

# The Voice of Care: On the Informality of Uniqueness

Timothy J. Huzar

## Abstract

In this article, I argue that the phenomenon of vocality – as conceptualised by Adriana Cavarero – suggests that theoretical conceptualisations of the political and the ethical have to be informal. The vocal, for Cavarero, first expresses a person's unique singularity. Singularity does not fit into a formal articulation of what politics or ethics is. This is because the formal necessarily concerns the abstract, not the specific. However, despite this, Cavarero suggests that uniqueness can be formally put to work to distinguish humanness from non-human life (in her *For More than One Voice*), and a political phonosphere from a non-political one (in her *Surging Democracy*). I reflect on the informality of the vocal in its specificity, drawing on Cavarero and Judith Butler's reflections on the distinction of the ethical and the political in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, to provide further evidence for the necessary informality of conceptualisations of both the ethical and the political.

*Keywords:* Cavarero, informality, uniqueness, vocality, ethical, political, Levinas

## Biography

Timothy J. Huzar is a critical theorist whose work explores philosophical issues around narration, care, singularity, and politics. He has published in numerous academic journals, and is the co-editor of *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Non-violence*, a collected volume on the thought of Adriana Cavarero published by Fordham University Press in 2021. Tim is a Lecturer in Cultural Competency Education at King's College London, and a Research Associate at the Centre for Rights and Anti-Colonial Justice, University of Sussex.

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In what follows, I argue that when it comes to vocal uniqueness, our philosophising is always informal. I do this to resist the concluding claims that Adriana Cavarero makes in her monographs, *For More than One Voice* and *Surging Democracy*. Despite Cavarero insisting throughout these texts that vocality is first expressive of “uniqueness” – a kind of phenomenological given that does not reside within a person but emerges between people, and signifies nothing more than the singular particularity of *this* person in their ineluctable and inaugural connection to a plurality of others – a formalism emerges at the outer bounds of her argument. Here, unique vocality can be put to work to properly distinguish the politicity of different phonospheres, or the humanness of different existents. By dwelling on the connection between voice, singularity, care, and the political, I show that the unique voice disarms this type of formalism, at the same time blurring the edges of some of the structural binaries of what is known as Western metaphysics. This intervention, then, is a celebration of Cavarero’s generative philosophical imaginary even in its gentle critical mode.

Elliot is almost five months old and he puts everything in his gob. It is how he extends into the world and at the same time how the world becomes a part of him. Elliot jabbbers with his gob. Almost a gibberish, a jibber-jabbering, a blathering or a babbling – except that his is a gift of the gab. His, as Cavarero would say, is a voice “destined to speech” (2005: 211). Almost, then, the nonsensical babbling of a brook, but also almost the secret language of an argot, the subversive language of gossip, or the technical language of a jargon.

Jargon comes from the Old French signifying the cheeping of birds; in Italian, the word might be *garrire*, which, as well as a chirping sound, also refers to a fluttering or flapping, and therefore to a sense of touch. Like the jay, Elliot’s is a garrulous voice. He barely waits before responding to you. His vocalisations come in fits and starts but they are always propelled: either by a joy that is mimetically relayed between you and him, or by a displeasure that it is also difficult not to be affected by. Both garrulous and *garrire* have their roots in the

Latin verb *garriō*, signifying chatter or prattle, cognate with the Ancient Greek word *gêrus*, meaning “voice”. These are words that stick in the throat, guttural words, words that make the embodied character of the *logos* inescapable, words that you gargle, just as Elliot gargles as he discovers that his saliva is his own – like a gargoyle, from the Latin *gula*, meaning throat, and the Arabic *gūl*, meaning ghoul. *Garriō* and *gêrus* are themselves cognate with the Old English word *caru*, meaning sorrow, lamentation, concern, anxiety, and, crucially, care. Caring and vocalising thus maintain an affinity, but what is their relation?

Etymology here cannot constitute a proof; rather, it is an occasion for unbridled exploration. The voice of care places its accent not on the reason expressive of the political community – the *semantike* of *logos* that is embarrassed by the *phone*, as Cavarero demonstrates – but on the prattle or the chatter – invariably pejorative words – that are typically positioned as the obverse of rational communication (2005: 33–41). Prattle, chatter and babbling are not helpful in distinguishing “what is beneficial and what is harmful, and so also what is just and what is unjust” (Aristotle, *Pol.*: 1.1253a). The blah blah blah of the barbarian secured the coherence of the reasoning community of the *polis*, and the caring labour of tending – to the child, the household, the city – ensured the polis’ sempiternal reproduction. The vocality of care, either in its nonsensicality or in its opacity, could then, following the prejudice of the powerful stereotype that is the Western tradition, simply signify the a- or anti-political. But prattle, chatter, and care’s many other vocal manifestations are doing something other than communicating reason. Further, despite being at a distance from reason, they still maintain not only ethical worth (commonly granted), but also political worth. Taking inspiration from Judith Butler’s reflections on Emmanuel Levinas, we might call this the anarchy of the ethical, revealing the moment where the ethical and the political touch (2012: 67–8).

The vocality of care is present in Elliot but no less present in any person of whatever maturity, and it “presences” Elliot just as it presences me as I am mimetically caught, beholden,

held, *apprehended* (Lewis, 2017).<sup>1</sup> To apprehend is to touch on the uniqueness of another, and at the same time to have one's own uniqueness celebrated. It is in this way a caring, connecting the babbling vocal to *caru* – to care – in this precise sense. Apprehension – which also signifies an anxiety that is reflected in care – orientates us within a horizon not of abstraction and generality, but of the specificity of this existent; this baby whose name is Elliot. As Cavarero shows, this is the scandal that the *logos*, as it is stereotypically thought in the Western tradition, escapes from: that the semantic, noetic reason of the *logos* cannot but touch on the embodied *phone*, which cannot but touch on the singularity of existence; that the soul is nothing other than the extension of the body (*this* body), even as it is distinct from the body (Nancy, 2008: 122–135); that Man collapses into men, and women, and non–binary existents, each in their specificity, even as the Human and its rights are sometimes polemically mobilised in contestations of the assumption of inequality (Rancière, 2007: 39–61).

As Cavarero notes, quoting Hannah Arendt, “For millennia, philosophy has diverted its gaze from the appearance of human beings because it cannot tolerate their most scandalous property, their realness, together with their contingency” (2002: 94).<sup>2</sup> This scandalous specificity is blatant in Elliot's babble. Elliot apprehends me and I apprehend him, which can be heard in the mimetic call and response that we both enter into, but it also occurs simultaneously even when the apprehension appears unidirectional. As Elliot apprehends me he is apprehended, and as I apprehend Elliot, I am apprehended. We care for each other, enjoying a common, everyday happiness. For me, this is given in those moments of gentle touch, attentive caress, as I incline in the evening, holding him, and his fingers grip and stroke my arms, and he coos, and I sing Eia Pumpeia like my mum and dad did, and like my omi did, and we calm down together to jointly prepare ourselves for the early sleep of the broken night, marvelling at the blackbird atop the holly tree making his contribution to the dusk chorus

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<sup>1</sup> For more on mimesis as it relates to Cavarero's thought, see Adriana Cavarero and Nidesh Lawtoo (2021: 183–9).

<sup>2</sup> Cavarero is quoting Arendt in *The Life of the Mind* (1978: 91).

in anticipation of the dawn. Certainly, I also care for him in the sense that I respond to his vulnerability, refusing either an active or a passive wounding, as Cavarero argues; but this caring is an echo of a primary anticipation of *who* Elliot is, and who I am to him (Cavarero 2011: 30). To care then is to cry out because we lament, but also because we are in need, and also because we are searching for someone, and also because we savour the happiness proper to the apprehension of who another is. To care is to give voice, and it is a voice of chatter, a voice of prattle, a voice of babble like the cheeping of birds, like the gargle of a throat, like the water pouring from the mouth of a gargoyle. It is a voice that always returns to the specificity of another; to Elliot. As Elliot babbles, he cares, revealing who he is and who I am.

Elliot, or voice more generally (we can let Elliot carry on growing up now, although his singularity should be felt innervate all that is said here), finds itself somewhere between the nonsensical and the secret, between the animal and the human, between the body and the soul, between the public and the private, between the singular and the plural. This awkward indeterminacy is not a problem to be resolved. It is a necessary consequence of the fact that the voice is always someone's voice – that the voice refers to singularity, complicating the binaries central to the Western macrotext. This is Cavarero's primary argument in her *For More than One Voice*: that voice is always emitted from some *one*, to be heard by the ear of someone else (2005: 4). It brings us back, again and again, to the uniqueness of an existent – to who they are, as opposed to what they are. However, in both *For More than One Voice* and in her later *Surging Democracy*, the question of what counts as the sound of uniqueness causes Cavarero trouble: at the edges of her argument, uniqueness – not so much the specificity of existents but the specificity of *this* existent – becomes a quality or characteristic that can be properly ascribed to some, and not to others. How does this happen?

In the *Iliad*, Homer uses the word *gêrus* to describe the sound of the Trojan army: unlike the silent Danaäns, the Trojans sound like the bleating of sheep – or more specifically, of ewes crying out for their lambs (*Il.*: 4.422–40). However, this is the case not because the Trojans are simply animalistic,

lacking *logos*, but because of an overabundance of *logos*. What they lack is a *common logos*. The resulting cry – as languages intermingle through the disparate vocalisations of the Trojan army – sits uncomfortably between animal and man (Heath, 2005: 65–6). One could almost describe the noise of the Trojans, with Cavarero, as a “pluriphony”, which is the sound made by a plurality (2021: 75). Writing in *Surging Democracy*, Cavarero says that a pluriphony is neither a harmony, nor a cacophony (*ibid.*). The singularity of each existent is not lost in the thrum – in the chirm – but nor does it remain “singular”, if to be singular is to be separable from all others. However, the example is far from perfect, as it goes against the grain of Cavarero’s desire to work against the bellicose nature of the metaphysics of the Western tradition, and sits closer to the counter-examples of crowds and masses that she takes from the writings of scholars studying the totalitarianisms of twentieth century Europe. Cavarero is rightly concerned by “the warlike rhythms, the marching feet” that are “fusional and ecstatic”, in this instance as a crowd sings *La Marseillaise* in the work of Émile Zola (*ibid.*: 74). Rather than an army marching to war, Cavarero might exemplify the sound of plurality by turning to the audience at La Scala, murmuring before a performance of *Don Giovanni*; or, as she does in *Surging Democracy*, by making reference to the sound of Russian dissidents gathered at a poetry recital in Moscow, themselves having to recite a poem – one voice supplementing the other – after the poet drops his script (*ibid.*: 72–5). However, conceptually distinguishing between mass and plurality is not straightforward. Cavarero asks, “[i]s there a sonorous difference between the voice of plurality and that of the mass? Is there an acoustically perceptible difference between their distinct phonospheres?” (*ibid.*: 66). She answers her questions by focusing on the way plurality celebrates uniqueness, whereas in the crowd or the mass uniqueness is rendered superfluous. “Plurality’s quality comes from the uniqueness of its political actors”, she says (*ibid.*: 62). Despite the Russian dissidents reciting the poem in unison, which would otherwise be a sign of the collapsing of singularity into the totalitarian mass, for Cavarero, they nonetheless generate a pluriphony:

[t]he poem is recited in unison, but the most relevant element, in the dynamic of this choral performance – or rather, the element that makes it a political performance – is not the typical fusional effect of speaking in unison, but rather the adding, one after the other, of singular voices. Put another way, the voices unite with the choir as unique voices and, independently of the effect of reciting in chorus, remain plural (*ibid.*: 73).

But distinguishing the phonospheres of the mass and the plurality in this way is only a temporary suspension of the issue. We still need to know what enables us to distinguish between the sound of uniqueness – of unique voice – and the sound of fungibility, or of the mass. To distinguish a plurality from a crowd based on the veneration of uniqueness might be correct, but if uniqueness refers to the specificity of a person – *this* person – can it be formally put to work as a measure of the politicity of a phonosphere?

The issue is starker in her earlier monograph *For More than One Voice*. Here, Cavarero explicitly links voice to humanness, which raises the question of whether not only voice but the uniqueness it cannot fail to celebrate is a privileged property of the human – a measure of humanness, just as in *Surging Democracy* it is a measure of a pluriphony. In Cavarero's words,

[e]very human voice is obviously a sound, an acoustic vibration among others, which is measurable like all other sounds; but it is only as human that the voice comes to be perceived as unique. This means that uniqueness resounds in the human voice; or, in the human voice, uniqueness makes itself sound. The ear, its natural destination, perceives this unique sound without any effort, no matter what words are spoken. No matter what you say, I know that the voice is yours (2005: 177).

A page later, Cavarero says,

[the ear] can try to decipher the sounds [...] but it cannot decide on, or control, their emission. The ear receives without being able to select beforehand. The ear

distinguishes the sound of the voice and knows it to be human not only because it vibrates in the specifically human element of speech, but also because the ear perceives its uniqueness (*ibid.*: 178).

The problem here is twofold. First, politically, if vocal uniqueness is a proper quality of humanness, then it can be mobilised for exclusionary ends: those without voice, without uniqueness, are not human, or are not protected by the rights bestowed on humanness, even if their humanness is formally recognised. Second, philosophically, if uniqueness refers to the specificity of an existent, how can it be generalised and abstracted in its function as a property of humanness, expressed through the voice?

We know, of course, that some sounds are not heard as voice, and therefore not as human. As Jacques Rancière has shown, this begins with Aristotle and continues throughout the Western tradition (2010: 37–8). But would Cavarero have those thus devocalised find ingenious ways of demonstrating their possession of voice? Of better representing this voice, so it can finally be perceived? If, as Cavarero says, “it is only as human that the voice comes to be *perceived* as unique”, then the political project would be to restore humanity to those dehumanised; to shift people’s *perceptions*, so that the perception of another’s (human) uniqueness is inescapable. This is a common way for politics to operate: a hegemonic contestation of discourse; a struggle over perception, representation and recognition. But is the political or ethical worth of uniqueness exhausted by issues of representation and recognition?

As I have noted, for Cavarero, voice is synonymous with the singular: with uniqueness. Voice is an expression of this singularity, and singularity only ever exists in its becoming, in its expression – it is not a quality but a *doing*. On careful inspection, the babbling, prattling, chattering voice evades its reduction to an inchoate reason, and instead is caught in the intimate relay of the caring celebration of who another is; in their apprehension. When Cavarero says that “[t]he ear, [the human voice’s] natural destination, perceives this unique sound without any effort” (2005: 177) and that “[n]o matter what you say, I know that the voice is yours” (*ibid.*), this self-evident

immediacy is the case not because, in this instance, the perception of uniqueness is irresistible – perhaps because it is perfectly recognised, as a consequence of its politically ideal representation – but because the apprehension of uniqueness is not coterminous with its recognition. To receive a flavour or taste – “*un sapore*” – of another’s uniqueness does not require its cognisance.<sup>3</sup> The political strategy that follows Cavarero’s linking of voice and uniqueness should not be the ideal representation of voice, given the contingent barriers to its recognition. Instead, it would be something like the transformation of a philosophical imaginary that constitutively excludes some so that others can impersonate immortal, universal, abstracted forms of being.<sup>4</sup> It would be to sustain a sense of the world within which it would be nonsensical to parade as an independent existent who knows the world at an eternal distance *from* the world despite being *a part* of the world. It would be to open our senses to the forms of apprehension enacted in furtive co-appearance, including the babble, the prattle, the chatter, the gossip, and not only the reasoning that they all touch on and are touched by.

Uniqueness – expressed in and as voice – can never be adequately represented. Representation is anathema to uniqueness. Further, representation – or more properly, the mode of thought that privileges representation as the final gauge of political or ethical value – actively inhibits uniqueness. There are people who fail to perceive another’s uniqueness; uniqueness can be effaced, sometimes in the very act of properly representing it. This is always a risk. But uniqueness – or voice – matters not because it signals humanness. Uniqueness matters because it *is*, and abstracted being depends upon the violent refusal of this particularity. In Latin, to care (*cura*) is in part to heed, to pay attention. When one cares, what one heeds or pays attention to – what one apprehends – is not

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<sup>3</sup> On the translation of Cavarero’s “*un sapore*”, see Paul A. Kottman’s Translator’s Introduction to her *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (2000: xxviii, note 39).

<sup>4</sup> But with the proviso that the mechanism for this transformation is often complex, and the placing of transformation as the *telos* and measure of politics can just as readily depoliticise those who appear not to be contributing to this objective.

another's representation, but another's uniqueness. Uniqueness, singularity, particularity, finitude – cannot become the measure of another: you are unique, you are not. It is why when Cavarero makes uniqueness proper to humanness, this is a mistake. There is nothing that uniqueness is “proper” to. It cannot authoritatively distinguish the plurality from the crowd because it invalidates all appeals to authority. It cannot be measured and cannot be used to measure. It disarms us as we attempt this abstraction, and could therefore be said to be anti-violent – disarmed like “*l'inerte*”, and in this way vulnerable (Cavarero, 2011: 30). It interrupts the rationale that enables the proper hierarchisation of being, racialised after 1492 (Wynter, 1995). It is incommensurable with a system of proprietorial measurement. So, while some may mobilise it in this way – as Butler notes, for Levinas the Palestinian has no face, or lacks the capacity to have a face – they are mistaken, they make a sort of category error (2012: 39). What those who are properly recognised as unique – that is, those who have qualified for the proper recognition of uniqueness – are granted is not uniqueness. It is uniqueness's representation, its abstraction, which is to say its nullification. The bestowing of uniqueness is always a reciprocal, dispossessive, tactile, informal activity.

What does it mean to say uniqueness is necessarily informal – that it refuses any formal appeal? In *Parting Ways*, Butler notes a tension between Levinas's conception of the face – with its referent in an abstract specificity – and broader formalisms that structure community. For Butler, this is a tension between the ethical and the political. The commandment “Thou shalt not kill” that issues from the face – the commandment that is the face – is an ethical injunction made not at a formal level but as if it were directed to me and me alone; as if I bear all responsibility for the upholding of this commandment. It refuses a formalism that would begin with the generality of the people, and consequently renders each one philosophically superfluous. This bars an extension of the commandment to the level of law and the political (Butler, 2012: 57). Butler writes,

[e]ven though the social dimension of the political does not negate the ethical and its claim, it remains difficult to

say in what way that ethical claim lives on in the social and political domain. [...] Does the face survive in the domain of the political? And if it does, what form does it take? And how does it leave its trace? (*ibid.*: 55).

This tension has also been marked by Cavarero. Writing in *Inclinations*, she notes that:

the world is comprised, not of a series of duets, or duels, but of a plurality of human beings who, far from confronting one another face-to-face, [...] instead much more plausibly, stand beside each other, side-by-side with one another. [...] The problem of the connection between ethics and politics, for Lévinas, is configured as a transition from duality to plurality – or, more precisely, from an ethical and subjectivizing relation between two who face one another, to a social relation among many who do not look one another in the face (2016: 169).

For Butler this tension is an opportunity to deform what is understood as the political. Butler asks,

[m]ust the face always be singular, or can it extend to the plurality? If the face is not necessarily a human face – it can be a sound or a cry – and is not reducible to a single person's face, then can it be generalized to each and every person to the extent that they appear precisely as of concern to me (but only to persons and not nonhuman animals, in his view)? Would this be a rupture in the way we think about plurality, or would it imply an entrance of the ethical precisely into the formulation of plurality itself? Would it imply a deformatization of plurality? (2012: 57).

To think this through, Butler highlights an anarchism in Levinas's ethical demand. The demand is anarchic in the etymological sense of an absence of authority: anarchic because it is trapped between an abstract Other and myself, lacking the authority to enshrine formal, general law. It is this that causes the fraught relation between the ethical and the political. For Butler, the ethical demand that is coterminous with the face of

the Other presses on the political when the law is unjust. In these instances, the ethical demand motivates a dissent from law (*ibid.*: 67–8). But can a “deformalization of plurality” (*ibid.*: 57) be imagined beyond an anarchic refusal? Is the political – or a plurality, or a pluriphony – necessarily formal?

If singularity is understood as my response to an abstracted specificity, then it becomes easy to sequester the singular in the realm of the informal ethical, in contradistinction to a formal political. For Cavarero, what is lost in Levinas’s conception of the face is the specificity of the other whose face would otherwise occupy the centre stage of the philosophical scene:

[t]he face is abstract, Lévinas says, because its self-signification abstracts precisely from context – which is to say from the world, from the frames of meaning shared by different historical or empirical situations, and not least from language itself. The face, then, has no attributes or qualities. If, to simplify the discussion, we were to translate Lévinas’s lexicon into Arendt’s, we would say that the face signifies the other’s singularity implied by the question “Who is he?” whereas the question “What is he?” – because it relates to context, qualities and attributes – remains offstage and immaterial for ethics (2016: 164).

And yet for Cavarero, “the who is never without the what” (2002: 100), and so the who cannot bear this abstraction – which, for Cavarero, Levinas cannot help but reveal. Cavarero says,

[t]he ethical relation is abstract, not because it relies on general formulas or universal principles, but because it excludes all effects issuing from the specificity of a given context. The problem is that, even though Lévinas is convinced of the importance of this thesis, and indeed hardly misses a chance to reiterate it, his own writing ends up regularly disproving it. When he writes about the “face-to-face” encounter, he continually invokes the orphan, the widower, and the stranger, as well as the poor, the indigent, the hungry, the stateless or even episodes taken from the

repertoire of the Torah. In short, despite his insistence on the abstraction of the face, Lévinas nevertheless does not at all give up contextualising the ethical relation (*ibid.*: 165–6).

When the other is not the Other but rather another, in and of the world, then the anarchic ethicality that troubles the political – the voice of care that always touches the political – also reaches our own words, our own vocalisings, as we philosophise, as we note distinctions between what is political and what is ethical, what is public and what is private; that is, when realms, spheres and domains become apparent to us and appear essential. Butler is correct when she notes that a “deformalized” political reveals the dependence of the formal political on the informal ethical, most clearly seen in a moment of crisis, and the security that anticipates this crisis (Hamilton, 2013). However, Cavarero’s refusal of the abstraction of the Other shifts Levinas’ injunction from the promotion of non-violence to the promotion of an interruption of mastery, indicating a violence to the masterful, proper, formalised accounting of the world.<sup>5</sup> In this way, what is sustained when we consider the specificity not only of myself but of the other person who is necessarily present is not simply an informal ethical relation in contrast to the formal political. Rather, it is an ethicality essential to existing which overwhelms our topographical political distinctions. The dyad then, not because of its structure of two – whether in contrast to one or to many – but because of its emphasis on the uniqueness of both poles of its relation, leaves us with nothing other than informality in our making sense of the world.

In *Giving An Account of Oneself*, Butler says that ethics suggests itself in the absence of the surety of our standpoint. “To take responsibility for oneself”, Butler says, “is to avow the limits of any self-understanding, and to establish these limits not only as a condition for the subject but as the predicament of the human community” (2005: 83). The question of ethics

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<sup>5</sup> In Butler’s words, “[i]f violence is an act by which a subject seeks to reinstall its mastery and unity, then nonviolence may well follow from living the persistent challenge to egoic mastery that our obligations to others induce and require” (2005: 64).

“emerges precisely at the limits of our schemes of intelligibility” (*ibid.*: 21). If we had certainty – if we knew what the right course of action was – we would have no ethics. What if this holds true for politics, too? In the absence of a formal ethics, we proceed with care, and in the absence of a formal politics, we proceed with care, too. I do not need theory to tell me what is ethical or what is political. With Rancière, we can say that politics is the moment when the formal authority of the political falls away, just as with Butler we can say that ethics is the moment when the formal authority of the ethical falls away. Both fall in the face of our singularity, as we apprehend one another. In this context, to not believe in spheres, realms or domains because they have no formal standing is specious. This would be to assume that only the formal can be believed in, acted upon. As such, the formal becomes re-instantiated as an impossible fantasy as quickly as it is rejected. Instead, our belief in these topographies can be, in its nature, vital, stemming from the dynamism of living rather than the deathly petrification of a sequestered *noesis*. We can then put spheres and realms to the test. Do they suit our needs? If so, then we can discuss them, informally but no less meaningfully. Do they not? Then we can find another way of articulating the political. They cannot be taken too seriously – which is not to minimise their violences, but to keep open another path of resistance. In either case, we are obligated to tread carefully in the absence of a formality that would grant us surety, mindful of what we are doing, and to whom. An informal obligation.

The point is not to contest that “the voice of plurality and the voice of the masses [...] are two essentially distinct political phonospheres” (Cavarero, 2021: 73). This is known to me, but it is known in the complicated way that one knows uniqueness: unmoored, enlivened, immediate, informal, given. Rather, the point is to question one’s capacity to properly declare these phonospheres, via a theoretical proclamation, distinct, which would leave them tethered and stultified. Put more strongly, this failure of proper declaration is a conceptual necessity that is a consequence of taking seriously the singularity of uniqueness. Cavarero, of course, knows this better than anyone, and while she privileges a humanness in her writings, it is better understood as a phenomenological reflection of the givenness

of the world, rather than any kind of metaphysical claim. The baby has a voice “destined to speech”, but their singularity muddies the waters of where speech ends and the chirping of birds begins, or even the rustle of a finely tuned engine. Elias Canetti, celebrated by Cavarero for his “exquisite hearing” (*ibid.*: 82) that he channels into an attention to vocality in his writings, hears the chirping of birds, which turns out to be the plural vocalisation of Jewish school children (*ibid.*: 75); and Cavarero notes that Roland Barthes, watching a scene in a film focused on a group of Chinese school children, hears their vocality first as a rustle (*ibid.*: 80). Barthes is transfixed by the distance from language that the rustle suggests, that nonetheless maintains a connection to language which offers a particularly human vitalisation of the rustle, amplified by Barthes’ own distance from the language being spoken by the children. Canetti, in contrast, is just as happy hearing “the variety of soundscapes composed of human and inhuman voices, in the mixture of heterogeneous sounds that includes vocal emissions”, Cavarero says (*ibid.*: 81).

It would appear that in both cases the vocality of the children demands that the distinctions between speech, chirping, and rustling – which are apparent to me even if their edges are sometimes unclear – can only ever be informally known. What blurs these distinctions at their edges is only in part their acoustic overlap. More significantly, it is the singular, babbling being – “a spring, pure and full of hope, vibrant and joyful, happy with its plural being” (*ibid.*: 85) – who, in his uniqueness, demonstrates the proximity of these distinctions and their occasional indeterminacy, spacing them as distinct, and in this spacing revealing their points of contact. And if this is true for these distinct sounds – the sonority of the human, the animal, and the object – it is also true for the distinction between politics; its inchoate, germinal, surging beginnings; the caring apprehension of care; and all that is exhausted from a “*justa propria principia*” (*ibid.*: 60) understanding of the political.

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