting name that Levinas gives for an ethical demand that imposes itself upon us against our will. We are, despite ourselves, open to this imposition, and though it overrides our will, it shows us that the claims that others make upon us are part of our very sensibility, our receptivity, and our answerability. We are, in other words, called upon, and this is only possible because we are in some sense vulnerable to claims that we cannot anticipate in advance, and for which there is no adequate preparation. For Levinas, there is no other way to understand the ethical reality; ethical obligation not only depends upon our vulnerability to the claims of others, but

establishes us as creatures who are fundamentally defined by that ethical relation.

This ethical relation is not a virtue that I have or exercise; it is prior to any individual sense of self. It is not as a discrete individual that we honor this ethical relation. I am already bound to you, and this is what it means to be the self I am, receptive to you in ways that I cannot fully predict or control. This is also, clearly, the condition of my injurability as well, and in this way my answerability and my injurability are bound up with one another. In other words, you may frighten me and threaten me, but my obligation to you must remain firm.

This relation *precedes* individuation, and when I act ethically, I am undone as a bounded being. I come apart. I find that I *am* my relation to the “you” whose life I seek to preserve, and without that relation, this “I” makes no sense, and has lost its mooring in this ethics that is always prior to the ontology of the ego. Another way to put this point is that the “I” becomes undone in its ethical relation to the “you” which means that there is a very specific mode of being dispossessed that makes ethical relationality possible. If I possess myself too firmly or too rigidly, I cannot be in an ethical relation. The ethical relation means ceding a certain egological perspective for one which is structured fundamentally by a mode of address: you call upon me, and I answer. But if I answer, it was only because I was already answerable; that is, this susceptibility and vulnerability constitutes me at the most fundamental level, and is there, we might say, prior to any deliberate decision to answer the call. In other words, one has to be already capable of receiving the call before actually answering it. In this sense, ethical responsibility presupposes ethical responsiveness.

Most scholars would want to keep any consideration of Emmanuel Levinas separate from any analysis of Hannah Arendt; he is a philosopher of ethics, drawing on religious traditions and emphasizes the ethical importance of passivity and receptivity;

she is a social and political philosopher, adamantly secular, who emphasizes time and again the political value of action. Why bring a discussion of Levinas together with one regarding Arendt? Both Levinas and Arendt take issue with the classically liberal conception of individualism, that is, the idea that individuals knowingly enter into certain contracts, and their obligation follows from having deliberately and volitionally entered into agreements with one another. This view assumes that we are *only* responsible for those relations, codified by agreements, into which we have knowingly and volitionally entered. And Arendt disputes this view. Indeed, it was the substance of the argument that she made against Eichmann. He thought he could choose which populations should live and die, and in this sense he thought he could choose with whom to co-habit the earth. What he failed to understand, according to Arendt, is that no one has the prerogative to choose with whom to co-habit the earth. We can choose in some ways how to live and where, and in local ways we can choose with whom to live. But if we were to decide with whom to co-habit the earth, we would be deciding which portion of humanity may live, and which may die. If that choice is barred to us, that means that we are under an obligation to live with those who already exist, and that any choice about who may or may not live is always a genocidal practice, and though we cannot dispute that genocide has happened, and happens still, we are wrong to think freedom in any ethical sense is ever compatible with the freedom to commit genocide. The unchosen character of earthly co-habitation is, for Arendt, the condition of our very existence as ethical and political beings. Hence, to exercise that prerogative of genocide is to destroy not only the conditions of personhood, constituted in the political sphere, but to destroy freedom itself, understood as a plural action. Without that plurality against which we cannot choose, we have no freedom and, therefore, no choice. And without that choice, we are not persons. This was one argument that

Arendt made about why the death penalty was justified for Eichmann: he had already destroyed himself by not realizing that his own life was bound to those he destroyed, and that individual life makes no sense, has no reality, outside of the social and political framework in which all lives are equally valued.

In Eichmann in Jerusalem (1962), Arendt questioned the principles of justice used in the judging of Eichmann and toward the end of her writings on the trial, she explicitly claims that the reason why Eichmann must die is that he made the consequential error of thinking that he could choose with whom to co-habit the earth. What Eichmann and his superiors failed to realize was that the heterogeneity of the earth's population is an irreversible condition of social and political life itself.ⁱⁱⁱ Our existence depends upon this heterogeneity; there is no individuality outside plurality (even as no plurality can substitute for individuality).

Arendt's accusation against Eichmann bespeaks a firm conviction that none of us may exercise such a prerogative, that those with whom we cohabit the earth are given to us, prior to choice, and so prior to any social or political contracts we might enter through deliberation and volition. In fact, if we seek to make a choice where there is no choice, we are destroying the conditions of our own social and political life. In Eichmann's case, the effort to choose with whom to co-habit the earth was an explicit effort to annihilate some part of that population, - Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, communists, the disabled and the ill, among others - and so the exercise of freedom upon which he insisted was genocide. Arendt stands for this plurality when she argues that none of us may choose with whom to co-habit the earth; we can surely choose with whom to share a household and perhaps also with whom to share a neighborhood or a region, or where to draw the boundary of a state, but we are not in such instances deciding against the right to live for those who are outside of those communities. But when

people decide that they will not share the earth, that means that they are committed to eradicating a population from the face of the earth. Not only is this choice an attack on co-habitation as a precondition of political life in Arendt's view, but it commits us to the following proposition: *we must devise institutions and policies that actively preserve and affirm the non-chosen character of open-ended and plural co-habitation*:. Not only do we live with those we never chose and to whom we may feel no immediate sense of social belonging, but we are also obligated to preserve those lives and the open-ended plurality that is the global population.

Although Arendt would doubtless dispute my view, I think what she has offered is an ethical view of co-habitation that serves as a guideline for particular forms of politics. In this sense, concrete political norms and policies emerge from the unchosen character of these modes of co-habitation. The necessity of co-habiting the earth is a principle that, in her philosophy, must guide the actions and policies of any neighborhood, community, or nation. The decision to live in one community or another is surely justified as long as it does not imply that those who live outside the community do not deserve to live. In other words, every communitarian ground for belonging is only justifiable on the condition that it is subordinate to a non-communitarian opposition to genocide. The way I read this, every inhabitant who belongs to a community belongs also to the earth, and this implies a commitment not only to every other inhabitant of that earth, but we can surely add, to sustaining the earth itself. And with this last proviso, I seek to offer an ecological supplement Arendt's anthropocentrism.

In Eichmann in Jerusalem, Arendt speaks not only for the Jews, but for any and every other minority who would be expelled from habitation on the earth by another group. The one implies the other, and the "speaking for" universalizes the principle

even as it does not override the plurality for which it speaks. One reason Arendt refuses to separate the Jews from the other so-called 'nations' persecuted by the Nazis is that she is arguing in the name of a plurality co-extensive with human life in any and all its cultural forms. At the same time, her judgment of Eichmann is one that emerges precisely from an historical situation of a diasporic Jew who was herself a refugee from Nazi Germany, but who also objected to the Israeli courts representing a specific nation, when the crime in her view was a crime *against humanity*, and representing only the Jewish victims of the genocide, when there were many other groups annihilated and displaced in accord with the Nazi policy formulated and implemented by Eichmann and his cohorts.

This same notion of unchosen co-habitation not only implied the irreversibly plural or heterogenous character of the earth's population, and an obligation to safeguard that plurality, but also a commitment to an equal right to inhabit the earth, and so a commitment to equality as well. These two dimensions of her argument took specific historical form in her argument against the idea of Israel as a state based on principles of Jewish sovereignty and for a federated Palestine in the late 1940s. The political conception of plurality for which she fought was implicit in the American Revolution in her view, and it led her to refuse to accept exclusively national, racial or religious grounds for citizenship. Moreover, she objected to the founding of any state that required the expulsion of its inhabitants, and the production of a new refugee class especially when such a state invoked the rights of refugees to legitimate its founding.

Under Nazi Germany and again with the establishment of the state of Israel, her concern was with the rights of refugees, those who are covered by no existing law, and who belong to no existing nation-state. In her terms, everyone has a right to belong to a place, that right belongs to everyone regardless of the place to which they belong. No

existing modes of belonging ground or justify that right, for that right must belong to those who have no place, and who seek to lay claim to a place that is not yet theirs. In other words, no specific communitarian mode of belonging grounds the right to belong. The right to belong is more fundamental than any particular community to which one belongs, and if we are to understand her argument against Eichmann, it appears that “belonging” must actually know no bounds and exceed every particular nationalist and communitarian limit. Both the arguments against genocide and the arguments for the rights of the stateless depend upon underscoring the limits of communitarianism.

The plural or diverse population to which she refers is one that she understood Eichmann to deny, but so also do all forms of the nation-state that seek to maintain a homogenous national character. It became important for Arendt to argue after the Second World War that political life must be understood as always plural, multi-lingual. Reading her now, we have to ask how this plurality might still be affirmed under conditions where borders establish intractable and antagonistic forms of adjacency or when global distances both geographical and cultural make the affirmation of ties more difficult.

Despite these difficulties, Arendt’s normative views still hold: there is no one part of the population that can claim the earth for itself, no community or nation-state or regional unit, no clan, no party, and no race. As I have suggested, to make such a claim is to enter into a policy of genocide. This means that unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation are preconditions of our political existence, the basis of her critique of nationalism, the obligation to live on the earth and in a polity that establishes mode of equality for a necessarily and irreversibly heterogenous population. Indeed, unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation serve as well as the basis of our obligations not to destroy any part of the human population, and to outlaw genocide as

a crime against humanity, but also to invest institutions with the demand to seek to make all lives liveable. Thus, from unchosen co-habitation, Arendt derives notions of universality an equality that commit us to institutions that seek to sustain human lives without regarding some part of the population as socially dead, as redundant, or as intrinsically unworthy of life and therefore ungrievable.

Arendt's views on the State of Israel were scandalous at the time, and it is doubtless one reason why her book on Eichmann was so poorly received and its ethical importance so radically undervalued. But what is evident is that her views on co-habitation, federated authority, equality, and universality were in stark contrast to those who were defending nationalist forms of Jewish sovereignty, differential classifications for Jewish and non-citizens, military policies to uproot Palestinians from their lands, and efforts to establish a Jewish demographic majority for the state. Although it is so often taught that Israel became an historical and ethical necessity for the Jews during and after the Nazi genocide, and that anyone who questions the founding principles of the Jewish state shows an extraordinary insensitivity to the plight of the Jews, there were Jewish thinkers and political activists at the time, including Arendt, Martin Buber, Hans Kohn, and Judah Magnus, who thought among the most important lessons of the Holocaust was an opposition to illegitimate state violence, to any state formation that sought to give electoral priority and citizenship to one race or religion, and that nation-states ought to be internationally barred from dispossessing whole populations who fail to fit the purified idea of the nation.

For refugees who never again wished to see the dispossession of populations in the name of national or religious purity, Zionism and its forms of military violence against indigenous Palestinian populations were not the legitimate answer to the pressing needs of Jewish refugees. In the Eichmann text, she continues to have the

stateless in mind, as she did when she considers the massive deportations from Europe in World War II and when in 1948 she objected to that form of political Zionism heralded by Ben Gurion that defeated her co-authored proposal for a federated binational authority in Palestine. She predicted a new refugee problem, not merely one that would happen during the Naqba of 1948 to over 750,000 Palestinians, but one that would continue to happen as the state of Israel moved forward as a nation-state on the model that she rejected, and thought everyone should reject. She could not have predicted the 1.7 million who now have that refugee status within the West Bank and Gaza alone, but she did predict that nation-states that seek to regulate the racial or religious composition of their populations invariably produce new classes of refugees, and call into question their own legitimacy by expelling populations who do not conform to the national norm. Her call for co-habitation was meant quite clearly to counter not only the genocidal politics of National Socialism but the recurrent production of the stateless by any and all nations that purging themselves of heterogeneity. And though she would have never argued that Israel is *like* Nazi Germany, and she would have opposed all such analogies, she was clear that Israel was continuing a project of settler colonialism in the name of a national liberation project, producing hundreds of thousands of refugees that would not only delegitimize any claims to democracy made by that state, but keep the state embroiled in conflict for decades to come.

For those who extrapolated principles of justice from the historical experience of internment and dispossession, the political aim is to extend equality regardless of cultural background or formation, across languages and religions, to those none of us ever chose (or did not recognize that we chose) and with whom we have an enduring obligation to find a way to live. For whoever “we” are, we are also those who were

never chosen, who emerge on this earth without everyone's consent and who belong, from the start, to a wider population and a sustainable earth. And this condition, paradoxically, yields the radical potential for new modes of sociality and politics beyond the avid and wretched bonds formed through settler colonialism and expulsion. We are all, in this sense, the unchosen, but we are nevertheless unchosen together. It is not uninteresting to note that Arendt, herself a Jew and refugee, understood her obligation not to belong to the "chosen people" but rather to the unchosen, and to make mixed community precisely among those whose existence implies a right to exist and to lead a liveable life.

Alternative Jewishness, Precarious Life

I have offered you two perspectives derived in different ways from Jewishness. Levinas was himself a self-avowed Jewish thinker and a Zionist, deriving his account of responsibility from an understanding of the commandments, how they act upon us, and how they compel us ethically. And Arendt, though surely not religious, nevertheless took her position as a Jewish refugee from the Second World War as a point of departure for thinking about genocide and statelessness and for the plural conditions of political life.

Of course, neither Levinas nor Arendt are easy to work with in this struggle. As with Levinas, there are parts of Arendt's position that are clearly racist (she objected, for instance, to Arab Jews, identified as a European and thought other should do), and yet come of what she writes is still a resource for thinking about the current global obligations to oppose and resist genocide, the reproduction of stateless populations, and the importance of struggling for a plural and open-ended conception of plurality.

Arendt's Euro-American framework was clearly limited, and yet another limitation comes to mind if we try to understand the relationship of precarity to practices of co-habitation. Precarity only makes sense if we are able to identify as clearly political issues bodily dependency and need, hunger and the need for shelter, the vulnerability to injury and destruction, forms of social trust that let us live and thrive, and the passions linked to our very persistence. If Arendt thought that such matters had to be relegated to the private realm, Levinas understood the importance of vulnerability, but failed to really link vulnerability to a politics of the body. Although Levinas seems to presuppose a body impinged upon, he does not give it an explicit place in his ethical philosophy. And though Arendt theorizes the problem of the body, of the located body, the speaking body emerging into the "space of appearance" as part of any account of political action, she is not quite willing to affirm a politics that struggles to overcome inequalities in food distribution, that affirms rights of housing, and which targets inequalities in the sphere of reproductive labor.

In my view, ethical claims emerge from bodily life itself, a bodily life that is not always unambiguously human. After all, the life that is worth preserving, and safeguarding, who should be protected from murder (Levinas) and genocide (Arendt) is connected to, and dependent upon, non-human life in essential ways; this follows from the idea of the human animal, a different point of departure for thinking about politics. If we try to understand in concrete terms what it means to commit ourselves to preserving the life of the other, we are invariably confronted with the bodily conditions of life, and so a commitment not only to the other's corporeal persistence, but to all those environmental conditions that make life liveable.

In the so-called private sphere delineated in Arendt's The Human Condition, we find the question of needs, the reproduction of the material conditions of life, the problem of transience, of reproduction and death alike – everything that pertains to precarious life. The possibility of whole populations being annihilated either through genocidal policies or systemic negligence follows *not only* from the fact that there are those who believe they can decide among whom they will inhabit the earth, but because such thinking presupposes a disavowal of an irreducible fact of politics: the vulnerability to destruction by others that follows from a condition of precarity in all modes of political and social interdependency. We can make this into a broad existential claim, namely, that everyone is precarious, and this follows from our social existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance and who, therefore, are at risk of statelessness, homelessness and destitution under unjust and unequal political conditions. As much as I am making such a claim, I am also making another, namely, that our precarity is to a large extent dependent upon the organization of economic and social relationships, the presence or absence of sustaining infrastructures and social and political institutions. In this sense, precarity is indissociable from that dimension of politics that addresses the organization and protection of bodily needs. Precarity exposes our sociality, the fragile and necessary dimensions of our interdependency.

Whether explicitly stated or not, every political effort to manage populations involves a tactical distribution of precarity, more often than not articulated through an unequal distribution of precarity, one that depends on dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable, and worth protecting, and whose life is ungrievable, or marginally or episodically grievable and so, in that sense, already lost in part or in whole, and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance. In my own view, then, a

different social ontology would have to start from this shared condition of precarity in order to refute those normative operations, pervasively racist, that decide in advance who counts as human and who does not. My point is not to rehabilitate humanism, but rather to struggle for a conception of ethical obligation that is grounded in precarity. No one escapes the precarious dimension of social life – it is, we might say, our common non-foundation. And we cannot understand co-habitation without understanding that a generalized precarity obligates us to oppose genocide and to sustain life on egalitarian terms. Perhaps this feature of our lives can serve as the basis for the rights of protection against genocide, whether through deliberate or negligent means. After all, even though our interdependency constitutes us as more than thinking beings, indeed as social and embodied, vulnerable and passionate, our thinking gets nowhere without the presupposition of the interdependent and sustaining conditions of life.

It is, of course, one thing to claim this in the abstract, but quite another to understand what the difficulties are in struggling for social and political forms that are committed to fostering a sustainable interdependency on egalitarian terms. When any of us are affected by the sufferings of others, we recognize and affirm an interconnection with them, even when we do not know their names or speak their language. At its best, some media representations of suffering at a distance compel us to give up our more narrow communitarian ties, and to respond, sometimes in spite of ourselves, sometimes even against our will, to a perceived injustice. Such presentations can bring the fate of others near or make it seem very far away, and yet, the kind of ethical demands that emerge through the media in these times depend on this reversibility of the proximity and distance. Indeed, I want to suggest that *certain bonds are actually wrought through this very reversibility*. And we might find ways of

understanding the interdependency that characterizes co-habitation precisely as these bonds.

Finally, I want to say that sometimes these bonds are wretched ones, that one population is up against another in ways that feel unliveable, and the modes of interdependency are characterized as exploitative or colonizing. This is surely the case in Israel/Palestine where the notions of a national home and homeland are inevitably implicated in relations of internal heterogeneity and adjacency which bring up the issue of unchosen co-habitation in yet a different way. Israel and Palestine are joined; they overlap, and through the settlements and the military presence, Israel invades and pervades Palestinian lands. Even if they sought a full-scale separation from each other, the two would still be bound to one another by the separation wall, by the border, by the military powers that control the border. The relationship would only be extended in its wretched form. There are settlements now in the West Bank populated with right wing Israelis who nevertheless depend on local Palestinians for conveying food or menial jobs. And we might point out as well that the soldiers at the checkpoint are in constant contact with Palestinians who are waiting there or passing through. These are forms of contact, adjacency, unwilling modes of co-habitation that are not only clearly inegalitarian, but where the military presence is hostile, threatening, and destructive. These are clearly different from the activist the weekly demonstrations at Bi'lin where many have suffered physical injury and death, the important triumph at Budrus to steer the wall away from the olive trees, the persistent rallying of support in Sheik Jarrah for those threatened with the confiscation of their homes, and those whose homes have already been transferred to Jewish Israelis, the important engagement with *Taayush* (Arabic for “living together”) during the second Intifada when medical supplies were illegally transported into the West Bank, the Israeli feminist

activism of *Machsom Watch* at the checkpoints dedicated to witnessing, chronicling and opposing harassment and intimidation of Palestinians, or the work of Palestinian and Jewish Israelis together at *Adalah* in Haifa (an organization surely worthy of receiving a Nobel), which has legally processed thousands of claims against Israel for the confiscation of Palestinian lands and the expulsion of Palestinians from their homes and their homeland. I would include among these the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions movement, which now has an Israeli version, which stipulates that co-existence requires equality and cannot take place under conditions where one party is subjected to colonial subjugation and disenfranchisement – an Arendtian view, to be sure. These are but a few of the many insistent and important ways of practicing and thinking about alliance, modes of working together, but sometimes working in separate venues against the illegal occupation and for Palestinian dignity and self-determination.

Over and against these instances of co-habitation, there are, as we know, antagonistic ties, wretched bonds, raging and mournful modes of connectedness. In those cases where living with others on adjacent lands or on contested or colonized lands produces aggression and hostility in the midst of that co-habitation. Colonial subjugation and occupation is surely one way to live without choice next to and under a colonizing population. The mode of unchosen co-habitation that belongs to the colonized is surely not the same as the notion of a democratic plurality established on grounds of equality. And this is why only those forms of alliance that struggle to overcome colonial subjugation carry the trace of any future possibility of co-habitation between the inhabitants of that piece of earth. Otherwise, Palestinians remain disproportionately exposed to precarity, and Israelis act to shore up their territory and majority-rule through extending colonial control and heightening their modes of military aggression.

It seems to me that even in situations of antagonistic and unchosen modes of cohabitation, certain ethical obligations emerge. Since we do not choose with whom to cohabit the earth, we have to honor those obligations to preserve the lives of those we may not love, we may never love, we do not know, and did not choose. Second, these obligations emerge from the social conditions of political life, not from any agreement we have made, nor from any deliberate choice. And yet, these very social conditions of liveable life are precisely those that have to be achieved. We cannot rely on them as presuppositions that will guarantee our good life together. On the contrary, they supply the ideals toward which we must struggle. Because we are bound to realize these conditions, we are also bound to one another, in passionate and fearful alliance, often in spite of ourselves, but ultimately for ourselves, for a “we” who is constantly in the making. Thirdly, these conditions imply equality, as Arendt tells us, but also an exposure to precarity (a point derived from Levinas) which leads us to understand as a global obligation imposed upon us to find political and economic forms that to minimize precarity and establish economic political equality. Those forms of cohabitation characterized by equality and minimized precarity become the goal to be achieved by any struggle against subjugation and exploitation, but also the goals that start to be achieved in the practices of alliance that assemble across distances to achieve those very goals. We struggle in, from, and against precarity. Thus, it is not from pervasive love for humanity or a pure desire for peace that we strive to live together. We live together because we have no choice, and yet we must struggle to affirm the ultimate value of that unchosen social world, and that struggle makes itself known and felt precisely when we exercise freedom in a way that is necessarily committed to the equal value of lives. We can be alive or dead to the sufferings of others, - they can be dead or alive to us, depending on how they appear, and whether they appear at all; but

only when we understand that what happens there also happens here, and that “here” is already an elsewhere, and necessarily so, that we stand a chance of grasping the difficult and shifting global connections in which we live, which make our lives possible – and sometimes, too often, impossible.

ⁱ See Levinas’s remarks that the Palestinians have no face (and hence, their human vulnerability can be the ground for no obligation not to kill) in “Ethics and Politics”, The Levinas Reader, ed. Sean Hand, Oxford: Blackwell, 1989, p. 289.

ⁱⁱ See also Levinas’s remarks about the “asiatic hordes” who threaten the ethical basis of Judaeo-Christian culture in “Jewish Thought Today,” in Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism, tr. Sean Hand, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990, p. 165 . This was more fully discussed in my Giving an Account of Oneself, New York: Fordham University Press), 1995, pp. 90-96.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, New York: Schocken Books, 1963, 277-78

The essay, "Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation," is a later addition to the ethical inquiry Butler initiated in the aftermath of the 9/11 attack and the ensuing geopolitical situation in the Middle-East.² How should we respond to atrocities taking place far away from us, for which we bear no direct responsibility? Is it tenable to argue, as some do, that our obligations emerge only in contexts bound by communities, cultures, nations, or national alliances? The point of her essay is to contest the parochial mentality implicit in the.

2. *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* by Judith Butler 151pp, Verso, £16. This little book contains five fairly indignant essays by the distinguished Californian feminist and literary critic Judith Butler, written in protest against current American policies governing the Iraq war, the treatment of Palestinians and the state of the Guantánamo prisoners. Butler sharply rejects any idea that the destruction of the World Trade Centre justifies these violent measures. As she puts it: "That US boundaries were breached, that an unbearable vulnerability was exposed, that a terribl