

BETWEEN VULNERABILITY AND CONTAMINATION: RETHINKING THE SELF IN THE GLOBAL AGE¹

Elena Pulcini²

Abstract: Contemporary feminist thought undoubtedly has the merit of having called into question the paradigm of the modern *subject*: that is the figure of a sovereign subject. Despite immense differences, feminism has tried to rethink the subject by taking criticism of the modern paradigm as its starting point. The idea has emerged of a subject that takes leave of the modern Self's unilateralism by reintegrating the excluded, repressed, undervalued poles (whether they are difference, the body, the unconscious or care). In other words, what has long been considered "other" loses its negative connotation and becomes an element constituting the Self. While sharing this perspective, I have come up with an idea that could be defined as the *fertility of the negative*. Particularly inspired by the reflection of Georges Bataille, I have tried to put forward the notion of a *contaminated subject*.

Keywords: sovereign subject, contaminated subject, Bataille, Butler, global vulnerability.

The contaminated subject

Contemporary feminist thought undoubtedly has the merit of having called into question, albeit from very different points of view, the paradigm of the modern *subject*: that is the figure of a sovereign subject, as an autonomous and self-sufficient, logocentric entity, enclosed within a logic of identity. We can find a clear manifestation of this paradigm in the two hegemonic figures of modernity – the liberal tradition's *homo oeconomicus* and the *subject as a conscience* devised by Descartes – both based on dualism and opposing positive (reason, thought, freedom, male) and negative poles (passions, body, need, female). In other words, the sovereign subject is based on excluding what is each time considered

¹ Many of the issues discussed in this paper have been developed in Pulcini (2012).

² Prof. University of Florence, Italy. Email: elena.pulcini@unifi.it.

“other” from the subject itself. As a consequence, it is essentially unilateral.

Despite immense differences, feminism has tried to rethink the subject by taking criticism of the modern paradigm as its starting point. From Carol Gilligan’s ethics of care to the Italian theory of difference, from Jessica Benjamin and Nancy Chodorow’s psychoanalytical reflections to Judith Butler’s more recent reflections on the topic of responsibility, the idea has emerged of a subject that takes leave of the modern Self’s unilateralism by reintegrating the excluded, repressed, undervalued poles (whether they are difference, the body, the unconscious or care). In other words, what has long been considered “other” loses its negative connotation and becomes an element constituting the Self. It brings about a profound change in its structure of sense, extending its boundaries and opening up new potential.

While sharing this perspective, I have come up with an idea that could be defined as the *fertility of the negative*. By

reinstating its dark areas, the Self apparently loses power, autonomy and certainties, but acquires the ability to finally face up to that *otherness* constitutive of its deepest, most inalienable humus.

This means that we do not have to renounce the idea of the subject and decree its death, as a certain postmodern *vulgata* would have us do. Nor could it be sufficient to replace it with the idea of intersubjectivity.³ Rather we need to rethink it without presupposing its sovereignty. In other words, the subject is such due to its acceptance of the challenge stemming from the unshakeable materiality of the body, from the fracture of difference, from the obscurity of the unconscious. It is such because it is open to a process of *distortion* that prevents the identity from being recomposed, and causes its deposition from the sovereign position that modernity had bestowed upon it. So what I would like to do is also oppose the pathologies that were inevitably triggered by a subject that retains itself sovereign and absolute; that

³ Here I am referring to the concept present in Habermas’s thinking.

is, oppose the resulting dominion, the obsession with acquisition, the purely instrumental and utilitarian attitude, and above all, the narcissistic drift of the modern subject (Pulcini, 2003; 2012).

In this sense, I have been given precious input from the line of reflection, from the *Collège de Sociologie* to Derrida, proposing the deconstruction of some key notions of Western and modern thought from the inside, and a rethink of the very basis of their foundations. So, from this critical starting point, I have tried to put forward the notion of a *contaminated subject*, particularly inspired by the reflection of Georges Bataille.⁴ He configures, through the notion of “blessure” (wound), the image of a subject cut through by a permanent and constitutive *wound*, exposing it to contagion from otherness. As a result, he argues against all illusions of the Self’s separateness or self-sufficiency. “Oneself,” Bataille says, “is not the subject isolating itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of the subject and the object” (Bataille, 1988: 9).

Therefore, we must bid farewell to what has been defined as modernity’s *immunitary* paradigm (see Esposito, 2011) in order to rethink the subject outside the logic of conscience and identity. In my view, the dethroning process resulting from the Self’s recognition of an otherness that constitutes itself from within, or rather of an otherness disputing it from within, preventing the closure of its identity, is the necessary presupposition to outlining a different image of the subject. No longer atomistic, but open to the other, the subject is “affected” by the other, and willing, to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s words, to share, *partager* its very existence (see Nancy, 2000).

However, I must immediately clarify that to speak of contamination does not mean merely to speak of a subject being *in relationship* with the other. A large part of feminist thought has quite rightly put forward the idea of a subject *in relationship* in opposition to the self-centred and “logocentric” subject of Western modernity. But to use the term contamination is to place the stress on the

4 A recurring theme in Georges Bataille’s reflection.

fact that the relationship should not be understood as the reciprocal interaction between two sovereign and autonomous subjects, but as something *that constantly brings identity under discussion*. Contamination means *hosting* the other inside oneself and therefore being capable of recognizing the other insofar as the Self accepts otherness, *difference* within itself.

Italian feminism has placed great emphasis on the idea of difference, but I think that the idea of difference – above all if understood as sexual difference – could risk once again repropounding the dualisms upon which Western thought is based: unless it is assumed in a non-essentialistic sense, that is, to use the Blanchot's definition, as a “principle of internal dispute”, contesting all the subject's presumptions of self-sufficiency (see Blanchot, 1988). In other words, difference is what acts, to use a Freudian term, as an “uncanny”: as the internal dissonance that prevents the subject from encasing itself in its identity, and that brings its convictions over its identity under permanent debate.

Therefore, the contaminated subject is that which not only has a constitutive relationship with the other, but

that which lets itself be destabilised by the other/otherness and by the relationship insofar as, by recognizing its internal difference, it never corresponds to itself, nor does it encase itself in a rigid, clear-cut identity. On the contrary, it is exposed to the other in that it holds *traces of others* in itself.

The consciousness of vulnerability

A thinker who places particular emphasis on this need is Judith Butler in her recent reflections on ethics. Taking inspiration from Emmanuel Lévinas, Butler puts forward a radical rethink of the very idea of the subject, based on the death of the sovereign subject: “But this death, if it is a death, is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had. In other words, it is a necessary grief.” (Butler, 2009). That is, we do not have to decree the death of the subject *tout court*, but of the subject *as a conscience*, founded on claims of mastery and coherence, perfectly transparent to itself and capable of accounting for itself, enclosed in the egoic

presumption that it controls its own existence. Therefore, we “need to mourn” before we can possibly think of another structure of the Self: a Self aware of its constitutive dependence, of the unshakeable bond that links it to the other in a relationship of reciprocal interdependence.

In this sense we can talk of a reciprocal *recognition*. Not by chance has the theme of recognition, as set out by Hegel, been brought up again recently as part of the criticism of the liberal *homo oeconomicus* paradigm. This has been done by a series of authors who tend to underline and bring out the intrinsically relational and social nature of a subject that needs to be recognised by the other to obtain confirmation of its own dignity and identity (see Honneth, 1995; Ricoeur, 2005).

Therefore, this topic is highly important for rethinking the subject in relational terms, so long as it is not seen, Butler tells us while proposing a post-Hegelian view, as the recognition between two static and definitive identities, but between subjects-in-the-making. Capable of putting themselves at stake, these subjects are involved in a reciprocal

exchange that produces a displacement in their identity: “When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address.” Hence, to ask for or to give recognition is to “solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other. It is also to stake one’s own being, and one’s own persistence in one’s own being, in the struggle for recognition.” (Butler 2004; on the topic see also Butler, 2005).

This means that relations are not configured as a symmetrical relationship between two pre-constituted free and acting subjects, but as an “impingement” instigated by the other, an impingement that inaugurates the subject at the very moment in which its identity is expropriated, in which it is violated, causing its decentralization, its *wound*: “the *primat* or impress of the Other is primary, inaugurative, and there is no formation of a “me” outside of this

originally passive impingement [...]” (Butler, 2005: 97). Therefore, we must not simply oppose the idea of relationality to that of autonomy or sovereignty, but underline the effect of destabilisation and dispossession that relations with the other and dependence on the other produce in the subject, consigning it to a condition of *vulnerability*.

In both her texts, Butler comes back to this concept, originated by Lévinas (1981), several times. And I believe that in it we can grasp an affinity with my concept of contamination.

In other words, the Self is not formed without this original impingement, or violation, by the other. It calls upon me through the powerful compulsion of the Face, forcing me to recognize my condition of original non-freedom. Thus, it blocks the narcissistic and immunitary drifts of a subject that considers itself autonomous and self-sufficient. Vulnerability is a primary, original

situation. So much so that Butler sees it as the sign of being *human*, of the constitutive and inescapable fragility of the human condition.⁵ It is therefore something that we cannot avoid, something that “one cannot will away without ceasing to be human” (Butler, 2004: xiv), whose origins we cannot trace, because it is coeval to the very origin of life, preceding the formation of the subject.⁶ “That we are impinged upon primarily and against our will is the sign of a vulnerability and a beholdenness that we cannot will away.” (Butler, 2005:100)⁷. Even when this vulnerability becomes intolerable, when we are brutally reminded of it by being wounded and offended, we must avert every attempt to repress it or react to it violently, because this is where, we could say, the truth of being and the subject resides: the truth of relationships and the bond of reciprocity. Indeed, it is precisely when it reappears due to a failure, a defeat and the consequent pain,

5 “but there is a more general conception of the human with which I am trying to work here, one in which we are, from the start, given over to the other [...], given over to some set of primary others” (Butler, 2004: 31).

6 “Although I am insisting on referring to a common human vulnerability, one that emerges

with life itself, I also insist that we cannot recover the source of this vulnerability: it precedes the formation of ‘I’” (Butler, 2004: 31).

7 See also (Butler, 2004: 45): “What is prematurely, or belatedly, called the ‘I’ is, at the outset, enthralled, even if it is to a violence, an abandonment, a mechanism”.

that vulnerability can become a resource: an ethical resource wherein the very source of responsibility lies.

At this point I am not going to follow Butler (2005) in her undoubtedly interesting ethical proposal founded on the nexus between vulnerability and responsibility.⁸ What interests me, instead, is to underline her proposal to *put the idea of vulnerability in a positive light* so as to make it the foundation of a relational subject.

However, at this point a problem arises which could be formulated as follows: what is it that allows the subject to regain *perception* of its vulnerability? If it is true that the subject, since modernity, has considered itself sovereign and self-sufficient, consequently exposing itself to a narcissistic drift, which resources may we make use of to produce that necessary break so that we may overcome the paradigm of conscience and identity? In other words, there must be something – a fact, an event, an experience – that allows us to psychically regain access to the acknowledgement of our constitutive

fragility, producing that wound, in the Self's enclosed and narcissistic body, that opens the boundaries of identity and exposes it to the other.

We could say that the response suggested by Butler, prompted mainly by her reflections on the present day, consists of an invitation to make the most of what we could sum up as the experience of loss. When we lose something that is vital for us, through the death of loved ones for example, or lose our sense of security or the protection of the community in which we live, we experience grief, we sustain damage that breaks the autarchic illusion. “It tears us from ourselves” to reveal “something about who we are [...], something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or bonds that compose us.” (Butler, 2004: 22). In other words, *the experience of loss and failure* can produce the narcissistic wound that permits the reawakening, in the Self, of the consciousness of one's own vulnerability and constitutive dependence.

⁸ I dealt with the topic of responsibility in the global age in Pulcini (2006).

Now, the example at the basis of Butler's reflection is anything but coincidental: it is that highly significant symbolic event, the September 11 attack on the Twin Towers; a "global" event par excellence, in which the physical collapse of the towers seemed to correspond to a collapse in conscience,⁹ now bereft of the certainties of its sovereign position. With the "wound" inflicted on the body of the sovereign country *par excellence* and, in so doing, on the whole of the West, September 11 produced the end of all illusions of immunity and the traumatic revelation of a vulnerability that can no longer be denied.

It is unfortunately true, Butler observes, that the responses (of the Americans above all) to this event were inspired by the desire for repression and retaliation, resulting in dominion and violence; but it is also true that this event can be seen as a chance to reawaken consciences thanks to the ensuing perception of our human fragility and the precariousness of life. In other words, the

shock produced by loss, failure and grief can permit us, so long as we accept the resulting destabilization, to rediscover the intrinsic sociality of the human condition: in which we are all dependent on each other, exposed to the risk of relationships, united by a tie that connects our lives in a reciprocal and indissoluble bond: "Perhaps we can say that grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am. This possibility does not dispute the fact of my autonomy, but it does qualify that claim through recourse to the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own" (Butler 2004: 28).

Hence, vulnerability is a *resource*, an "extraordinary resource" that the Self must grasp and make the most of in order to regain its *relational* nature and the *sense* of its being in the world.¹⁰

⁹ Or rather, *Western* conscience.

¹⁰ "To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every

other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way" (Butler, 2004: 30).

Global vulnerability as the condition for a relational Self

Now, starting from Butler's reflections, I would like to further develop this line of interpretation by setting out a general thesis: that it is the global age that creates the objective conditions for this Self-awareness (see Pulcini, 2012).

First of all, because the principal and novel characteristic of the global age resides, as is often repeated, in the phenomenon of *interdependence*: the interdependence of events and lives, as a result of which everything that happens at the "local" level can, potentially at least, have repercussions at the "global" level, thus affecting the whole of humankind. September 11, which Butler is not alone in finding exemplary, is only the tip of the iceberg in this new condition from which no one can escape in order to take refuge in the reassuring position of the *spectator* who observes events from the outside. The erosion of territorial borders induced by economic and technological globalization means that today we are all, despite ourselves, potential *actors* in events, since at all times and in all places the lives of every one of us can be involved in matters

that apparently do not concern us, and potential *victims* of phenomena that we are not able to control. Unfortunately, many examples of this can be had from the disturbing succession of what have been defined "global risks" (Beck, 1992): from nuclear power to global warming, from the recurrent explosion of lethal viruses (SARS, BSE, Evola) to environmental catastrophes, and the current, long financial crisis producing knock-on effects on a planetary scale, revealing the impotence of traditional control policies; not to mention the frightening rise in atrocities caused by global terrorism. The "network" metaphor that often recurs in contemporary reflection doubtlessly turns out to be effective in describing this condition of interdependence, of common exposure to challenges that we cannot manage, yet neither can avoid. Due to the "time-space compression" (Harvey, 1989), due to the enormous development of information and communication technology annihilating distance and accelerating time, the world has paradoxically become at once boundless yet closed, lacking limits yet incredibly small and shrunken.

As Zygmunt Bauman (1999) says, we are like passengers on a pilotless plane, at the mercy of the insecurity and anguish caused by our perception of losing control over what happens. Insecurity, fear and disorientation have become our existential condition, to which we respond by taking apathetic refuge in the dimension of the *here and now*, in turn symptom of a disconcerting loss of future. Thus, we are in the presence of radical social changes that are becoming a real and proper anthropological mutation: the modern image of an autonomous Self, sovereign and dominator, is crumbling in the face of a condition of universal impotence and vulnerability. Every day we are exposed to experiences of loss and failure. And, nevertheless, nestling here is a potential resource. For the first time we have the possibility of transforming a negative situation into a precious opportunity since we are able, to use Bataille's words, to *grasp the chance*: that is, to *recognize* the truth of this condition and to inaugurate new possibilities.

By making vulnerability a generalized dimension extended to the whole of humankind, the global age allows us first of all to reverse the process of its

repression produced by the *hubris* of the modern Self. Secondly, it allows us to grasp the opportunity to change direction. Indeed, the subject is now in the position to regain, together with the awareness of its own fragility and neediness, the perception of the bond that unites it indissolubly to other lives and other destinies.

But all this means, in my opinion, underlining a particular dimension of the subject that has been for the most part ignored or undervalued by the Western and modern tradition: that is, the *emotional dimension* (Pulcini, 2006). The emotions in fact are the unmistakable manifestation of a *wound* inflicted on the closed and compact body of identity; that is, they are the expression of moments of self-dispossession, of the subject's being unseated from its sovereign position and from its illusion of holding rational control over events. Which by no means signifies that they are blind and irrational forces capable only of obscuring or distorting our comprehension of things and our actions. On the contrary, the emotions have their own particular "intelligence", as purported recently by Martha Nussbaum. They possess their own cognitive and evaluative

function, essentially “reveal[ing] us as vulnerable to events that we do not control” (Nussbaum, 2001: 12). And, I must add at once, they hold great value for us.

Thus, when we experience loss and failure, the Self’s scaffolding gives way, inevitably it falls due to an emotional shock that exposes us to something unexpected and unforeseen, upsetting our certainties and revealing their precariousness. Emotions, says Nussbaum once again, “involve acknowledgement of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency” (*Ibid.*); they are the eloquent symptom of our “neediness”. And just like all symptoms, we could say, they are the expression of a *sense* that cannot be ignored or repressed. On the contrary, it needs to be deciphered and made the most of, since this is where lies the profound, though often inconvenient and unutterable, truth of our human condition.

Thus, I would like to stress, the vulnerable subject is the one capable of *rediscovering contact with its own emotions*, of listening to them and making the most of them; seeing them as an unignorable message that can act as a

prelude to a change in the direction of our actions.

Of course, this operation is anything but easy. First of all, because the enormity of the global challenges and the consequential sense of impotence drives the subject to implement defence mechanisms and to repress so as to preserve the psyche from intolerable truths – as often happens, for example, in the face of the possibility of a nuclear holocaust or the probable devastating consequences of environmental risks – prompting attitudes of *denial* and apathetical indifference. Second, because where, on the other hand, *pathos* forcefully reappears, like in the case of a terrorist attacks, it mainly takes on negative connotations: of fear, anger, hatred towards the other, who hence becomes the enemy to demonize and exorcize, as has been the exact case since September 11.

Thus, it is not just a matter of regaining contact with our emotions, but of managing them, directing them in a selective manner: opposing fear with solidarity, hatred with compassion, anger with hospitality, the desire for power with brotherhood; that is, reactivating the emotional dynamic that allows us to *fight*

*passions with passions.*¹¹ We can react to the experience of loss and failure with violence, fomented by destructive passions, and with the desire to annihilate those considered responsible; but we can also react by reawakening what I would define *empathetic passions*, inspired by the desire for belonging and reciprocity (On this concept, see Pulcini, 2016).

We have seen that the global age poses the objective conditions for this conversion insofar as it makes us *all equal in our weakness and vulnerability*. And therefore it provides the premises for individuals to recognize that they are members of a common humankind: bound one to the other by sharing the same challenges and the same destiny.

The challenge of difference: accepting contamination

Therefore, the notion of vulnerability seems to be an effective foundation, through the destabilizing power of the negative, for thinking of a relational subject; a subject aware of the

fact that the world is essentially, to use Jean-Luc Nancy’s words, co-existence, “being-with” (*être avec*) (Nancy, 2000).

Nevertheless, the global age places before us a further challenge, for which the awareness of vulnerability is not a sufficient answer. I am alluding to the challenge that comes from the *other*, and in particular the other meant as *he who is different*: a challenge that makes it necessary for us to go back to the idea of contamination. One of the novel effects of globalization is to produce, through great migratory flows, a mixture of cultures and races, religions and languages. By breaking down previous state and territorial borders, this gives rise to increasingly multicultural societies on a planetary scale. Not by chance has “multiculturalism” become a watchword for our times; a concept that without doubt appears eloquent and fertile where it can bring out, in descriptive terms at least, the problematic nature of different people living together.

Indeed, we are well aware that many of the conflicts across the planet

¹¹ Here I propose a correction to Hirschmann’s thesis (Hirschmann, 1977), in which passions are fought with interests.

today originate due to the difficulty of multicultural co-existence, since this mobility makes regressive forms of *pathos* explode, often resulting in the unexpected revival of archaic forms of atrocity and violence previously thought outmoded, a thing of the past. In this connection, we speak of *identity conflicts* (see Marramao, 2003; Sen, 2006), because what is at stake is the very identity (cultural, ethnic, national or religious) of those who feel excluded and humiliated by a social context subordinating them to a hegemonic identity.

In the West above all, today the problem consists of the fact that *the other* is he who crosses our borders to become a close, internal presence, with whom we come into contact day in, day out. The other, the stranger (whether *émigré*, refugee or illegal immigrant) is now among us, he lives in our cities, he crosses our roads. The other can no longer be relegated to the outside, as the global age coincides with the disappearance of that separate and reassuring “elsewhere” to which we can confine those who threaten (or rather, who we believe to threaten) social cohesion. And neither does he come then go; on the contrary, he can

increasingly be defined as Georg Simmel’s figure of the “stranger within”: “the person who comes today and stays tomorrow”, as Simmel puts it (Simmel, 1950: 402); and who consequently cannot be expelled or assimilated as he has decided to endeavour to keep his own culture and tradition.

Thus, with his unavoidable proximity, the figure of the other is a perturbing presence challenging the Self’s claim to immunity. And as a consequence he becomes the subject of negative projections by a Self that becomes entrenched in defending its identity by “inventing” an enemy to make a “scapegoat” for its own insecurity and fears. Therefore, this projective trend does not only concern single multicultural situations, but seems to affect the whole globe, where the tendency to identify the other as the enemy seems to be becoming increasingly pervasive and to be taking on increasingly bitter tones, so as to legitimize not only disastrous preventive wars, but also the success of misleading formulae such as the “clash of civilizations” (Huntington, 1996). Not by chance is the strategy undertaken in this sense to rekindle those dynamics of de-

humanization that have always legitimized violence against the other, but that today take on “horrorific” forms of brutality against the defenceless (see Cavarero, 2009), unveiling the deformed face of Western democracies. Suffice it to think of Abu Ghraib and the repulsive image of the American woman soldier smiling, indifferent and self-satisfied, as she slams her foot down on a pile of the inert bodies of Iraqi prisoners.

The *other* is still, or I should say today more than ever, as Spivak (1999; 2003) reminds us, someone who is not wholly human and as a consequence is deprived of his status of subject, authorizing all ideologies and practices preaching annihilation and humiliation; needless to add, the mirror response to this situation was to spark the fuse of Islamic terrorism, followed by its frightening escalation.

The process of constructing and dehumanizing the other, with the evident goal of exclusion and dominion, is constant and has been recouped in the global age in the more or less disguised forms of the defence of freedom, rights and democracy. Though leaving aside extreme forms of violence and abuse of

power, this process is nevertheless evident in a highly emblematic case, that is, the French debate on the right of Muslim women to wear the veil. Hiding beneath the pretext of laicity and freeing women from the oppression of the religious and traditional patriarchy, Spivak says, is the imperialist gaze (the “imperial I-eye”) of a West that makes women the stake in a “clash of civilizations” aimed at reclaiming its own identity and values. And, we could add, this is becoming increasingly the case the more this identity and these values quaver in the face of the contaminations produced by global society.

So, first we need to unmask the deceit, at times concealed behind even the best of intentions, to prompt a process of (self-)criticism and deconstruction that shatters all claims to absolutization and identity autarchy. In this sense, it is not sufficient to appeal to liberal tolerance, and even less so to compassion and goodwill, since the intrinsic risk of this type of attitude is to keep the subalternity of whomever concerned intact; and therefore it is to deny the other, however unconsciously and unintentionally, of the status of subject.

Therefore, the only possible response is to shatter the illusion of immunity through continual criticism and deconstruction of one's own identity: that is, to *accept contamination*; or rather to see contamination itself as a possible "resource" in order to bring one's own identity under discussion and overcome the Self/other dualism. Paradoxically, what avails us of this chance in the global age are those very same processes producing negative outcomes: that is, the other's proximity in space. If it is true that the other's becoming internal is what intensifies conflict and violence, it is also true that this very fact is what gives us the possibility to change the relationship with the other. However, this can only be so long as we are willing to recognize it as a *difference*, that is, as a presence representing a diversity at once impossible to avoid and to assimilate. In other words, the fact that the other becomes internal, that I find myself day in, day out in the presence of his Face, as Lévinas would say, comes to be the factor of challenge and resistance that we can respond to with violence, but that we can also react to by opening ourselves up to the contamination

of his presence, exposing ourselves to the risk of contact or contagion.

What is needed in this case too is *recognition*: to recognize the other as the figure that embodies a difference which radically questions not just the Self's autonomy, but also the roots of its identity.

I would like to immediately underline that this does not mean accepting *just any* difference; because there are differences that attract me and differences that I do not accept, that make me feel uneasy. Accepting (and making the most of) contamination does not mean denying this unease, which can on the contrary *perturb* me, make me question my identity. Therefore, we must not recoil from the unease that we feel when faced with situations that we cannot manage to accept, we need to recognize our ambivalences towards the challenge posed to us by the other. Only a hypocritical and superficial tolerance can deny the fact that at times the other's difference makes me feel uneasy, it exposes me to situations that for me are unacceptable: like seeing an Indian woman submitting to the despotic authority of her husband, or an Islamic woman covered by a burka and condemned to exclusion from all social

life, or an African woman undergoing infibulation.

Difference is always perturbing, and it becomes even more so when it rattles the very roots of the values and principles that we are deeply attached to. So, in these cases, it is legitimate to defend our values and principles, appealing to what we consider our better Western inheritance like rights, freedom, responsibility (of which we are rightly proud in the face of the ideological drift of fundamentalisms and the resulting terrorism). However, in order for this to happen, we need to be aware of the *relative and contingent* nature of our identity. In other words, the problem is not denying ourselves in order to welcome the other, but accepting the inevitable face-to-face deriving from *really* coming into contact with the other. To go back to the topic of passions, we must listen to that bundle of emotions that emerge from encountering difference in order to try to understand it and understand its sense. Because, I must repeat, the emotions *do* reveal sense. Often prevailing is the prejudice that they are totalitarian and unchangeable, almost a sort of natural destiny that we cannot change; on the contrary, the emotions

presuppose cognitive processes and evaluation, which we can modify and make change direction the moment in which we are able to give them a sense.

We need to exit the sterile alternative between refusal and tolerance, in order to accept the *risk of the relationship* with the other, putting our own passions and convictions at stake. What is important is that the *contingent* character of our identity remains steady by recognizing our own *difference within*; considering identity (our own identity) something that is constantly fluctuating and developing: which means exposed to novelty, to the unknown, to the feeling of bewilderment we get when we venture into new territories. This means that, in this case too, *recognition* cannot be seen as the reciprocal confirmation of rigid and definitive identities, but as a trend open to reciprocal transformation, requiring us to put up and deal with the *pathos* and unease that inevitably pertain to the relationship between different people.

Therefore, if we are to think of a relational subject, we cannot consider a *vulnerable subject* alone, that is, a subject capable of breaking free from its atomist chrysalis to open up to the other as a

constitutive element of a Self dethroned from its sovereign position. It also means thinking of a *contaminated subject*, that is, a subject capable of hosting and recognizing difference, of putting its own identity at stake and opening up to the possibility of change. We have seen that, starting from vulnerability and contamination, the global age poses the *objective* conditions for rethinking the subject, insofar as it produces not just the *interdependence of events and lives*, but also the *coexistence of different peoples* at planetary level. Our task is to turn this objective chance into the *subjective* capacity to respond to the challenges of the global world.

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