

Judith Butler
Senses of the Subject
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Judith Butler's definition of the feminine subject has delineated, perhaps more than that of any other contemporary feminist theorist, the parameters of the subject in recent decades. Beginning with her path-breaking work in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1993), she has set the stage for a redefinition of the subject as linguistically constituted. Although her conception has been controversial, it has nevertheless become the touchstone of discussions of the subject since the 1990s.

But although Butler's work has been identified as the foundation of linguistic constructionism, this definition has become less and less appropriate as Butler's work has evolved. Beginning with *Bodies That Matter*, Butler advances a definition of the subject as paradoxical or ambiguous: neither wholly constructed nor wholly given. In subsequent books, *Undoing Gender* (2004b), *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), and *Precarious Life* (2004a), Butler develops a complex understanding of the subject that is a distinct departure from the linguistic constructionism with which she is identified. It is an understanding of the subject that focuses on the role of norms and what she calls "the requirement of identity." Her thesis is that some of us are excluded from the human because none of the norms that define the human fit us. Butler's conclusion is that it is incumbent on us to rearticulate the human, to open up the definition of the human to encompass the excluded identities.

These essays continue this direction of Butler's work. Although Butler asserts that the essays represent less well-known and less popular dimensions of her ethical work (10), they are nonetheless valuable additions to an understanding of her complex philosophy. The essays consist of works published between 1993 and 2012 that have not been widely available. The volume registers shifts in her view on the subject, continuing some of her well-known positions and introducing new themes not previously present in her theory of the subject.

Butler outlines in the introduction both the similarities and the differences in her theory. Informing all of her discussions is the overriding theme of her work: what she calls the paradox of the subject. She asserts: "nothing determines me in advance--I am not formed once and definitively but continuously and repeatedly. I am still being formed as I form myself in the here and now" (6). This in itself is not a new insight. What is new is Butler's emphasis on the ethical

implications of this ambiguous formulation. Ethics has always been an important aspect of Butler's work. In these essays, however, ethics takes center stage as a major concern. She asserts: "the contours of an ethical relationship emerge from this on-going paradox of subject formation" (6) and "Where the ethical does enter, it seems, is precisely in that encounter that confronts me with a world I never chose" (16).

These themes are explored in the chapters that follow, where other themes are introduced as well. Several essays explore a dimension of subject-formation that has not been at the forefront of Butler's thought: the body and the sentient. In an essay on Descartes, "How Can I Deny That These Hands and This Body Are Mine?," Butler criticizes precisely the view with which she has been closely associated: "strong constructionism." Labeling this position "scandalous," she asserts that she wants to suggest another way of approaching the question. In an argument that parallels her discussion of the constitutive role of language, she asserts that the body is *not* the ontological effect of language; it is given through language, but never fully given (20). Thus Descartes's effort to excise the body fails because the body returns as a final dimension of the text (32); the body is neither a surface nor a substance, but the linguistic occasion of the body's separation from itself (35). The thesis that emerges here is clear: neither the body nor language fully determines the subject, but neither can be removed from its constitution.

An alternative to Descartes that brings the body, or, more precisely, the sentient into the equation emerges in a chapter on Merleau-Ponty and Malebranche. For both theorists, touching is a central human activity, not a single act of touching, but the condition by virtue of which a corporeal condition is assumed (37). Although Malebranche is not a theorist who immediately comes to mind in contemporary discussions of the subject, it is a tribute to Butler's genius that she can elicit an ally in such an unlikely source.

Ethics and related issues occupy Butler's attention in the remaining essays in the book. In "The Desire to Live: Spinoza's Ethics under Pressure," Butler explores what she calls an ethic that honors desire without collapsing the egomaniacal defense of one's own life (85). The result is an "ethics under pressure" that would be constituted as a struggle and one that has anxiety rather than conviction as its condition. What she finds valuable in Spinoza's view is that it leads neither to a defense of simple individualism nor to forms of territoriality (89). In an explicit reference to the state of Israel, Butler concludes that the most important aspect of this ethics is that the death drive is held in check and that that opposes any nationalism.

Perhaps Butler's most puzzling take on ethics is her examination of what she calls "Hegel's Early Love." Hegel's task, Butler claims, is to figure out what keeps alive what is living in love (106). This is puzzling because it seems to have no connection to the rest of Butler's work on the subject. Butler seems to concede this when she states that the philosopher must cease to be a philosopher if he/she wishes to affirm the infinite life named love; one name for the deadening element in love is "philosophy" (107).

Some of these questions are answered, however, in the next chapter, on "Kierkegaard's Speculative Despair." For Kierkegaard, despair thwarts the possibility of a fully mediated subject in Hegel's sense (113). But Kierkegaard wants to articulate a subject that is opposed to Hegel's subject. Kierkegaard's major concern is the question of faith. The primary way in which human

selves fall into despair, for Kierkegaard, is their repudiation of their infinite origins. Therefore, one is always in despair or faith (124–25). Kierkegaard interprets Hegel as arguing that the subject will eventually find a harmonious relationship. Kierkegaard is less optimistic. He claims that the self is perpetually estranged from itself and the world (126) and, finally, that the postulation of a Kierkegaardian God underscores that existence is absurd (134).

We are on more familiar ground in the final two chapters. In "Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics: Alterities of the Flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty," Irigaray attempts to turn Merleau-Ponty's terms against him in order to open up the space of sexual difference. This space, for Irigaray, emerges with incommensurability between the sexes (154). Butler does not fully endorse Irigaray's position. She questions how it can explain sexual relations between members of the same sex. She concludes, however, with a theme that unites all of the essays: the subject as flesh is primarily an intersubjective being, "finding its primary sociality in a set of relations that are never fully recoverable or traceable" (168).

In the concluding chapter, "Violence, Nonviolence: Sartre on Fanon," Butler turns to a theme that is not only at the center of her theory, but that also constitutes her most valuable contribution in this volume: the need for a radical transformation of the human. Going back and forth between Sartre and Fanon, Butler establishes that the position of the colonized as subject is completely untenable. We cannot just advocate better treatment of the colonized on the part of the colonizer; we must exchange our notion of humanism with a different form of humanism. We must ask: what happens to the notion of the human under the conditions of colonization? We must, in short, open up the human to another future (181). This theme has been central to her recent work and constitutes a major contribution to contemporary ethics. Her discussion of post-kinship studies in anthropology explores how we can expand the concept of the human beyond its present parameters. Even more poignant is her discussion of subjects who are excluded from the realm of subjectivity through the work of societal norms. As she puts it in these discussions, these subjects are denied an identity; they are not allowed to "be." Here she comes to the same conclusion with regard to the colonized. She concludes that we need a "new conception of the human where some manner of touch other than violence is the precondition of the making" (197).

Butler is the most significant philosopher working today on the issue of the subject and subjectivity. In this volume she fleshes out her previous theories and adds new perspectives to her position. Anyone interested in these issues, feminist or nonfeminist, must contend with her arguments.

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