"ESTOU DE LUTO PELA VIDA NA TERRA" – LEVANDO A PRECARIEDADE E O LUTO PARA ALÉM DO HUMANO[1]

"I'm in Mourning for Life on Earth" – Taking Precariousness and Grievability Beyond the Human

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RESUMO

Os contributos de Judith Butler para a filosofia e a política tornaram-se um dos esporos mais fecundos do pensamento contemporâneo. Envolvendo um vasto leque de pensamento crítico, abrem uma fonte a muitos daqueles que falam da resistência à norma. Este artigo pretende introduzir uma leitura antiespecista dos seus principais contributos para a epistemologia, a ontologia e a ética, nomeadamente através dos conceitos de enquadramento, precariedade e enlutamento, com especial incidência na sua conceção do corpo. Estas ideias são discutidas na perspetiva de uma possibilidade: a de levar a proposta de Butler para além do humano. A reflexão mostra que elas abrem, de facto, caminhos interessantes para a filosofia antiespecista, embora algumas das suas implicações não sejam isentas de dificuldades.

Palavras-chave: Precariedade. A Possibilidade de Luto. Ética Anti-Especista. Corpos Para Além do Humano.

ABSTRACT

Judith Butler's contributions to philosophy and politics have become one of the most fruitful spores in contemporary thought. Engaging with a wide range of critical thinking, they open a source to many of those who speak from the resistance to the norm. This article aims at introducing an antispeciesist reading of their major contributions to epistemology, ontology and ethics, namely through the concepts of frame, precariousness and grievability, with a special focus on their conception of the body. These ideas are discussed from the perspective of a possibility: that of taking Butler's proposal beyond the human. The reflection shows that they do open interesting paths for antispeciesist philosophy, while some of its implications are not free of difficulty.

Key-words: Precariousness. Grievability. Antispeciesist Ethics. Bodies beyond-the-human.

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INTRODUÇÃO

fig. 1: Protesters from *Insalute Britain* sit on top of a vehiacle as they block the A20 in Kent (September 2021). They are holding two messages: "I want my children to survive" and "Arested 4 times because I am in mourning fot the life on Earth. Author: Gareth Fuller.

Is it possible to grieve lives that are not human? To mourn the death of others so paradoxically near and distant to our species, understanding their vulnerability and fragility? If so, what does it tell us politically?

The answer to these questions requires first a close insight on the ideas of grief and precariousness that the deaths of others may cause, as well as its social and political signification. And it is Judith Butler's later works which give quite a rich look on the matter, spanning throughout epistemology, ethics, and ontology.

By questioning whose lives could be mourned and grieved, Butler points at the anonymity of all those lives made invisible to the norm – an idea that works for most of the uncounted lives in the contemporary maze of oppressions. This has led them[4] to become a referent thinker not only for the queer social movement, but also for other fights against unjust violence and invisibilization. Here, the focus will be placed on their notions of precariousness, grievability and frame. These three ideas are tied to other paramount concepts around which their main arguments orbit: relationality,

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[4] In the beginning of 2020, Butler gave a lecture at the Technischen Universität Berlin where they showed their preference for the pronouns "they/them" to refer to themselves (Fischer, 2020). This decision is respected in this article for consistency.

interdependency, and vulnerability – all of which commonly appear in the antispeciesist discourse.

In the following pages, the reflection will rise from a common ground with Butler: acknowledging the inescapable embodied existence of any subject that implies its fragility, neediness, and dependence. Considering that there is no possible being in the world that is fundamentally autonomous, dis-connected, and independent, this affirmation constitutes concomitantly the affirmation of an immanent relationality appliable to any existent being. Such relationality goes hand in hand with a sense of dispossession of the self (Butler, 2004b; 2005) – bluntly: what I am is fulfilled with my relations to others in such a way that I do not belong exclusively to me. In this regard, dispossession is profoundly experienced through grief, since one goes through grief once the relation to another is lost. As Butler argues, when we lose a beloved one, there is a subsequent recognition of her absence, but not only: we acknowledge, and experience, the loss of the *bond* tying us together – and, with it, the fraction of ourselves enclosed in that bond (Butler, 2004b: 22).

Grieving is an act of major emotional necessity that is performed and made public through discourse, whatever the number of hearers. Precisely because it is *also* a discursive act, grieving finds its limits by being inscribed in a certain truth regime[5] (Butler, 2004b). The possibility of grieving publicly gives account of the frames of recognition and, above all, of the limits of intelligibility in which the subject is immersed. In this sense, there is a core struggle for recognition that is, in the end, a struggle to recognise the vulnerability, dependence, and relationality of every subject.

Butler's proposal operates in a three-sided manoeuvre: that of epistemology, that of ontology and that of ethics. The reflection that follows studies the main ideas of each in order to explore the possibilities of broadening what Butler calls the "frames of intelligibility", so that beings beyond the human can be considered grievable – that is, valuable and deserving to be preserved against unjust torture and death.

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[5] Butler poses their reflection on these terms after Michel Foucault's work (Foucault, 2000). For a broader incursion on the concept, see (Weir, 2008).

2. ONTOLOGY: PRECARIOUS LIVES, PRECARIOUS BODIES

It could sound ambitious to state that Butler's study of precariousness leads to a reflection on ontological grounds. Nevertheless, their treatment of the concept cannot but be placed in such a terrain, for it points towards an inescapable condition that marks being and existence.

The first matter to take into consideration when trying to define precariousness in Butler is its confrontation to two other concepts that the author repeatedly handles in their works: precarity and vulnerability. For the first, in the introduction of *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (2009), the author gives a clear definition of both "intersecting concepts" (25). While precariousness is a characteristic of all life, that is, that every life is dependent on others, exposed to the possibility of violence, being its persistence "in no sense guaranteed", "precarity designates that politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, 2009: 25-26). That is, while precariousness may be a democratizing trait, even an equalizing one, given that all life is precarious in essence (all life is susceptible of harm, violence and death), precarity destabilizes the equal distribution of such a vital condition and gives account, precisely, of the inequalities in the exposure to damage by contextual reasons (social, political, and economic structures mostly – but also, as we will see, the existing norms of recognition and intelligibility). Therefore, Butler will refer to precariousness as a "more or less existential conception (…) [that] is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of 'precarity'" (Butler, 2009: 3).

While precarity is then a political problem (even a distributive one), precariousness, for Butler, can never be *recognized* in political terms. This is explained by the complex conception of recognition that the author handles, and the difference there is between cognizing and recognizing (Petherbridge, 2019). We can find then, at the core of this political problem, that there is a broader epistemological question that requires attention. But we will come back to this issue.

The difference between precariousness and vulnerability is, perhaps, more difficult to establish. It seems that, when Butler uses the term 'precariousness' in their works of the first decade of the 2000s, the author is applying it to accompany 'life'; thus referring to the precarious condition of every life – "the fact that one's life is always in some sense in the hands of the other (…) that its survival is dependent on what we might call a social network of hands" (Butler, 2009: 14). On the contrary, one can see the term 'vulnerable' or 'vulnerability' accompanying the idea of 'body', arguing almost always for its openness to harm and its injurability – even though the first, its vulnerability, is not reducible to the second, its injurability (Butler, 2009: 34). In some cases, 'vulnerability' and 'vulnerable' are used in a broader sense following its common usage, being applied to "breakable" concepts or things, such as a normative frame (Butler, 2009: 10) or nations (Butler, 2009: 43), referring to the susceptibility to harm and destruction. It is worth mentioning, though, that in one of her last published works, *The Force of Nonviolence* (2021), the author leaves aside the term 'precariousness' in favour of 'vulnerability' (see, mostly, this book's *Postscript* in Butler, 2021a: 185-204).

This difference in usage makes a more fundamental question appear in sight: what the body is. For the aim of this article, a passage of *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Justice* can be specially illuminating (Butler, 2004b: 26). In it, four major ideas around this concept are given emphasis: i) the breakability and fragility not only to "the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence"; ii) the publicness of the body, since "constituted as a social phenomenon, my body is and is not mine"; iii) the dispossession implied in such publicness; and iv) the relationality that allows any body's survival and that neglects anyone's full autonomy and independence.

What is of more interest here are the second and fourth of the above. Nonetheless, a word can be said on the other two. For the first, it is important to take into account that Butler does not consider that precariousness implies solely the possibility of being violented, but the fact of any body's neediness and dependence on others. In fact, care does acquire centrality in the author's reflection (see, i.e., Butler, 2009: 14) in line with other feminist thinkers (Mackenzie et al., 2014; Cavarero, 2000, 2008, 2016; Fineman,

2008, 2017, 2020; Roelvink & Zolkos, 2015). For the third, it can be better explained after a brief insight on the publicness of the body.

Butler writes that the bodies we inhabit "are not quite ever only our own" (Butler, 2004b: 26), that is, that they are more public than private entities. This relates to the idea of exposure that covers the materiality of the body and to the relationality within which all bodies exist. Publicness becomes, thus, their very *milieu* of existence. Not because the body "sees and is seen", as Merleau-Ponty once suggested, but because "the body is less an entity than a relation" (Butler, 2016: 19). This means that the body, in its being pierced by norms and discourse, is given sense (or, rather, all its senses) through the web of meaning and the web of lives that it integrates. That is why Butler will say that the body is a "social phenomenon", an expression that they use elsewhere too (Butler, 2009: 33).

Considering that the relations intersecting a body is, to the broadest extent, what constitutes it, one can easily reach the third idea: the annihilation of the full propriety of our own bodies. The question of dispossession, as was briefly commented above, arises then with its greatest force in this point. "Given over from the start to the world of others", as Butler writes, "it bears their imprint" (Butler, 2004b: 26). This stresses not only the exposure and openness of the body, but its immersion in a world that already existed and that defines, more than our conscious agency and willingness, its possibilities and subjectivity.

Finally, the author's conception of the precariousness of life (and, extensively, of bodies too) includes the questioning of the desirability, and plausibility, of autonomy. Following Olivia Guaraldo's analysis (Guaraldo, 2012), Butler seems to pursue an ethics of the non-sovereign subject. In this sense, there is an assumption of dependency in the ontological definition of the human (or, with Butler, of any body) that effaces any possibility of constructing a strong notion of autonomy, independence and sovereignty that may be compatible with this assumption. Actually, the confrontation to the liberal traditional subject is recurrent in Butler's writings, pointing towards the construction of a social ontology, or a relational ontology. rather than the usual individualistic ontology that characterizes Western thought. Nevertheless, this idea carries an implication that will be discussed in the last section

of this article: the neglection of fully accomplishing authenticity and uniqueness.

3. ETHICS: THE ADDRESS OF THE OTHER'S GRIEVABILITY

The idea of grievability is plausibly one of Butler's most original pillars of thought. Inseparable from the notions of precariousness, vulnerability, relationality, and dispossession, the normative aspiration of the concept resides in contributing to a radical equality in the value of all lives. Being defined as the capacity to be mourned by others, "to say that a life is grievable", writes Butler, "is to claim that a life, even before it is lost, is, or will be, worthy of being grieved in the occasion of its loss" (Butler, 2021a: 75). Thus, grief, as a noble act of recognition, evidences the value of the life that is cried for. That is why it involves, to some extent, acknowledgement: on the one hand, of the value of the life that was lived; on the other, of the imprint that the loss of that life leaves in those who grieve it (Butler, 2021a: 105). Actually, Butler writes that "grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (Butler, 2009: 14), this meaning that value is expressed through grief and grief through value, in a somewhat bidirectional implication, when a life is lost.

But the acknowledgement of life is only posterior to imagining the possibility of its death. Recognising the potential loss (or the factual loss) of a life depends on some conditions belonging to the 'truth regimes' that follow the Foucauldian idea (Butler, 2021a: 105) – or, as we will see next, on the frames of normativity in which the grieved and grieving lives are inscribed.

Plausibly like the concept of precarity, grievability can be allocated and distributed inside a social and political context – for instance, in *Precarious Life*, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Butler stresses critically the differential treatment that the victims of that attack and the posterior victims of US military actions were given (Butler, 2004b: 35-41). If we took it to more contemporary grounds, it is easy to establish an analogy with the unbalanced treatment that Western media is giving to the deaths of Israeli and Palestinian people, or the little attention that is being paid to the uncountable

deaths of migrants in the Mediterranean Sea, rendering them invisible and unworthy of ethical concern.[6]

It is because of its distributive nature, responding to concrete political decisions, privileges, and truth regimes, that it can also become a parameter for justice (Butler, 2021a: 58-59). More precisely, Butler is convinced that "grievability is a defining feature of equality, [and] those whose grievability is not assumed are those who suffer inequality—unequal value" (Butler, 2021a: 108).

It should be specified, nonetheless, that the idea of grief that is being expressed here is to occur in a public space, for the sharing of mourning makes up for a great part of its curative and political characteristics. In fact, prohibition of public grieving and foreclosure of the public space to those effects is one of the most hurtful violences, as Sofocles's *Antigone* showed almost 2500 years ago (Butler, 2004b: 36). It is then important to stress that there are modes of publicly valuing a life – that is, of publicly, collectively, affirming that "this is or was a life", implying in this assertion its irrefutable value. For the author, these modes include memorialization, safeguarding, recognition, and the minimization of its precarity in order to preserve that life (Butler, 2021a: 116). In this line, grieving becomes the most political act of social life. It not only involves social and political engagement but determines a relevant part of each person's identity and process of identity formation.[7]

In *The Force of Nonviolence*, Butler tries to advocate for a "radical equality of the grievable" (Butler, 2021a: 56) that may serve as a basis for an ethics of nonviolence. The principle of equalizing grievability is paired with precariousness/vulnerability in that, as exposed bodies, open to violence and needed of care, there is a common condition of potential death, after which an equally distributed subjection to grief should ensue (Butler, 2004b: 30). There is thus a normative, more than descriptive, aim: "that every life

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[6] On the other hand, thinking in blunt antispeciesist terms, it is not hard to apprehend the lack of grievability allowed to lives beyond the human, such as those whose existence starts and ends in a slaughterhouse.

[7] As Butler writes: To grieve, and to make grief itself into a resource for politics, is not to be resigned to inaction, but it may be understood as the slow process by which we develop a point of identification with suffering itself. The disorientation of grief—"Who have I become?" or, indeed, "What is left of me?" "What is it in the Other that I have lost?"—posits the "I" in the mode of unknowingness (Butler, 2004b: 30).

ought to be grievable, thus positing a utopic horizon within which theory and description must work" (Butler, 2021a: 106). But, as we have just commented, the allocation of grievability is far from being egalitarian in contemporary societies – and this is explained by the normative frames defining whose life is grievable and valuable, and whose is not.

4. EPISTEMOLOGY: EMBODIED SUBJECTS IN DISCURSIVE REALITIES

In the introduction of *Frames of War*, Butler explains the epistemological problem that permeates the ontological, ethical, and political questions of apprehending the precariousness of life, opening thus the possibility of its grievability. The author starts from the assumption that "specific lives cannot be apprehended as injured or lost if they are not first apprehended as living" (Butler, 2009: 1). Success in apprehending a life will depend, to a great extent, on the perceptual capacity to conceive that life as such – which, in turn, depends on the rules that allow the "production" of that life discursively. There is thus a "normative production of ontology" that "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" (Butler, 2009: 3).
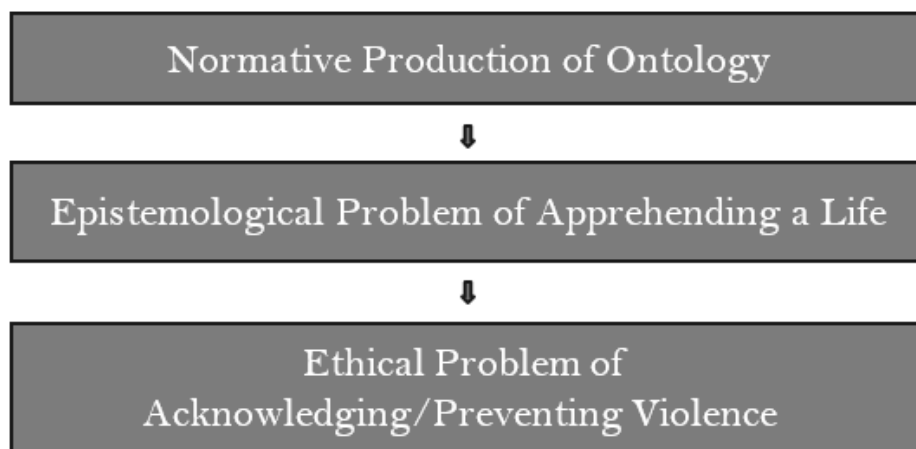
Put graphically:

fig. 2: Dynamics of Recognition.

The normative production of ontology is defined by the frames of power to which such lives are subordinated. These frames of power define the recognizability of the lives that are apprehended and, consequently, mark the possibility of their recognition. That is, recognizability precedes recognition. This gives sense to Butler's assertion that, for a life to be considered as lost or injured, it must first be apprehended as a life – and, we could add, a life that is marked by bodily exposure, openness to violence and harm, and needed of care[8]. The capacity of being recognized as such, its recognizability, precedes thus any possibility of recognition.

But Butler warns us that "[recognizability] is *not* a quality or potential of individual humans" (Butler, 2009: 5). If it were, there would be no problem other than individual development. Rather, recognizability responds to preset norms and conditions of recognition that are socially built. That is, recognizability transcends, is located *outside*, and does not necessarily belong, to 'the *individual* human'. Therefore, for something to be recognized means to introduce it into a preset structure of recognizability. The latter is the antechamber to the possibility of being recognized – an inescapable antechamber decorated with the existing norm that will give rise to the recognition, or not, of a subject (or even to the mere possibility of the doubt of its recognition).

For this very reason, Butler will say, what is at stake is the question of "how such norms operate to produce certain subjects as 'recognizable' persons and to make others decidedly more difficult to recognize" (Butler, 2009: 6). Thus, when the author asks, "whose is a grievable life?", they are asking for the norms defining whose life would be grievable. In this sense, "the problem is not merely how to include more people within existing norms, but to consider how existing norms allocate recognition differentially" (*id.*). At this point, Butler questions the very root of what will determine the apprehension of vulnerability beyond the human body.

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[8] Again, even though it is not made explicit throughout these pages, the question of care is quite relevant in Butler's overall reflection (mostly when it comes to the ethics of nonviolence, as in Butler, 2021). In this regard, they enter into dialogue with other contemporary feminist thinkers, of which one important interlocutor is Adriana Cavarero (see Huzard & Woodford, 2021; Sáez Tajafuerce, 2014; Butler & Cavarero, 2007; Pulkkinen, 2020).

> If recognition is an act or practice undertaken by at least two subjects, and which, as the Hegelian frame would suggest, constitutes a reciprocal action, then recognizability describes those general conditions on the basis of which recognition can and does take place. It seems, then, that there are still two further terms to understand: apprehension, understood as a mode of knowing that is not yet recognition, or may remain irreducible to recognition; and intelligibility, understood as the general historical schema or schemas that establish domains of the knowable. (...) A life has to be intelligible as a life, has to conform to certain conceptions of what life is, in order to become recognizable. So just as norms of recognizability prepare the way for recognition, so schemas of intelligibility condition and produce norms of recognizability (Butler, 2009: 6-7).

This passage is key, for it explains the epistemological structures of the dynamics of recognition, that include both apprehension and intelligibility. Again, put graphically:
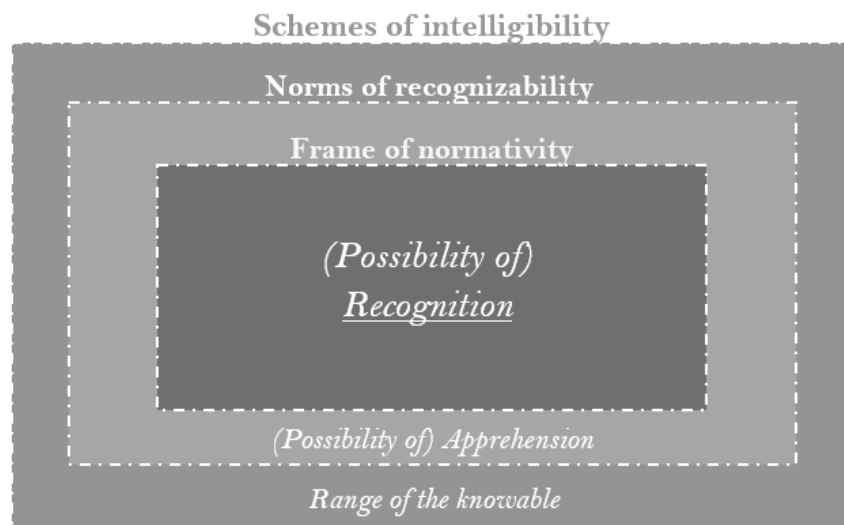

fig. 3: Epistemilogical Frames.

It is in the schemes of intelligibility that the key point of the question lies. It is by them that the 'range of the knowable' is defined – that is, whatever can be conceived, whatever is understood to exist and the form in which it exists, even whatever can be imagined, is determined by basic and primordial schemes of intelligibility.

Their nature of cutting patterns of the knowable is, nonetheless, neither static nor unique. Schemes of intelligibility need themselves to be (re)productive. They need to allow for creativity outside and within the nor-

mative framework operating in a certain context. They are themselves changeable and allow for the mutability of the norms of recognizability that pave the way to recognition. Schemes of intelligibility allow the opening up of breaches inside the dominant frame of normativity, by calling into question its givenness.

The ultimate proof of the possibility of rupture (of the 'vulnerability' of the frames, we could even say) is to be found in astonishment and anguish. The broken frame surprises itself in the capacity to subvert established norms, in the contestation of hegemonic power, and in the sorrow and agony against violent situations that the frame normalizes and narrativizes. And here the role of the arts and humanities is key: by means of their disruptive critical thinking and counter-hegemonic doings, the norms suffer the dynamicity of what they expect to hold statically.[9]

It is the breakability or motility of the frame, a motility that is needed too in order for the frame to become hegemonic, which also accounts for its iterability[10] (Butler, 2009: 12). But in this dynamicity, it will only be the "collapsibility of the norm" that will allow the permanence of the frame, even if this frame changes certain characteristics. In other words, "the norm functions precisely by way of managing the prospect of its undoing, an undoing that inheres in its doings" (*id.*).

Butler's goal is to help understand how this dynamic, driving logic of the frame is related to the possibility of apprehending a life in a way that is susceptible of being mourned. This means that precariousness must also be incorporated as "an aspect of what is apprehended in what is living" (Butler, 2009: 13). But, as commented above, "precariousness itself cannot be properly *recognized*" (*id.*). Precariousness is prior to recognition just as the rules of recognizability were prior to recognition. Thus, precariousness can be apprehended, just as a life can be apprehended, though not necessarily recognized – which would explain the differential distribution of *precarity*.

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[9] An example of this are the photographs of Abu Ghraib or the *Poems from Guantánamo*, that Butler comments at different stages in *Frames of War,* even though their point is to stress the suffering of lives not considered grievable. See, specially, (Butler, 2009: 55-62).

[10] It is useful and interesting to observe that "iterability" derives from the Latin "iterare", which means "the same" after its Indo-European root "*e-, *i-" (to be found too in "idem, eadem, idem") and "repetition" after the Indo-European "*tero" (Roberts and Pastor, 2009). The frame's iterability would, in this sense, refer to the possibility of repeating itself anew.

Indeed, it is the author's aim to make understand what it is that precedes the apprehension of precariousness, that may allow a subsequent recognition of life, dignified, and which thus makes it possible to fight to change the framework of intelligibility in which it is inscribed. It is, in fact, the capacity of one life to be mourned by another, its grievability: "The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life. Grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of the living being as living, exposed to non-life from the start" (Butler, 2009: 15).

That is why we could portray Butler's introduction of precarity and precariousness into the above explanation in the following way:
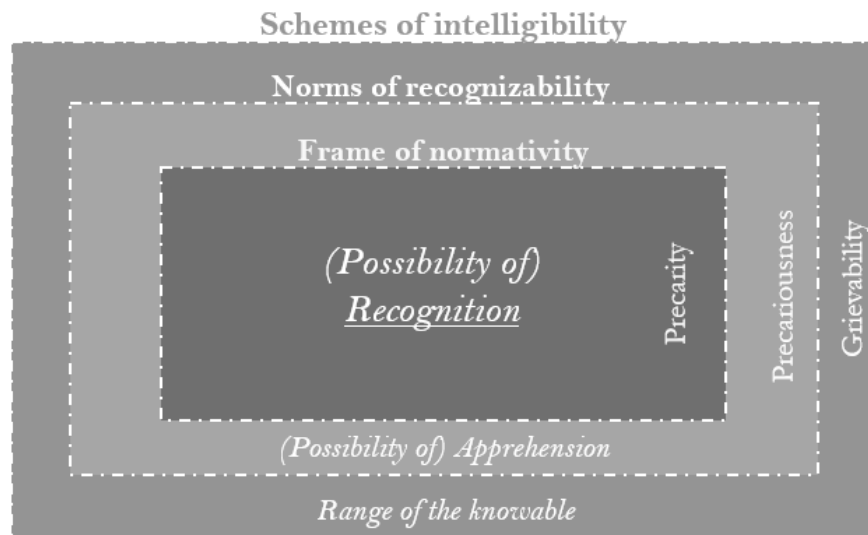

fig. 4: Precarity, precariousness and grievability in the epistemological frames.

It is on the basis of including in our realm of the knowable the possibility (and the capacity) of a grievable life that the apprehension of our precariousness, as a feature of ontological normativity, can be facilitated. It is also in this way that precarity can be recognized as the result of a contingency that exacerbates precariousness. But how can precariousness be included in it, how can we insist that precariousness is always already within it, that it is inescapable to being, and that it is not exclusive to the human (something that Butler admits repeatedly, as in Butler, 2009: 13, 19; Butler, 2021a: 58, 72-73)?

5. VULNERABILITY AND GRIEF BEYOND THE HUMAN: A CRITICAL STANDPOINT

The previous lines have briefly presented a portion of Butler's main contributions to philosophy inside the spheres of ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Through the ideas of precariousness, relationality, and grievability, as well as in their explanation of the functioning of the frames of intelligibility, many paths of thought have opened to think the concrete case of (not yet) grievable lives beyond the human. Indeed, even the author gives a hint towards this direction when they write about precariousness as "a shared condition of human life (indeed, as a condition that links human and non-human animals)" (Butler, 2009: 13).

There is, though, a matter that may rise difficulty: Butler's neglect to ascribe a full, genuine uniqueness to bodies that are "less an entity than a relation" (Butler, 2016: 19). Their criticism is aimed at the impossibility to perceive the extent of one's singularity. In fact, Butler argues that affirming the authenticity and uniqueness of each being carries the risk of contemplating the possibility of its total negation. This clashes with the very idea of the relational being: the total negation of a "subject" enclosed within herself is not possible because her being transcends her own body and her own person (she is herself and all the relations that pass through her). To achieve her complete negation would imply also negating all the relations that constitute her. Since this is not possible, the affirmations of authenticity and singularity should be claimed carefully. But maybe the most important consequence of this critique is that it opens a door towards political action, making it possible to construct, on the basis of corporeality, a space of resistance against oppression and injustice – for no one could ever be completely negated.

The second response points at the danger of anthropocentrism that this criticism (and proposal of resistance) entails. Put quite directly: one needs not be aware of its singularity for one's uniqueness to be real. On the contrary, that is rather a matter of (the certainly limited) *human* ability, if we may, to *concede recognition* of such uniqueness – whether to others or to oneself. This does not mean, though, that lives beyond the human are not immersed in a relationality and intercorporeity forging too their uniqueness

(allowing thus their resistance, in the case of their loss, in other singularities). But it points at the limits of acknowledging uniqueness: the essentially *human* limits of it.

Following the same steps that Butler took in their reflection, one could turn now to the question of grief, for the inescapable relationality of every body concedes the affliction of loss in others. It is obvious today that multiple species beyond the human are capable of grieving their companions, whether human or non-human, as well as there can be an interspecies experience of grief. But, as with the explanation in Butler, one must be aware of where exactly one is situated inside the epistemological frames considered before.

The possibility to apprehend a life, or understand the murder, that a piece of meat conceals falls inside the possibilities opened by the schemes of intelligibility. On their motility will depend its incursion in the spheres of apprehension and recognition. With it, the schemes of intelligibility allow the entrance of grievability and horror applied to lives beyond the human – but facing a chunk of meat is not the only situation to open up that possibility. Perhaps more common is the situation of the grief that follows the death of a non-human companion. But how does one justify the recognition of the grievability of those lives one does not know personally? In other words, is it possible to grieve anonymous lives beyond the human that are given over to death?

These questions concede two spaces of reflection. On the one hand, there is the important aspect that leads one back to the definition of grievability. This condition depicts the *possibility to be grieved*, that is, to cause grief on someone who would mourn the lost life, thus intrinsically recognising both its value and the (damaging) effects of the absence of that life. This means that one needs not grieve every life and assume the deaths of others through mourning – this, apart from impossible, would be self-damaging. Moreover, it should be noted that grieving is too much of an intimate process for it to be "mainstreamed" or "standardized"; not in all situations one is able to grieve all the lost lives one knows about, mostly when these lives are anonymous to oneself. Rather, it is the recognition that every life contains the possibility to be grieved by another what is being discussed

through the allocation of grievability, for this possibility renders it valuable and, thus, a certain anonymity to oneself ceases to mean an anonymity from existence.

On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that all life is certainly given over to death – it is in the definition of life, through its corporeality, its living matter, its vulnerability, that life is fragile and subject to end at any time. This means that to defend life because "it is life", as if it had an intrinsic value, is incorrect. As Butler points out, the so-called "pro-life" postures, who defend the foetus's right to life against the decision over abortion of the pregnant woman, are not far away from articulating their arguments in this manner (Butler, 2009: 15-19). If the debate on abortion revolves around what defines a living being, or even if the grievability of life depends on that life belonging to a living being defined as such and bearer of rights just because of its "being alive", there is a big chance of falling into anthropocentrism. First, because of the fantasy of there existing the possibility of regulating domains of life which are obviously out of human control. Second, because guaranteeing a thing such as a "right to life" is not even possible: death is an inevitable part of life, and "excluding death in favour of life constitutes the death of life (…) [while making] this pretension [is a] function of anthropocentrism's omnipotent fantasy" (Butler, 2017: 37).

Therefore, the discussion, again, is not so much on the potential grievability of lives, but on its equal allocation – in a way, trying to reveal a thread of the *continuum* among beings, that starts from each body's vulnerability and transcends it towards the notion of grievability. In this way, the transition from the ontological condition of precariousness towards the more epistemological problem of "conceding" grievability finds a political power that should not go unnoticed, as well as it is inscribed inside the domain of ethical concern.

6. BROADENING CONCERN IN NARROW SOCIETIES

The previous lines have briefly presented a portion of Butler's main contributions to philosophy inside the spheres of ontology, epistemology,

and ethics. Through the ideas of precariousness, relationality, and grievability, as well as in their explanation of the functioning of the frames of intelligibility, many paths of thought have opened to think the concrete case of (not yet) grievable lives beyond the human. Indeed, even the author gives a hint towards this direction when they write about precariousness as "a shared condition of human life (indeed, as a condition that links human and non-human animals)" (Butler, 2009: 13).

There is, though, a matter that may rise difficulty: Butler's neglect to ascribe a full, genuine uniqueness to bodies that are "less an entity than a relation" (Butler, 2016: 19). Their criticism is aimed at the impossibility to perceive the extent of one's singularity. In fact, Butler argues that affirming the authenticity and uniqueness of each being carries the risk of contemplating the possibility of its total negation. This clashes with the very idea of the relational being: the total negation of a "subject" enclosed within herself is not possible because her being transcends her own body and her own person (she is herself and all the relations that pass through her). To achieve her complete negation would imply also negating all the relations that constitute her. Since this is not possible, the affirmations of authenticity and singularity should be claimed carefully. But maybe the most important consequence of this critique is that it opens a door towards political action, making it possible to construct, on the basis of corporeality, a space of resistance against oppression and injustice – for no one could ever be completely negated.

The second response points at the danger of anthropocentrism that this criticism (and proposal of resistance) entails. Put quite directly: one needs not be aware of its singularity for one's uniqueness to be real. On the contrary, that is rather a matter of (the certainly limited) *human* ability, if we may, to *concede recognition* of such uniqueness – whether to others or to oneself. This does not mean, though, that lives beyond the human are not immersed in a relationality and intercorporeity forging too their uniqueness (allowing thus their resistance, in the case of their loss, in other singularities). But it points at the limits of acknowledging uniqueness: the essentially *human* limits of it.

Following the same steps that Butler took in their reflection, one could turn now to the question of grief, for the inescapable relationality of

every body concedes the affliction of loss in others. It is obvious today that multiple species beyond the human are capable of grieving their companions, whether human or non-human, as well as there can be an interspecies experience of grief. But, as with the explanation in Butler, one must be aware of where exactly one is situated inside the epistemological frames considered before.

The possibility to apprehend a life, or understand the murder, that a piece of meat conceals falls inside the possibilities opened by the schemes of intelligibility. On their motility will depend its incursion in the spheres of apprehension and recognition. With it, the schemes of intelligibility allow the entrance of grievability and horror applied to lives beyond the human – but facing a chunk of meat is not the only situation to open up that possibility. Perhaps more common is the situation of the grief that follows the death of a non-human companion. But how does one justify the recognition of the grievability of those lives one does not know personally? In other words, is it possible to grieve anonymous lives beyond the human that are given over to death?

These questions concede two spaces of reflection. On the one hand, there is the important aspect that leads one back to the definition of grievability. This condition depicts the *possibility to be grieved*, that is, to cause grief on someone who would mourn the lost life, thus intrinsically recognising both its value and the (damaging) effects of the absence of that life. This means that one needs not grieve every life and assume the deaths of others through mourning – this, apart from impossible, would be self-damaging. Moreover, it should be noted that grieving is too much of an intimate process for it to be "mainstreamed" or "standardized"; not in all situations one is able to grieve all the lost lives one knows about, mostly when these lives are anonymous to oneself. Rather, it is the recognition that every life contains the possibility to be grieved by another what is being discussed through the allocation of grievability, for this possibility renders it valuable and, thus, a certain anonymity to oneself ceases to mean an anonymity from existence.

On the other hand, it is important to emphasize that all life is certainly given over to death – it is in the definition of life, through its corpore-

ality, its living matter, its vulnerability, that life is fragile and subject to end at any time. This means that to defend life because "it is life", as if it had an intrinsic value, is incorrect. As Butler points out, the so-called "pro-life" postures, who defend the foetus's right to life against the decision over abortion of the pregnant woman, are not far away from articulating their arguments in this manner (Butler, 2009: 15-19). If the debate on abortion revolves around what defines a living being, or even if the grievability of life depends on that life belonging to a living being defined as such and bearer of rights just because of its "being alive", there is a big chance of falling into anthropocentrism. First, because of the fantasy of there existing the possibility of regulating domains of life which are obviously out of human control. Second, because guaranteeing a thing such as a "right to life" is not even possible: death is an inevitable part of life, and "excluding death in favour of life constitutes the death of life (…) [while making] this pretension [is a] function of anthropocentrism's omnipotent fantasy" (Butler, 2017: 37).

Therefore, the discussion, again, is not so much on the potential grievability of lives, but on its equal allocation – in a way, trying to reveal a thread of the *continuum* among beings, that starts from each body's vulnerability and transcends it towards the notion of grievability. In this way, the transition from the ontological condition of precariousness towards the more epistemological problem of "conceding" grievability finds a political power that should not go unnoticed, as well as it is inscribed inside the domain of ethical concern.

There are spaces and practices that facilitate the collective modulation of the frames, their questioning and change, and the cultural domain is capable of creating and destroying the norm equally, as Butler argued (2009). The development of art and imagination are instances of this, whether through literature, photography, plastic arts, music, or film. Whether performatively or exhibiting, the bonding of art and critical thinking can result in fruitful and necessary actions and predispositions to change the given (see fig. 5).
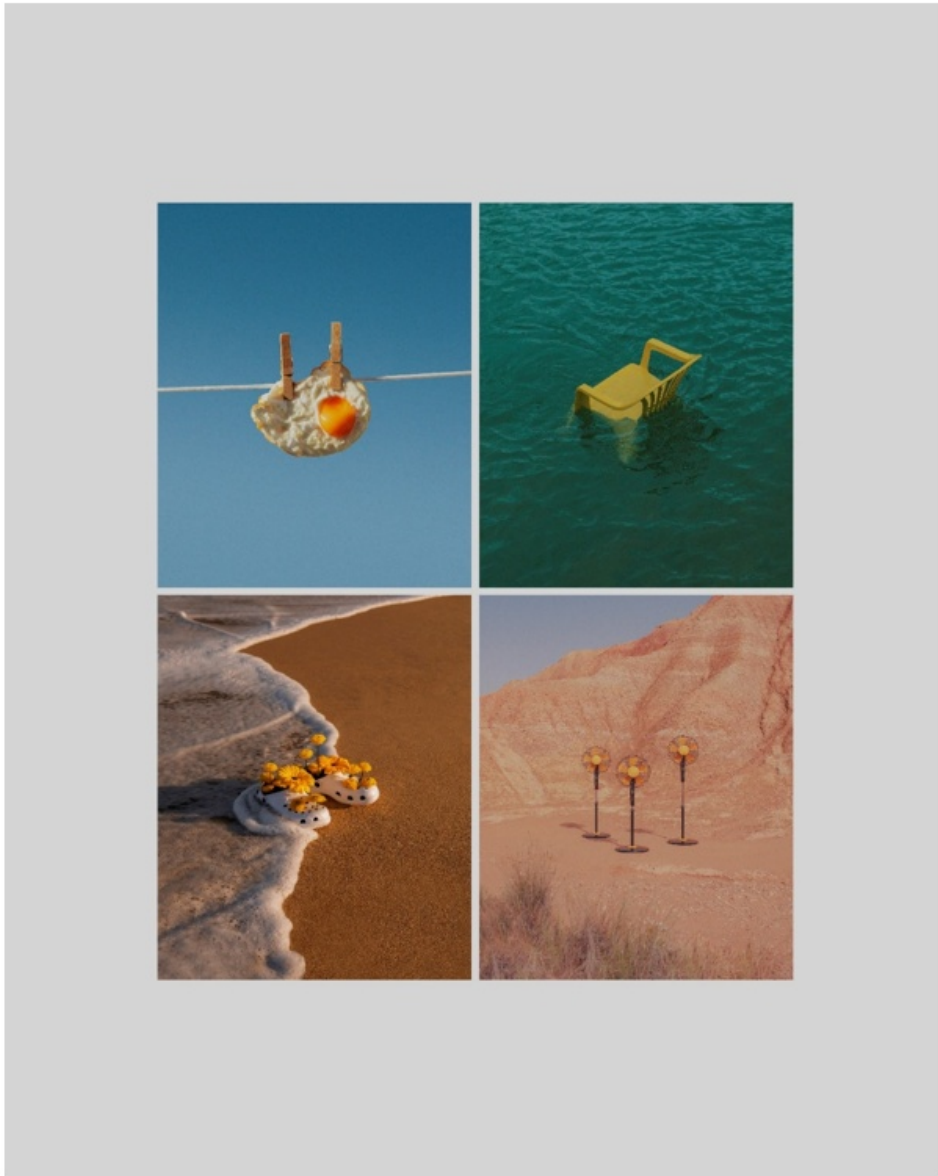
fig. 5: "Welcome Summer. This is how this year is gonna look like". Andoni Beristain, 2021. Image ceded by the artist with his consent. ([@andoniberistain](#)).

Extreme heat, floods, rising sea levels or desertification, these four images are open to free interpretation – an interpretation that corresponds to each one's configuration of the sphere of appearance, of the possible, of that which is worthy of concern. But the formation of the range not only of the knowable, but of the imaginable, is cocreated by the possibilities that are opened up through culture (again, the frame has the possibility to undo and redo itself differently). In this sense, one could ask about the force of the impulse created by that which is aesthetic (as the images in fig. 5 could be). The range of the knowable and the possibilities to unconceal its infinite pos-

sibilities respond thus to an affective dimension that cultural and artistic means help potentiate and uncover.

Critical thinking arises when the affective part responds viscerally, but this does not mean that the posterior motility of the frames is not a conscious and reasoned-through action. There needs to be a combination between the triggering cause of distress and the resolutive answer to this distress[11]. Certainly, to subvert the norm is a very conscious thing to do: it is *forcing* into question, it is knowing the frame of normativity and writhing it critically. In this sense, to recognize grievability in others is no less rational too. But this exercise appeals also to the affective openness to "see things differently" – an openness that locates oneself in the schemes of intelligibility, in that which can be imagined.

All in all, it is the exploitation of imagination what concedes an openness and disclosing of the schemes of intelligibility, both exercises that need the participation of art and critical thinking to concede its dynamism and motility. Its relevance lies in its capacity to delimit the sphere of appearance, the landscape of the existing, that keeps in it the terrain for *any* ethical encounter, the interspecific included. Indeed, Butler gives a hint in the normative, ethical direction that apprehending precariousness should take: "Precisely because a living being may die, it is necessary to care for that being so that it may live" (Butler, 2009: 14). And care, apart from providing attention and sustain, must take first the form of presence in one's ethical horizon.

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[11] Distress is, nonetheless, a possibility among many other affective responses to a certain triggering situation (which comprises, for instance, fiction or Internet content that needs not be distressing, but can rather cause laughter or discomfort).

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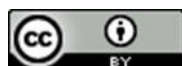
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