

Ontology Against Performativity

by Mary Walsh

Contemporary feminist debates over the meanings of gender lead time and again to a certain sense of trouble, as if the indeterminacy of gender might eventually culminate in the failure of feminism. Perhaps trouble need not carry such a negative valence. To make trouble was, within the reigning discourse of my childhood, something one should never do precisely because that would get one in trouble. The rebellion and its reprimand seemed to get caught up in the same terms, a phenomenon that gave rise to my first critical insight into the subtle ruse of power: The prevailing law threatened one with trouble, even put one in trouble, all to keep one out of trouble. Hence, I concluded that trouble is inevitable and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it.(1)

This opening passage of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* alludes to an extremely important point in the context of many contemporary feminists political concerns with ontology and performativity. Butler's point that trouble is inevitable and that the task is how to make the best of it can be used as a point of enquiry into the current status of what is politically at stake by framing the contestations in contemporary feminist critical practices around either position. After all, Butler is not suggesting that the subject be done away with(2) and this is precisely why feminist political theorists need to look closely at what constitutes the performativity challenge to ontology. Ontological understandings of the subject need not be limited to ontology as essence because contemporary feminist political theorists also utilise an understanding of ontology as becoming, an understanding of ontology that is significantly elided because of the contemporary tendency to view all ontological positions as suspiciously essentialist. In recent years much feminist philosophical, political and social theory has been largely preoccupied with questions that pertain to issues surrounding epistemological/ethical concerns. This has largely been at the expense of any arguments from ontology which have been prematurely dismissed for committing theoretical faux-pas that cluster under the rubric of various forms of essentialism. However, ontological arguments are not necessarily always essentialist and the association of essentialism and ontology are based on widely held misconceptions of exactly what is at issue in rethinking identity and difference.

This paper outlines the two 'positions' of ontology and performativity based on the work of Grosz/Gatens and Butler respectively. In terms of theoretical orientation, the ontological position is developed and understood to be a form of what I understand as *Replying Elsewhere* whilst the performativity position is understood as a form of *Speaking Otherwise Within*. Although I acknowledge that bodies matter, I argue that the question of which bodies matter should remain central to the feminist political theorising agenda if the issue of women's subordination is to be effectively theorised.

Ontology as Replying Elsewhere

In previous work I have identified what I understand to be three distinguishable forms of reply by various orientations of feminist knowledges to mainstream knowledges. These are the approaches that I refer to as Speaking With, Speaking Otherwise Within and Replying Elsewhere.(3) Although there are various ways in which to classify approaches to the mainstream literature, I chose these three demarcations to enable me to assess the tensions within feminist philosophical/political theorising. Briefly, the Speaking With approach can be identified by those feminist theorists who articulate their political positions by using the enunciative term gender as their foundational reference as authoritative feminist speakers. The approach encapsulates a distinctive neglect of an active understanding of the body and the limitations of this approach are best exemplified by Gatens(4) and Grosz.(5)

In the Speaking With approach the mind and body are understood as discrete and separate entities that have a passive role in knowledge acquisition. This approach understands both the mind and body as essentially blank or neutral with political and social inscriptions working actively from the outside in to shape individual consciousness. A further postulation is that the mind controls the body or, put in another way, that consciousness(6) actively shapes the human subject with the body having an auxiliary role in the formation of that consciousness. The concern with gender is intimately linked to the central theoretical focus of equality and difference, where theorists who discuss gender are attempting to present an argument about women's commensurability with men without having to grapple with the complex underlying ontological tensions that such an enterprise would obviously entail.

The second approach, referred to as Speaking Otherwise Within represents a conglomeration of positions that I identify as variations of biological foundationalism because of their tendency to cluster about various biological affectations. The approach has three variations. The first variation refers to understandings of sex as a brute prediscursive anatomical facticity (the sex/gender distinction), the second to sex as directly related to sexuality and sexual practice and the third to reproductive understandings of sex. Although there has been feminist recognition of the theoretical and conceptual shift from a focus on sex/gender to discussion where the term gender only is used, there has not been a corresponding recognition of the complexities surrounding notions of sex. Politically, it is significant that much contemporary feminist political theorising is appearing under the rubric of the term gender. Equally as crucial, but almost completely ignored, are the conceptual and theoretical complexities that attend our notions of sex where 'sex', 'sexuality' and 'sexual difference' are often presented as meaning the same thing. My point is to highlight the way in which usage of these various understandings of sex serve to undercut politically the sexual difference approach I refer to as Replying Elsewhere. Speaking Otherwise Within represents approaches to sexual difference that have closed ontologies and make claims about women which foreclose any possibility of open ended political theorising.

The position I understand as *Replying Elsewhere* does not juxtapose mind and body. It does not understand the body to be opposed to mind because the subject is not understood as a thing but as a process. This view suggests a notion of subjectivity that is referred to as the corporeal;(7) an understanding of the subject which does not displace the mind because body is not opposed to mind. Mind becomes a displaced term as the approach is not concerned with the body as a flesh entity but rather with how this flesh entity is constructed linguistically, that is, its psychical and physical dimensions. The subject is never simply 'fleshy matter' as the subject is mediated through language.(8) The subject is understood to be both historically and culturally located and sexually specific with an ontological understanding of the subject based upon a notion of becoming rather than essence.

The approach that I refer to as *Replying Elsewhere* offers an exciting alternative to understandings of the gender approach with its implicit notions of women's equality (sameness) with men and the biologically foundationalist understandings of sexual difference (where difference is utilised in ways that work against women). I had initially identified this third approach with the Australian feminist theorists Grosz and Gatens with their notions of the corporeal and the centrality of the body. However, the influences upon the work of these two theorists can be traced back to the Lacanian derived French feminist theorising that takes up the notion of an embodied female subject.(9) The cross cultural exchange between some Australian feminists and the French theorists has been extremely successful for theorising new ways of understanding subjectivity. Of course, this is not meant to imply that the more traditionally empirically based American feminist theorising has nothing to offer as the work of Butler demonstrates.

The approach that I identify with the Australian feminist theorists Grosz and Gatens, specifically attempts to develop an understanding of the political and ethical significance of sexual difference and is a response to the lack of positive inscriptions of women in both theoretical and practical terms. Both Grosz and Gatens have appropriated insights from the French feminist theorists. The French feminists are by no means a neat ensemble of theorists and here I am referring to the particular theorists that have appropriated very specialised readings of Lacan such as Irigaray and Kristeva. It is fairly well established that there are many versions of Freud but the French feminists have embraced Lacan's Freud.(10) Lacan's version of Freud can be understood as "a valuable contribution towards an understanding of gender-roles as masks rather than norms".(11)

In attempting to map out a space for the positive inscription of women's specificity, Irigaray focuses on the notion of women's desire. Although her work covers a range of different issues, her more recent work is concerned with how women may articulate sexual difference(12) which explores the possibilities for ethical inter-subjectivity between men and women. One of the most significant insights of Irigaray's work is to challenge the idea that there can be a position that is outside established discourse. Irigaray is aware that being outside is not a speaking position so she attempts to utilise strategies that work from the inside that can disrupt and displace, for example, her strategy of mimesis.(13) Gatens understands Irigaray to be speaking and writing from a position which openly avows itself as feminine and corporeal and this exposes the

masculine position in philosophy and political theory as one that is partial. Irigaray's attempt to speak what is repressed in malestream discourses "forces them to abandon their masks of neutrality and reveal that they too have a body, a sex and a perspective."(14)

This understanding of subjectivity that includes the body is an essential component to exposing how women are actually denied any position from which to articulate their ever changing experiences. The Replying Elsewhere position is not attempting to set up a universal woman to compete with universal man. There is no universal anything (strictly speaking), only historically and culturally changing definitions of what it is to be a man or woman, although the point is that whatever women can be is not in the hands of women themselves, but left to men who go about making it their business to define what women are and can be. The problem I am addressing is encapsulated by Probyn who suggests that "the ontological/epistemological tension is captured brilliantly in the articulation of the distinct questions of 'who am I? and who is she?'. The question of 'who am I?' cannot be spoken without an ontological tone, nor can it be allowed to stand alone".(15) Moreover, whilst I would agree that all theoretical constructions involve some measure of domination and exclusion, I would not necessarily advocate an abandoning of trying to construct theory. Although postmodernism has subverted the subject and made discussion of identity problematic, I agree with Schlee that, "piecing together female subjectivity is yet a necessary task, given its history as a non-thing; we must seek to understand how it is constituted in order to arrive at some sort of, truth about reality for women".(16)

Performativity as Speaking Otherwise Within

By now, some of you will be thinking that I have completely missed the point of Butler's performativity position if I could have classified it as a Speaking Otherwise Within position. Surely Butler's position is about as far away as you can get from a biologically foundationalist position. Certainly, the three variations of approach that I articulated as comprising (but not exhausting) the Speaking Otherwise Within approach do not come anywhere near encompassing the reformulation of current debates that Butler intended. Although I acknowledge that Butler's position is not biologically foundationalist, it can be understood as a very sophisticated version of Speaking Otherwise Within because of its concern with compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism.

In some senses, Butler could just as easily be classified as a Speaking With theorist because her enunciative claims for feminism are grounded in the term gender, but I chose to place her as a Speaking Otherwise Within theorist because her radical reformulation of the terms of 'sex' and 'materiality' are enunciated within the terms of a concern with sexual practices and the complex interplays between homosexual (queer) matrices and embodied masculinity and femininity. I think this latter key concern is a qualitatively different concern than the recognition of how the complex interplays between patriarchalism and phallogocentrism insinuate women as non-things, something that is significantly underdeveloped in feminist political theory accounts of women's oppressions. Fraser implicitly recognises this, I think, when she claims that there are two

separate sorts of claims that are constantly intermingled in Butler's position, the normative and the ontological.(17)

Before examining more closely what exactly constitutes the performativity position that Butler espouses, it is worthwhile to discuss briefly where Butler is situated in terms of her intellectual influences. Certainly as an American theorist, Butler's enunciation of her performativity position is almost as complex as some of the French feminist positions in terms of the complexity of prose.(18) Bordo is moved to comment, for example, that Butler's *Gender Trouble* is "an extremely difficult book to read, fully armored as it is with Foucauldian terminology and writing in the dense, complexifying style of much continental philosophy".(19) I would have to say that Butler's *Bodies That Matter* follows in what amounts to the same genre of complexity, but I think this is a welcome development in that it demonstrates that Anglo-American feminists can achieve the level of sophisticated analysis that is often exclusively associated with the French feminist theorists.

In Butler's earlier work, and I am thinking here of some of her earlier essays,(20) one can see the degree of influence not just from the Foucauldian perspective (which seems to have been inflected in the work post 1986) but from such theorists as De Beauvoir and Wittig. In what appears to be obvious but is rarely explicitly acknowledged, it would seem that Butler's own position is heavily indebted to French continental poststructuralist and feminist thought and this is the case even though Butler seems to regard "those French feminists" with a certain amount of contempt for their so-called biological determinism. Although it may be mistakenly believed by many in the Anglo-American world that French feminists can all be grouped in together as a neat ensemble, this is a serious (and perhaps deliberate) misunderstanding of the complexities and divisions within French feminist theory. Although one cannot understand the complex nature of the work of Irigaray and Cixous without first having read De Beauvoir this does not mean that De Beauvoir and Irigaray, for example, can be lumped into one group or that there is a continuity in their respective positions.

Butler's intellectual influences (within the various French genres) can be traced to a certain fascination with the existentialist doctrine of consciousness, freedom and individual choice. The starting point of existentialist thought suggests that we are born with no innate essence and it was the existentialists who first introduced the body as a serious site of philosophical contemplation. Existentialism as it was espoused by both Sartre and De Beauvoir evidenced a certain distain for the idea that we can be oppressed as a group (a social dimension) because all individuals choose the positions that they are in, even though De Beauvoir did discuss the oppression of women as a group in *The Second Sex*(21) and Sartre later included a group dimension into his highly individualist doctrines. Without going into too much detail it should also be remembered that the work of Freud and Lacan seriously challenged the primacy of consciousness (the introduction of the unconscious) which is the cornerstone feature of existentialism. According to Dallery, De Beauvoir seems to `deliberately misread' the contemporary French feminist concern with `writing the body' by reducing it to a new form of biological essentialism.(22) Aside from the existentialist influence of De Beauvoir evidenced in

Butler's understanding of the body as a situation, she also uses the work of Wittig who is politically opposed to the work of French feminists associated with *Ecriture feminine* (writing the body).

The performativity position articulated by Butler is heavily inflected with the insights from French poststructuralist Foucault and French feminists De Beauvoir and Wittig. Dallery claims that De Beauvoir "completely ignores the roots of *écriture féminine* as a response to Lacanian psychoanalysis which claims that sexual differences cannot be reduced to biology, since woman's body is constituted through phallic symbolization".(23) Braidotti claims that the French theorists such as De Beauvoir (and I would include Wittig) completely reject the ontological perspective of irreducible specificity as politically dangerous. She claims that "you can make that comment if you have no idea of psychoanalysis, and that is precisely the case. There is nothing more anti psychoanalytic than the existentialist tradition. They cannot really accept the Freudian insights and unless we understand the logic of the unconscious, a lot of this French theory becomes really dangerous and deterministic".(24) More recently, Kennedy recognises that the two aliens to American feminist theorising continue to be monolithically referred to as French feminism(s) and psychoanalysis.(25)

The work of Foucault is an obvious influence in Butler's overall orientation but it is noteworthy that although Foucault also takes the body as a serious site of political contemplation, his understanding of the body was largely as a passive mediator of various social inscriptions, as 'imprinted by history', although I am willing to concede, along with Mc Nay(26) that a more sophisticated understanding of the body emerges in the disparate collections of essays found in Foucault's work after his death. Butler does recognise that much of Foucault's work reveals an indifference to sexual difference,(27) but her appropriation of Foucault is concerned with the manner in which juridical systems of power produce the subjects that they claim to represent.(28) It is this central insight, appropriated from Foucault, that shapes the ongoing focus of Butler's position. For example, in the first part of *Bodies That Matter*, Butler's concern is to demonstrate how power relations actually work in the very formation of "sex" and "materiality".(29)

The French intellectual interests that shape Butler's position are crucially linked to her notion of performativity. Butler first introduces us to the notion of performativity in *Gender Trouble*. She claims that,

words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.(30)

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler claims that it is the regulatory norms of "sex" that function as performative to shape the materiality of bodies, "more specifically, to materialize the body's sex, to materialize sexual difference in the service of the consolidation of the heterosexual imperative. In this sense, what constitutes the fixity of the body, its contours, its movements, will be fully material, but materiality will be rethought as the effect of power, as power's most productive effect".(31) This suggests a way of understanding gender as more than what is inscribed upon the surface of a body or sex, as sex will be understood in its normativity, and the materiality that constitutes the body will not be conceptually sustainable outside the materialisation of that regulatory norm.

Butler's position is politically opposed to the idea that feminist critical practices need to be grounded in the sexed specificity of the female body. She articulates this concern by questioning how and why "materiality" functions as the sign of irreducibility, "how it is that the materiality of sex is understood as that which only bears cultural constructions and, therefore, cannot be a construction".(32) In an earlier discussion, Butler stresses that there can be no "ontologically intact reflexivity" to the subject, and that the claim itself is perhaps at its most political in suggesting that the subject exists prior to politics.(33) Butler qualifies these points by claiming that she is not attempting to subvert the subject and that the conception of the subject as either presuming or negating does not exhaust the terms of theoretical debates and discussion. For Butler, this constitution of an either/or alternative misconstrues the point.(34)

Unresolved Issues

At the beginning of this paper I alluded to the opening passage of *Gender Trouble* where Butler suggests that trouble (in the context of gender) is inevitable and that the key imperative was to work out the best way to be in it. In suggesting that there is a better way to be in it, Butler is implicitly saying that the identification of the way in which the materiality of sex is produced by regulatory norms within a heterosexist matrix in some senses makes the claim of the irreducible specificity of the female body a little exasperatingly native. And whilst I am not attempting to achieve a complete tension between the two positions of ontology and performativity, I am seeking fragments and traces of a way beyond this impasse. This impasse is one that Brennan identifies as blocking movement in contemporary feminist debates.(35)

Perhaps one of the most creative ways of understanding the complexities of the concerns of ontology and performativity is to understand that whilst both 'positions' are concerned with power, the ontological perspective with its psychoanalytic inflection is concerned with desire. This desire is more than just a repudiation of the ontology of lack espoused by Lacan but an active reworking and engagement of the complex interplays of conscious and unconscious interpellations of subjectivity. Grosz articulates this in the form of a question: "I am asking how it is that a notion like desire, which has been almost exclusively understood in male (and commonly heterocentric terms), can be transformed so that it is capable of accommodating the very category on whose exclusion it has previously been based ... (h)ow can this concept be dramatically stretched to include as subject what it has previously designated only by the position of object, to make what is

considered passivity into an activity?".(36) In a sense, then, the tensions between ontology against performativity are contributable to the political and ethical interplays between power and desire.

In many ways, Butler's refiguration of the complex interventions of regulatory norms in shaping the materiality of sex is a very sophisticated way of keeping the contemporary debates fixated upon the complex manifestations of power and away from the interplays between desire and power. This might seem quite paradoxical within the context of Butler's thoroughly cutting edge insights into queer subjectivities. But it is at this intersection that one of the many contestations between power and desire is played out. Much of Butler's oeuvre is concerned to expose the way in which gender is the performance of sex although most of the discussion of performance is concerned with the male subjects fascination with his own masculinity and femininity. This means that much of the concern with both *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies That Matter* is with the male subject and what Butler referred to as drag and subversion, although she does point out that there is no necessary relation between them.(37)

Butler recognises what she refers to as 'significant corporeality' in the presence of three contingent categories; anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance. She states, "(i)f the anatomy of the performer is already distinct from the gender of the performer, and both of them are distinct from the gender of the performance, and both of those are distinct from the gender of the performance, then the performance suggests a dissonance not only between sex and performance, but sex and gender, and gender and performance".(38) What this opaque rhetoric reveals is an extremely complex reworking of the same old refusal to understand sexual difference seriously as a discourse of power and desire. This is further evidenced when Butler comments that, "(w)hat in Lacan would be called 'sexed positions' and what some of us might more easily call 'gender'"(39) My point is that sexed positions cannot easily be referred to as 'gender' because feminist enunciative references to gender significantly downplay the centrality of the lived body to subjectivity.

Butler's position enunciates gender as a corporeal style understood as an act that is both intentional and performative(40) but her focus is upon the differential investments of power in sexualities that are other than those sanctioned by regulatory norms on bodies materially understood as discursively designated men and women. This means that she can claim that 'being a man' and 'being a woman' are reversible(41) and that a woman performing masculinity 'is always a little less' as femininity is the spectacular gender.(42) For Butler, a woman within the heterosexual matrix is one who desires a man, so that a woman who loves a woman becomes the site of a radical displacement and disjunction in our dominant understandings of the relationship between sex and gender. In some ways her position is qualitatively different from the concerns of those theorists who enunciate the position of *Replying Elsewhere*.

Grosz directly discusses the work of Butler. She is critical of the way in which Butler understands gender as the performance of sex. Grosz argues that this understanding of gender is 'redundant and largely irrelevant' and that the term has become unnecessary for

referring to the complexities of the cultural variability of the ways in which sex is lived. Grosz rightly does not deny this variability; she is unwilling to understand gender as the expression of sex because of her commitment to understanding sex "as itself always already an expression".(43) Grosz states that, "(a)s I understand it, the term sex refers, not to sexual impulses, desires, wishes, hopes, bodies, pleasures, behaviours and practices: this I reserve for the term sexuality. Sex refers to the domain of sexual difference, to the question of the morphologies of bodies".(44) My point is that sex and sexuality are often elided but that does not mean that they are the same thing at all and that contemporary discussions of sexuality that focus upon the homosexual (queer) challenge to heterosexual imperatives help to shift critical attention away from what is politically at stake in taking sexual difference seriously.

In conclusion, I wish to reiterate Butler's point that the performativity position, where gender is understood as the performance of sex, is not advocating doing away with the subject. This is important in the context of the impasse between the ontological and performativity positions (particularly when one considers the intellectual influences on the respective positions), since the question becomes: what sort of subject or subjects should feminisms utilise and develop? This leads to the question of what are the political stakes of utilising one position over another? I suggested that feminist ontological arguments can be separated into ontology as essence and ontology as becoming, where the former is understood as essentialist and ahistorical and the latter as non-essentialist and historically located and the subject is understood as a process not a thing. Although ontological arguments are often blurred and confused, the ontology as becoming position retains the importance of the irreducible specificity of the female body whilst the performativity position rejects this possibility. My point is that the performativity position poses a significant political challenge to feminists of sexual difference and that this is exacerbated by a failure to understand the complexity of the various ontological positions.

This paper has outlined the two 'positions' of ontology and performativity in the context of contemporary contestations about the state of the subject for feminist political theorists. In terms of theoretical orientation towards mainstream knowledges, the ontological position is developed and understood to be a form of what I understand as *Replying Elsewhere* whilst the performativity position is understood to be as a form of *Speaking Otherwise Within*. I have suggested that ontological arguments have been prematurely dismissed for committing theoretical faux-pas that cluster under the rubric of various forms of essentialism. However, ontological arguments are not necessarily always essentialist and the association of essentialism and ontology are based on widely held misconceptions of exactly what is at issue in rethinking identity and difference. The impasse is exacerbated by the contemporary tendency to understand all ontological positions as somehow linked to formulating an essence rather than an understandings of ontology based upon notions of becoming. This paper has suggested that the complex interplays between power and desire have a direct bearing to understanding ontology as in some senses against performativity. Although I acknowledged that bodies do indeed matter, I argued that the question of which bodies matter should remain central to the

feminist political theorising agenda if the issue of women's subordination is to be effectively theorised.

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