

A Review of “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” by Butler (1988)

Reviewer 2

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isitcredible.com

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I am wiser than this person; for it is likely that neither of us knows anything fine and good, but he thinks he knows something when he does not know it, whereas I, just as I do not know, do not think I know, either. I seem, then, to be wiser than him in this small way, at least: that what I do not know, I do not think I know, either.

Plato, *The Apology of Socrates*, 21d

To err is human. All human knowledge is fallible and therefore uncertain. It follows that we must distinguish sharply between truth and certainty. That to err is human means not only that we must constantly struggle against error, but also that, even when we have taken the greatest care, we cannot be completely certain that we have not made a mistake.

Karl Popper, 'Knowledge and the Shaping of Reality'

Overview

Citation: Butler, J. (1988). Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4, pp. 519–531.

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Abstract Summary: This essay reinterprets the phenomenological doctrine of constituting acts to argue that gender is not a stable identity but an identity tenuously constituted through the stylized repetition of acts. It analyzes gender identity as a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction, suggesting that its performative nature contains the possibility of contesting its reified status.

Key Methodology: Theoretical essay drawing on phenomenology, feminist theory, and theatrical/anthropological discourses.

Research Question: How is gender constituted through acts, and what possibilities exist for the cultural transformation of gender through such acts?

Summary

Is It Credible?

The essay presents a rigorous and internally consistent theoretical argument that fundamentally reorients the understanding of gender identity. By shifting the locus of gender from an internal essence to a “performative accomplishment,” Butler offers a sophisticated mechanism for explaining how gender is reproduced over time. The credibility of the essay lies in its careful dismantling of the “expressive” model of gender—the idea that acts merely reveal a pre-existing self—and its replacement with a model where acts constitute the illusion of that self. The logic is tight, the theoretical appropriations are transparent, and the resulting framework offers a compelling explanation for the stability of gender norms without resorting to biological determinism.

The central contribution rests on the distinction between expression and performativeness. The essay persuasively argues that if gender attributes are performative, they “constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal” (p. 528). This inversion is handled with philosophical precision. Rather than simply asserting this claim, the essay builds it through a synthesis of phenomenological concepts—specifically Merleau-Ponty’s view of the body as an “historical idea” (p. 521) and Beauvoir’s assertion that one “becomes” a woman (p. 519). The argument succeeds because it does not deny the materiality of the body but rather reconceives it as a “continual and incessant materializing of possibilities” (p. 521). This allows the essay to account for the “appearance of substance” in gender identity as a “sedimented” effect of repetition (p. 524), rather than a natural fact.

However, the essay’s reliance on phenomenology requires the reader to accept a significant modification of that tradition. The author explicitly acknowledges that applying the doctrine of “constituting acts” to gender requires a revision of the “individualist assumptions” inherent in Husserl or Merleau-Ponty (p. 525). Instead of a subject who constitutes the world, the essay posits a subject who is constituted *by* the world through acts. While this is a necessary theoretical move to avoid positing a pre-discursive self, it creates a tension: the essay utilizes the prestige of the phenomenological method while simultaneously discarding its

traditional subject-object orientation. The credibility of the argument holds, but it depends on the reader's willingness to accept this "appropriation and reinterpretation" (p. 519) as a valid theoretical expansion rather than a misapplication.

Furthermore, the essay navigates the limitations of its central metaphor—the theatre—with intellectual honesty. A potential weakness in performativity theory is the implication that gender is a role one can simply take on or off, like a costume. The essay anticipates this critique by distinguishing between the theatrical act, which has conventions separating it from reality, and the social act, which does not (p. 527). By using the example of the transvestite on the bus versus on the stage, the essay demonstrates that the "reality" of gender is maintained precisely because there are no conventions to "delimit the purely imaginary character of the act" (p. 527). This transforms a potential flaw in the metaphor into a supporting evidence for the "punitive" and "regulatory" nature of gender (p. 522).

Ultimately, the essay succeeds in defining gender as a "strategy of survival" (p. 522) within a specific historical context. It does not attempt to prove the existence of the "heterosexual contract" or "patriarchy" from scratch, but rather assumes these as the operative historical conditions based on the work of Foucault and Rubin (p. 524). While this limits the scope of the essay—it explains the *how* of gender reproduction more than the *why* of the structural origins—it allows for a focused and potent analysis of the corporeal style. The essay effectively reveals that the "true" gender identity is a "regulatory fiction" (p. 528), a conclusion that follows logically from the evidence presented.

The Bottom Line

The essay offers a highly credible and theoretically robust argument that redefines gender not as a biological or psychological truth, but as a "performative accomplishment" maintained through the stylized repetition of acts. By successfully inverting the relationship between the doer and the deed, it demonstrates that gender acts constitute the identity they ostensibly express. While the argument relies on a specific reinterpretation of phenomenological philosophy and assumes the validity of structuralist critiques of kinship, it provides a coherent and powerful framework for understanding how gender norms are reproduced and

naturalized at the level of the body.

Specific Issues

Acknowledged revision of phenomenological constitution: The essay constructs its primary argument by “appropriating and reinterpreting” the phenomenological doctrine of constituting acts (p. 519). The author explicitly notes that this application forces a revision of the “individualist assumptions” found in the traditional discourse of Husserl or Merleau-Ponty (p. 525). Rather than a subject who constitutes meaning prior to language, the essay posits a social agent who is an “object rather than the subject of constitutive acts” (p. 519). This requires an “expansion of the conventional view of acts” (p. 521). While the author defends this as a necessary theoretical synthesis to account for “social temporality” (p. 520), the argument relies heavily on the reader accepting this fundamental alteration of the source methodology.

Acknowledged limits of the theatrical metaphor: The essay utilizes a theatrical metaphor (“acts,” “script,” “performance”) to explicate gender constitution but acknowledges that the metaphor does not perfectly map onto social reality. The author notes that theatrical conventions allow an audience to “de-realize the act” (p. 527), whereas gender performance in the mundane world lacks these conventions, making the act “dangerous” (p. 527). The essay addresses this by arguing that the absence of such conventions is precisely what gives gender its “punitive” power (p. 522). While this distinction is used to strengthen the argument regarding the reality of gender, it highlights the inherent limitations of using dramaturgy to explain ontological conditions.

Peripheral treatment of macro-structural causes: The essay focuses its analysis on the “corporeal acts” (p. 521) of the subject, treating macro-structural forces such as the “heterosexually-based system of marriage” (p. 524) and “patriarchy” (p. 531) as established historical contexts rather than primary objects of investigation. The author relies on external theories from Foucault, Lévi-Strauss, and Rubin to establish the “heterosexual contract” (p. 524) that compels gender performance. Consequently, the essay explains the reproduction of gender norms at the level of the body but does not provide a genealogy of the structural forces that necessitate this reproduction, explicitly limiting its scope to the “mundane manner in which these constructs are produced... within the field of bodies”

(p. 525).

Future Research

Empirical verification of punitive consequences: The essay posits that gender is a “strategy of survival” with “clearly punitive consequences” for those who fail to perform it correctly (p. 522). Future research should move beyond the theoretical assertion of these consequences to empirically categorize and quantify the “punitive” social sanctions applied to non-conforming gender performances in non-theatrical spaces. This would involve sociological or anthropological studies designed to measure the specific social mechanisms (violence, exclusion, economic penalty) that enforce the “stylized repetition of acts,” thereby testing the essay’s claim that gender is maintained through duress rather than voluntary expression.

Genealogy of the compulsory framework: The essay relies on the “heterosexual contract” and kinship systems as the motivating force behind gender constitution but treats them as historical givens (p. 524). Future research is needed to perform the “critical genealogy” (p. 530) of these macro-structures themselves, applying the same performative lens to the institutions of marriage and kinship. Research should investigate whether these institutions are also “performative accomplishments” maintained by repetition, or if they possess a different ontological status than the gendered subjects they regulate. This would address the gap between the micro-analysis of the body and the macro-analysis of the social order.

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