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A Path Between Voluntarism and Determinism

Tracing Elements of Phenomenology in
Judith Butler's Account of Performativity

IN THE 1999 preface to the 10th anniversary edition of *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler addresses the difficulties of giving a precise definition of what might be said to be the key concept of this seminal work, namely that of *performativity*. Partly, she writes, this indeterminacy of the meaning of performativity reflects her own changing understanding of the notion, but partly it also has to do with the notion itself having taken on something of a life of its own as it has been picked up and rearticulated by others (Butler 1999, xiv). Indeed, the numerous interpretations and accounts of the performativity of gender identity, drawing on Butler, and more specifically on some particular passages and isolated sentences in *Gender Trouble*, are inevitably not the same as, and often very different from, Butler's own account (Kotz 1992).

In the following I turn to the notion of performativity as it is articulated by Butler primarily in *Gender Trouble*, but also in some of her other writings, with the purpose of drawing out elements of a phenomenological heritage. By doing this I will stray on a path that Butler herself leaves largely unexplored, albeit not at all unacknowledged, and that rarely appears in the literature and commentary on Butler's work.¹ Indeed, insofar as her writing is associated with or characterized as poststructuralist, it

is often placed in critical opposition to and, at least in part, incompatible with phenomenology.³ My intention with tracing elements of phenomenology in Butler's writings, and more specifically in her articulation of the notion of performativity, is not to make any claims regarding the more general role of phenomenology in her philosophy, but, more modestly, to highlight certain aspects of performativity that, while perhaps not necessarily getting lost outside of a phenomenological framework, can be productively brought out against such a background. More specifically, I want to draw attention to a doubleness of the performativity of identity and of the subject as on the one hand culturally and institutionally formed and reiterated, and on the other hand intentional. My aim is to thereby avoid the pitfalls of understanding performativity either in voluntaristic terms of free individual choice or in terms of absolute determinism.

I will highlight three elements that are central to the idea of performativity as articulated by Butler and that are also of key importance in the tradition of phenomenology, namely the notion of constitution, the notion of style, and the idea of meaning as being *in statu nascendi*. These three elements, I suggest, are both theoretically sophisticated and at the same time firmly anchored in the concreteness of everyday existence. In highlighting these elements, I am not pretending to make any claims regarding their origin and I am certainly not claiming that phenomenology was first on the scene creating these ideas and notions out of nothing. Rather, all ideas, traditions, schools and strands of thought are indebted to the soil in which they grow and from which they differentiate themselves.

Between Voluntarism and Determinism

The notion of performativity holds a central place in contemporary feminist theory and practice and it figures in a wide variety of different versions. Butler herself, in an interview with Liz Kotz (1992, 83), identifies what she calls a "bad reading" of the idea of gender performativity, a reading that snowballed in response to *Gender Trouble* and that she describes as "unfortunately [being] the most popular one" (cf. Butler 1993, x–xi). The bad reading, says Butler in the interview,

goes something like this: I can get up in the morning, look in my closet, and decide which gender I want to be today. I can take out a piece of clothing and change my gender: stylize it, and then that evening I can change it again and be some radically other, so that what you get is something like the commodification of gender, and the understanding of taking on a gender as a kind of consumerism. (Kotz 1992, 83)

This “bad reading” not only represents a commodification of gender, but also frames identity and the subject in decidedly voluntaristic terms. In contrast to such a reading, Butler (1990a, 33) describes gender as “a set of repeated acts within a *highly rigid regulatory frame* that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (my emphasis). Far from being a free choice, the performativity of gender is thus, on Butler’s account, instead a question of being highly regulated and a matter of “how to work the trap that one is inevitably in” (Kotz 1992, 84). There is, as she puts it in *Gender Trouble*, “only a taking up of the tools where they lie, where the very ‘taking up’ is *enabled* by the tool lying there” (Butler 1990a, 145, my emphasis).

While rejecting a voluntaristic understanding of gender (and identity) as a choice, Butler at the same time also denies the idea that it is something that is inscribed upon an individual as a *tabula rasa*, as if a person were a clean slate upon which gender would be written in different ways depending on social and cultural context. Butler writes:

[G]ender is not a radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual, as some post-structuralist displacements of the subject would contend. The body is not passively scripted with cultural codes, as if it were a lifeless recipient of wholly pre-given cultural relations. But neither do embodied selves pre-exist the cultural conventions which essentially signify bodies. (Butler 1988, 526)

Here, in the 1988 article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” preceding and anticipating *Gender Trouble*, Butler explicitly distances

herself from poststructuralist displacements of the subject (albeit without making reference to any specific such displacement) with which her own position is perhaps most commonly associated. Indeed, without claiming this position for herself, Butler has become something of a poster poststructuralist feminist thinker. The significance of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to Butler's philosophy has, as Sara Salih (2002, 6) writes, "led many people to classify her as a post-structuralist, since this is the 'school of thought' (although it isn't one exactly) to which they are generally regarded as belonging."³

Butler thus distances herself both from poststructuralist displacements of the subject, in very general terms, and from the idea that subjects pre-exist cultural conventions of signification. In her early discussion of gender identity as a performative accomplishment, she instead turns to phenomenology, and more specifically, the phenomenological theory of acts that "seeks to explain the mundane way in which social agents *constitute* social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social sign" (Butler 1988, 519). Even though phenomenology, on Butler's (1988, 519) account, "sometimes appears to assume the existence of a choosing and constituting agent [...] as the sole source of its constituting acts," she at the same time also identifies "a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution" that takes the agent as object. It is this "more radical use" of constitution that Butler proposes as she develops the idea of performativity. It is not entirely clear, however, what this "more radical use" is meant to entail except that it takes the agent to be the object of constitution and not a choosing subject existing prior to and as the sole source of its constitutive acts. Butler (1988, 523), moreover, seems to invite a certain degree of indistinctness, writing that feminist appropriations of the phenomenological theory of constitution "might employ the notion of an *act* in a richly ambiguous sense." In such an ambiguous sense, the phenomenological theory of acts of constitution, she writes, offers "a felicitous starting point" for a feminist theory seeking to understand how "bodies get crafted into genders" (Butler 1988, 525). It must be noted here that Butler's explicit reference to and discussion of phenomenology in "Performative Acts and Gender Con-

stitution” are curiously missing in *Gender Trouble*, published only two years later, in spite of the remarkable overlap between the two works in the account of gender as a performative accomplishment. Indeed, there are full paragraphs in the earlier article that reappear almost unaltered in *Gender Trouble* and the general line of argumentation is the same in both texts, but the references to phenomenology, upon which much of the discussion in the earlier article builds, have been removed in *Gender Trouble*. The earlier article does offer a clue to the influence of phenomenology in the development of the notion of performativity, and the passing over of this influence in *Gender Trouble* two years later raises some interesting questions about positioning, silencing, establishing of traditions, and claiming of intellectual property rights.

While Butler in *Gender Trouble* and other early work explicitly discusses the performativity of *gender* and its constitutive force in establishing the belief in a prediscursive sex, her claims already in the early writings are not limited to gender but rather concern the formation of the subject more generally. In fact, her main concern in *Gender Trouble* is the idea of woman as the *subject* of feminism, in terms of a feminist politics of representation, which then leads her to a deconstruction of the notion of gender and of the well-established distinction between a culturally constructed gender and a natural biological sex. Performativity, she says in a 1994 interview in *Radical Philosophy*, is not limited to the constitution of gender identity but “contests the very notion of the subject” (Butler 1994, 33). Further, following Louis Althusser’s account of the interpellation of subjects, Butler (1993, 225) argues that the I only *comes into being* through being called and that this constitutive naming takes place prior to the I. In more recent political and ethical work on vulnerability, Butler (2004, 31) insists on bodily life as the site of “a common human vulnerability [...] that emerges with life itself” and whose source we cannot recover as “it *precedes the formation of ‘I’*” (my emphasis; cf. Butler 2005, 12). This common vulnerability, she is careful to stress, “is always articulated differently [and] cannot be properly thought of outside a differentiated field of power and, specifically, the differential operation of norms of recognition” (Butler 2004, 44). A common thread

throughout Butler's work would thus in fact seem to be a displacement of the subject, in spite of her own distancing from such displacement (at least in poststructuralist form). How then should we understand this proposed deconstruction, displacement, and contestation of the subject?

As we have seen above, and as is also well known, Butler is quite clear that there exists no subject prior to performative acts, but that the subject is instead constituted by such acts. It is furthermore constituted in such a way that it appears and is instituted as being prior to and the origin of its own acts of constitution. With reference to Nietzsche, she famously writes, "there need not be a 'doer behind the deed,' but [...] the 'doer' is variably constructed in and through the deed" (Butler 1990a, 142). However, Butler is equally clear that deconstruction and contestation of the subject, or any other universal category, should not be taken as its negation. Contesting the very notion of the subject, by way of demonstrating that it is performatively constituted, does not entail pronouncing it dead and done with and it does not make the subject into a powerless puppet completely determined and controlled by the strings of discursive structures.⁴ Instead, such a move invites careful interrogation of the constitution of the subject as pregiven and foundational (Butler 1992, 9). Butler's (1990a, 33, 145–6) contention that the subject is performatively constituted is equally a contention that it is not brought about by *any* external power, but that the reiterated performative acting *is itself* the power in its persistence. As already suggested above, her articulation of performativity, in rejecting both a voluntaristic view of the subject and gender identity and an idea of the subject as a passive surface upon which identity is inscribed, involves a certain *doubleness* of the doing of the subject (as gendered) *both* as intentional *and* as culturally formed and reiterated (Butler 1988, 526; 1990b, 324; 1999, xxiv). It is precisely this doubleness that a phenomenological perspective, in my contention, can bring to light.

Intentional Acts of Constitution

In a phenomenological tradition, the idea of constitution is central and refers to the process through which objects and social reality, as well as subjects of that social reality, embodied and situated in the world and in

relation to others, are brought into being. As the process of constitution is constitutive of the subject's own being, it is not a process in which the subject can choose whether or not to take part. Rather than a voluntaristic agent performing an activity, the subject *is* the very activity of constitution as such. This ongoing activity results in the constitution of the world as well as of the embodied subject *as* the activity of constitution. The subject is thus continuously constituting itself as existing (Husserl 1997, 66, § 31) and while constitution does in one sense originate with the subject, the subject at the same time originates with the process of constitution, in so far as it depends on it for its own existence.

Even though the process of constitution is constitutive of the subject's own being, the subject is nevertheless conceived in terms of an intentional and constituting subject. Intentionality here must however not be understood in an everyday sense of purpose, aim or deliberate determination, which would seem to take us directly to a strictly voluntaristic understanding of the subject. Instead, intentionality as a technical term in phenomenology has the meaning of aboutness or directedness and signifies the notion that consciousness is always about something or directed toward something external to itself. As intentional, consciousness is always "consciousness of" something, for instance a belief about something or a desire for something. An act of consciousness is always directed toward something, always intending something but it is not dependent on any specific intentional object; instead acts of constitution are dependent on the very intending of intentional objects (and vice versa).⁵

While intentionality is often taken as a feature of consciousness or the mind, both Edmund Husserl and later phenomenologists, such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Simone de Beauvoir, also identify intentionality on the level of lived embodiment, and neither Husserl nor most later phenomenologists advocate an idea of consciousness or the mind as isolated from the body. The idea of a bodily, or operative, intentionality is explored at length in Merleau-Ponty's writings, describing how this operative intentionality functions and how it is by its own making, through its very structure, transformed into different forms of ob-

ject directed intentionality. As Merleau-Ponty (1962; 1968) writes, the relationship between the embodied subject and its world is generally transformed into an epistemological problem of how the subject knows a world that seems to exist in itself independently of the subject. Subject and world, consciousness and body, fall apart into irreconcilable opposites and all too easily these opposites are given ontological status as two essentially different forms of existence. The human lived body, however, belonging simultaneously,

to the order of the “object” and to the order of the “subject” reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders [and] teaches us that each calls for the other. (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 137; see also 1962, 154, 198)⁶

The foundation of any object directed intentionality in the operative intentionality of lived embodiment lays bare its structure as one of attachment, co-dependence, and even co-conditioning. This attachment between embodied consciousness and the world only comes to the fore through the method of the phenomenological reduction or epoché, in which I step back from a naïve natural attitude of everyday life where the subject most often appears to exist prior to, independent of and in control of representation. The reduction involves a letting go of habitual tendencies of objectifying the world and a radical shift of focus from *what* the world is to *how* the world and our relation to the world is given. In this shift, not only a transformation of our attitude, from a *what* to a *how*, toward the world occurs but also a disclosure of our own being. The phenomenological suspension of knowledge of the world as an object world and of the truths of the natural and human sciences unveils the embodied self as being-in-the world, in the sense also of being-*of*-the-world, and intentionally directed toward the world in which it is embedded and of which it forms part. It brings to light the lifeworld and is for Merleau-Ponty the phenomenological return to the things themselves, to the world as it is experienced and lived prior to scientific descriptions and judgments. The suspension of knowledge also unveils how mean-

ing of the lived world and of the self continuously originates anew. As the world comes into being for the self, the self also comes into being in relation to the world, as a reaching out of itself toward the world of meaning.⁷ What the reduction brings to light is thus an intimate bond and interrelation between the embodied self and its world in which both are co-constitutive of each other and continuously given birth in relation to one another.⁸

Drawing on a phenomenological description of constitution brings out the doubleness of performativity of being both intentional in the sense of directed or reaching out and institutionalizing in the sense of regulating and forming. A phenomenological perspective on performative constitution avoids both the “bad reading” of performativity in strictly voluntaristic terms and an understanding of performativity as completely deterministic reiteration. While the subject can only be a subject by virtue of being subjected to certain given conditions, enforcing its being in specific ways, it is within the framework of such conditions nevertheless an active subject who has no choice but to act. Further, by locating intentionality and constitution also on a level of lived embodiment, a phenomenological perspective takes the embodiment and situatedness of the subject into serious consideration, dismissing any interpretation of the subject as being an abstract product of linguistic structural play or only a position in language without much connection with lived reality. Such a view of the subject is often ascribed to Butler and the publication of *Gender Trouble* stirred some lively discussion on the role of the body in her account of performativity, which critics deemed to be downplayed or even absent. In contrast to this common criticism, I would argue that Butler in fact underlines the situatedness and embodiment of the gendered subject and rejects the idea that performative constitution takes place in a sphere of language, separate from that of material reality. Understanding reality and the materiality of bodies in terms of performative constitution does not make them any less real. Instead, it questions the idea that there is an underlying reality that exists in isolation from the different ways in which it is lived, understood, and conceptualized. The performatively constituted subject on

Butler's account is a situated subject, embodying normative ways of being in the world that are continuously reinforced, altered, transgressed and restructured through ordinary everyday comportment.⁹

Style

Butler's insistence on the centrality of embodiment to the notion of performativity (and of performativity to embodiment) is evident already in *Gender Trouble* and other early writings. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990a, 140) argues that the constitution of gendered subjects (and of gender as an identity) is instituted through a stylized reiteration of bodily acts and a stylization of the body (cf. Butler 1988, 519).¹⁰ She asks us to consider gender as "a corporeal style" (Butler 1988, 521; 1990a, 139) and denies any ontological status of the body apart from its performative acts. Gendered subjects, she argues, are reproduced "through the various ways in which bodies are acted in relationship to the deeply entrenched or sedimented expectations of gendered existence" (Butler 1988, 524). Style, for Butler (1990a, 139), is a "corporeal enactment" that "is both intentional and performative." To enact a certain style, of for instance gender, is not, she writes, "a radical act of creation," but rather "a tacit project to renew one's cultural history in one's own terms" (Butler 1986, 40). She is careful to stress that styles are "never fully self-styled, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities" of how they are and can be enacted (Butler 1990a, 139). How one renews one's cultural history in one's own terms is thus conditioned by that very cultural history in which "one's own terms" are situated but which is nevertheless continuously rearticulated and continued in different directions through singular intentional and performative enactments. Further, throughout her work, Butler (1999, xviii) stresses that practicing a certain style and learning the rules of different forms of intelligible discourse is a matter of taking part in and conforming to practices of normalization where not conforming comes at the high cost of intelligibility itself.

In spite of Butler's assertion that styles are never fully self-styled, the very notion of style to describe gendered subjects may nevertheless in

itself serve to reinforce a voluntaristic view, a “bad reading,” of performativity. In colloquial tongue, style is often understood as something we actively and voluntarily choose, indeed even consume. Style has, as Linda Singer puts it, been reduced to,

a fetish of the commodity market [...] which demands that we revamp our wardrobes, trade in our cars – in short commodity culture has effected a conflation whereby stylistic value has become synonymous with the market value of the item in question. (Singer 1981, 153)

Style is also used as a categorical tool, by which particularly works of art or cultural expression are catalogued into different genres or traditions. Further, in colloquial use, style has an evaluative function in relation to both cultural objects and persons. Style is, in Singer’s (1981, 153) words, “a distinguishing mark of quality” and “an object of discernment, whose final determination rests with the connoisseurs and experts.” Applied to objects as well as persons, having style may not at all be the same as being in style, in the sense of in fashion.

Butler employs the notion of style quite differently from these colloquial uses and her characterization of style reveals, once again, her reliance on phenomenology, to which this notion is central. For Merleau-Ponty (1973, 56), the notion of style designates “our original relation to the world” or our being-in-the-world, which, as seen above, is one of intertwinement and co-constitution.¹¹ Style can thus not be understood as “a veneer over things which can be extracted and investigated on its own” (Singer 1981, 154). Instead, it is a fundamental element of existence and described as a persistent and distinctive manner of being that is recognizable without necessarily being explicitly articulated (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 327, 330). As applied to lived bodies or embodied subjects, style is on Merleau-Ponty’s account what provides coherence to bodies, making their comportment, behavior and expression into something more than simply a series of individual gestures. Indeed, as Martin Dillon (1997, 79) writes, “I recognize a person’s style in gestures I may never have seen before” because they express that person’s specific manner of being.

Style may be said to constitute a consistent thread running throughout bodily expression and comportment, like a melody unfolding throughout life. The notion of style offers a way of accounting for the unity of the lived body not in substantive fixed terms but rather as “an adverbial unity” that “functions as a ground of identification [...] without having to posit an atemporal core of meaning that remains invariant throughout a given duration of time” (Dillon 1997, 79). Instead, the unity of style is, in Sara Heinämaa’s (1996, 301) words, “like a web or a fabric of partial and varied connections”; style as an adverbial unity is in continuously becoming as a relation with others and with a surrounding world.

Thus, rather than being entirely freely chosen or completely determined, style, as Singer (1981, 161) writes, “emerges as an intertwining of freedom and facticity, as the appropriation of a given situation and the transcendence of it.” Also Butler’s (1986, 40) account of style in terms of a corporeal enactment of renewal of “one’s cultural history in one’s own terms” captures an intertwinement of freedom and facticity. The enactment of style is a conditioned response to and firmly founded in one’s whole situation. It ensures certain stability to existence, which, whether for better or worse, secures identity without completely determining it or bestowing it with an immutable essence. Indeed, as Dillon (1997, 79) writes, the development of the notion of style might be said to alter the very meaning of essence or being, in the direction of recognizing it not as pregiven and definitely fixed but in a state of ceaseless becoming. According to such an understanding, any essence of woman (or any other gender or subject) would be impossible to pin down and eternally defined: woman’s being would never, as de Beauvoir famously puts it, be a matter of being born as a specific being but instead of continuously becoming as that being. Being as such would thus be conceptualized in terms of becoming.

Style in Butler’s account of the performative constitution of gendered subjects, as well as in phenomenological accounts of bodily styles of being, is established through repetition. Performativity is, as we recall, not to be understood in terms of a singular act but instead as a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988, 519; 1990a, 140; 1999, xv); it is the

mundane and unreflective habituation of norms in gestures and bodily comportment. Merleau-Ponty (1962, 441) speaks of “a sort of sedimentation of our life” and describes how a bodily style of being is established as habitual modes of being acquire “a favoured status for us.” The lived body in phenomenological terms is, as Heinämaa (1996, 302) writes, understood as the sedimentation “of values and meanings, created by former bodily acts: postures, gestures and movements.” Furthermore, these bodily acts do not originate with one individual lived body but, rather, bodily acts and individual lived bodies are always articulated as part of and in relation to an historical, cultural, and social situation in which they are firmly founded. Both Butler and phenomenologists, such as de Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, stress the constitution of corporeal styles and of embodied subjects as intersubjectively achieved through different forms of corporeal interrelation.¹² The unreflective process of habituation is not to be understood in the sense that we necessarily incorporate and favor habitual modes of being in seamless and uncomplicated ways. Quite to the contrary, unreflectively habituated norms and modes of being may well be, and often are, incorporated in conflicting ways, filled with tensions and different forms of disidentification and rejection. As Butler reminds us, gender performativity outside of an established heteronormative framework has severe punitive consequences in terms of loss of intelligibility and risks annihilation of lived reality through incorporation of norms producing shame, disgust, and hatred of “wrongful” performative acts.¹³

Repetition and Meaning in Statu Nascendi

While repetition is what establishes a certain style of being and secures its identity, there is, on Butler’s account, no repetition of the identity of embodied subjects that does not contain an element of displacement or slippage. The subject as a site of repetition “is always displaced by the very repetition that sustains it” and the process of repetition that secures the identity of the subject is also at the same time what establishes its permanent “non-self-identical status” (Butler 1991, 18). The notion of a non-coincidence of identity, and in the structure of repetition securing

identity, is central also in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological writings on style. The notion of style, as already established above, puts focus on the constitution of meaning as *both* intentional and performative, in the sense of repetitive of already established configurations of meaning. Style, as Dillon (1997, 79) writes, "allows one to identify an *emergent* unity" (my emphasis).

The stylized reiteration of bodily acts constitutive of gendered subjects and their social reality is, as discussed above, performative in the sense that it constitutes the identity it is purported to be (Butler 1990a, 25). The meaning that is brought to birth through the reiteration of performative acts is thus not a stable value but instead something that is continually constituted and "comes into existence at the same time as it is produced" (Stoller 2010, 109; see also Waldenfels 2000, 92–3). This focus on meaning as being *in statu nascendi*, that is, in a state of continuous birth, is as Silvia Stoller (2010) has argued, something Butler's notion of performativity shares with Merleau-Ponty's description of expression but this is a connection that Butler herself leaves entirely unacknowledged. In her zeal to move beyond what she calls an "expressive model of gender," Butler (1988; 1990a) is careful to distinguish her own notion of performativity from that of expression. With her claim that gender is a matter of performative acting and constitutes the identity it is said to express, she positions herself in sharp contrast to an "implicit and popular theory of acts and gestures as expressive of gender" (Butler 1988, 528) and thereby unfortunately disregards the rich and careful account of the notion of expression that can be found in phenomenology, and especially in Merleau-Ponty's writings (Stoller 2010; Käll forthcoming).

Like Butler, Merleau-Ponty strongly dismisses philosophies that argue for an inner self as the sole and absolute constituting force and he rethinks the notion of expression to reflect an understanding of the self as embodied, embedded in the world and interrelated with others.¹⁴ Expression on Merleau-Ponty's account cannot be understood in simple one-directional terms of something inner that is expressed to the outside, which is the simplistic picture Butler rejects when rejecting an expressive model of gender.¹⁵ Instead throughout his work Merleau-Ponty speaks of expres-

sion in terms of a paradox. The paradox lies in the event of expression itself between, on the one hand, the actual expression in which something is already expressed and, on the other hand, what is yet to be expressed through that expression. The event of expression, writes Merleau-Ponty,

presupposes that there is a fund of kindred expressions, already established and thoroughly evident, and that from this fund the form used should detach itself and remain new enough to arouse attention. (Merleau-Ponty 1973, 35, see also 41, 43, 113; 1962, 389, 391; 1968, 144)

Thus, expressive operations rest on the already established forms of expression as well as the new ways in which these are reiterated to stir attention and initiate meaning, and are both performative, in the sense of repeating already given meaning, and intentional.¹⁶

Much like performativity in Butler's writings, expression on Merleau-Ponty's account is understood as a founding event in which something emerges as something. While there is no meaning (or prediscursive subject) that precedes the event of expression, Merleau-Ponty stresses the presence of an intention or will to express. This will to express is informed and limited by already reiterated expressions, which to a greater or lesser extent cut through and alter my intentions. I cannot will without willing something precisely *as* something. There is a necessary presence of meaning, arising anew in every moment of expression. This meaning stems from me as an expressive self and is solicited by the world in which I am embedded but it also at the same time stems from the world and is solicited by me. The meaning of an expression is not merely the meaning I intend and not its particular use on any one particular occasion but must instead be understood in terms of the rules and conventions that govern its use on all occasions. The intention with which I express something is, to speak with Bernard Waldenfels (2000, 98), a "broken intention, broken like the stick in the water, immersed in an alien medium." It depends on "what the words want to say" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, xv). Merleau-Ponty (1962, xiv) very forcefully states that simply by virtue of being in the world "we are *condemned to*

meaning,” and there is nothing we can do or say that will not acquire a name in history. It is, in fact, by being condemned to meaning that we are able to do or say anything at all. I express myself by intentionally or unintentionally taking up meanings in which I dwell and which in part define who I am, and I make these meanings my own through expressing them. I reiterate meaning simply by being in the world but this reiteration is in each moment also a creation through which established meanings are altered and reestablished.

Merleau-Ponty’s interrogation of expression entails a rejection of essentialist theories, something that also Butler shares in her account of performativity. They both reject the assumption of a subject existing prior to its performative acts, in Butler’s case, or expressive acts, in Merleau-Ponty’s case. Contrary to Butler’s view that expression is in danger of essentialism by presupposing a pre-existing subject that expresses its identity from the inner to the outer, Stoller (2010, 98) argues that the notion of expression, such as it is articulated by Merleau-Ponty, “is by its very definition the realization of meaning in the act of ‘expression,’” something it shares with Butler’s articulation of performativity. For both Butler and Merleau-Ponty, the idea of the “inner” is an outcome of reiteration of acts of constitution and emerges in intimate coupling with the “outer” which is equally an outcome of the reiteration of acts. Both Butler and Merleau-Ponty provide accounts of how a separation between interiority and exteriority is brought about, a separation that is secondary but is instituted as original. What is brought to light and emerges in both performativity and expression is a difference or gap between what we have come to term an “inner world” of experiencing subjectivity and an “outer world” of the intersubjectively accessible body, whether these are experienced as harmoniously corresponding to one another or as being in stark conflict.

Conclusion

The idea of performativity as articulated by Butler offers a way of approaching the seeming stability of identity and subject positions, of categories, roles and behavior and a way of bringing to light the power of

reiteration both in terms of enforcing given ways of being and of the possibilities of changing them. It is in the structure of repetition, which secures identity, where Butler (1988, 520) locates possibilities of change and transformation, “in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of [an established] style.” As we have seen above, Butler stresses that there is no possibility for agency outside of the discursive practices through which the very term agency is made intelligible, but she also points to the possibility of performing differently:

The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, *to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself. (Butler 1990a, 140)

While repetition ensures a stability of identities and subject positions, it is also at the same time what opens up for the possibilities of altering seemingly stable identities. In so far as each act of repetition points toward an horizon of possible future acts, each present act holds within itself that which comes after: what is yet to come is always present as an eternal promise in the present and the present always present as a trace in that which is yet to come. Thus, even though we cannot decide whether to act or not, in so far as reiterated acting is constitutive of our being, performative reiteration can nevertheless be rehabilitated into alternate styles of being, fashioning embodied subjects and situations in ways that map out trajectories and forge relations in new and perhaps unexpected ways.

Also Merleau-Ponty (1962, 441) draws attention to possibilities of altering styles of being through unexpected acts of repetition and writes that any “habitual being in the world is at each moment equally precarious.” However, he also at the same time underlines the unlikelihood of drastic transformations and the difficulties with which such transformations are carried out. Merleau-Ponty (1962, 453) insists that to be “born is both to be born of the world and to be born into the world,” thereby capturing a doubleness of human existence of being both already con-

stituted with a certain meaning and at the same time continuously constituting meaning through repetition. The subject and all her choices and actions are always situated and their situatedness, as well as specific situations, form the conditions of their articulation. While individual situations are arbitrary in the sense of being based on nothing but the different ways in which they have been reiterated, Merleau-Ponty (1962, 170) locates a transformation of contingency into necessity in acts of repetition and identifies human existence in terms of such acts of repetition. The way in which embodied subjects are situated founds and makes new acts possible but this is definitely not to say that they can be arbitrarily changed by an individual act (Heinämaa 1996, 302).

So, while continued reiterated acting certainly has the power in its persistence of constituting and establishing outer reality in altered ways and thereby enabling new and different materializations of gendered bodies (Butler 1990a, 33, 145–6; 1993, 9), I agree with Heinämaa that the effects of repeating otherwise and performing differently should not be exaggerated. In so far as the generation of “alternative combinations of gendered features,” that may be able to challenge and alter habits of perception, are often momentary or local, “they cannot reverse the sedimentation of gender types” (Heinämaa 2011, 145). Further, recognition of the potentially transformative force of reiteration does not do away with possible conflicts between what we might (albeit perhaps reluctantly) call “inner” and “outer” realities, between that which is subjectively lived and that which is intersubjectively agreed upon. Butler acknowledges the presence of such conflicts and suggests that they are what make displacing and altering notions of gender and the subject such a difficult task. The notion of “woman”, she writes, refers “not only to women as a social category but also as a *felt sense of self*, a culturally conditioned or constructed *subjective identity*” (Butler 1990b, 324, my emphasis), but the implications of acknowledging a felt sense of self as well as possible meanings of “constructed subjective identity” are left largely unexplored. Here, a phenomenological perspective on the performativity of subjects can, in my contention, contribute significantly to a more comprehensive understanding of what it might mean to see the subject both in terms

of a social category and as subjectively lived and experienced. By calling attention to the doubleness of the performativity of subjects, such a perspective, might avoid the risk of reducing a felt sense of self to a product “manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (Butler 1990a, 136), while at the same time recognizing it as situated and conditioned by the whole of its situation. This doubleness is, as I have argued above, present in Butler’s account of performativity and reading her in conversation with a phenomenological heritage can help bring it more clearly into view. Even though the issue of how to understand lived subjectivity is perhaps not of main concern for Butler, her theory of performativity as a way of accounting for the constitution of subjects nevertheless also has implications for how to understand subjectivity and by recognizing and reading her together with her indebtedness to a phenomenological tradition, which in part conditions her own position and writings, we might gain better understanding both of subjectivity and the constitution of the subject.

Drawing attention to a doubleness of performativity of the subject, against the background of a phenomenological perspective, as on the one hand culturally and institutionally constructed and on the other hand intentional and subjectively lived, I have sought to avoid the Scylla and Charybdis of seeing performativity in either decidedly voluntaristic or deterministic terms. Staging these positions as exclusionary of and oppositional to one another implies a necessary choice between the two, a choice that in my mind would be entirely unproductive and that I do not think Butler’s account of performativity invites us to make. Instead, I have argued that her rejection of both a voluntaristic view of the subject and the idea of the subject as a passive surface or determined product, involves a doubleness of performative constitution which in fact would discard even the possibility of making such a choice. Insisting on the performative constitution of gender identity, of subject positions and, particularly, of woman as the subject of feminism, opens for a recognition of women as both subjected to structures of power and privilege as well as actively participating in the concrete doing of different identities within and as part of such structures.

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NOTES

1. For notable exceptions, see Heinämaa (1997), Kruks (2001), Lloyd (2007), Stoller (2010), and Käll (forthcoming).
2. As many feminist phenomenologists have by now convincingly shown, however, the assumed contrast between poststructuralist feminism and phenomenology rests on misconceptions of phenomenology and an underlying attachment to a dualistic structuring of the inner and the outer (Heinämaa 1997; 2003; Kruks 2001; Coole 2007; Stoller 2009; 2010; 2013; Käll 2014; forthcoming; Käll and Zeiler 2014). Diana Coole (2007) argues that Butler's early critique of Merleau-Ponty's writings on sexuality has played an important role in persuading feminists that phenomenology is ideologically tainted and incompatible with Butler's work. Butler herself, writes Coole (2007, 209), and I agree, is "more circumspect in her criticisms, and more ambivalent in her conclusions about Merleau-Ponty's worth [and the worth of phenomenology generally], than her poststructuralist followers tend to recognize."
3. In what seems to be inevitable processes, texts, philosophers, and theorists are labeled in certain ways and canonized as belonging to certain traditions, to the point where they are read only through predominant interpretations. Through specific labels, such as poststructuralism or poststructuralist feminism, phenomenology or feminist phenomenology, positions of inclusion and exclusion are established in relation to each other. We might ask at what point a specific label takes on the function of a straw man. At what point do we simply assume we know what, for instance, so called poststructuralist thinkers stand for on the basis of a few key phrases pulled out of context? Suspicious that there may not be any such thing as poststructuralism, Drucilla Cornell (2005, 136) identifies a series of such catch phrases: "the radical indeterminacy of linguistic meaning, and more generally of

any semiotic field; the critique of communitarian aspirations for the replication of the logic of identity; the debunking of the myth of the centered, self-conscious subject transparent to itself; the exposure of the traditional conception of reason as the rationalization of power; the proclamation of the end of metaphysics.” It is not difficult to agree that any attempts “to identify a wide range of thinkers and philosophical positions as a cohesive movement with amplifying themes [...] often obscure as much as they illuminate.”

4. The subject in Butler’s theory of performativity is, as Susan Hekman (1995, 101) puts it, “situated but no social dupe [...] she is a subject who refuses to play the role scripted for her [...] a resistant subject.” To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, writes Butler (1992, 16), “to censure its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racialist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where unanticipated meanings might come to bear.”
5. Whether that which is intended exists in reality or not is of no consequence to this twofold structure of intentionality. The objects as real objects in the world are not of any concern here. Instead, only the form in which the objects are given to consciousness is of importance. The question is not one of *what* it is that is given to consciousness; the question is rather *how* it is given. The issue of whether there are non-intentional mental acts is an issue of much philosophical debate and goes far beyond the scope of this article.
6. In the elaboration of this non-representational operative intentionality is also where Merleau-Ponty famously locates the originality of Husserl’s thinking. It is to be found, he writes, “beyond the notion of intentionality [...] in the discovery, beneath the intentionality of representations, of a deeper intentionality, which others have called existence” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 140, note 54). Elaboration of an operative intentionality on the level of lived embodiment contributes to troubling a traditional identification of the intentional with the mental, distinguished from embodiment. Such identification must, as Heinämaa (1996, 302) points out, be abandoned in order to give room for a more comprehensive and productive understanding of the relation between the embodied self and the world.
7. And, in that reaching out of itself, also as exposure to the world, to others and to its own exterior. For a discussion of operative intentionality in terms of exposure, see Käll (2012).
8. The embodied self, Merleau-Ponty (1968, 133) writes, “takes its place among the things it touches, is in a sense one of them, opens finally upon a tangible being of which it is also a part.” Pointing to the fundamental embeddedness of the seeing subject in the seen world, Merleau-Ponty (1968, 134–5), continues a little further on in the text, “he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he *is of it*, unless, by principle, according to what is required by the articula-

tion of the look with the things, he is one of the visible, capable, by a singular reversal, of seeing them – he who is one of them” (italics in original). See also Merleau-Ponty (1968, 113): “The visible can fill me and occupy me only because I who see it do not see it from the depths of nothingness, but from the midst of itself; *I the seer am also visible.*”

9. Indeed, dealing with subversive bodily acts, the latter half of *Gender Trouble* takes the body as its focus. Butler explicitly responds to the criticism of not taking the body into serious consideration with the publication of *Bodies that Matter* (1993) three years after *Gender Trouble* and addresses it specifically in the preface and introduction to the book.
10. Butler describes gender in terms of a “stylized repetition of acts” in both the 1988 article “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” and in *Gender Trouble* from 1990, but whereas the earlier text makes specific reference to de Beauvoir’s phenomenological account of gendered existence precisely as a “stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988, 519), in *Gender Trouble*, Butler (1990a, 140) uses the same phrasing to describe her own account of the performativity of gender while at the same time distancing herself from phenomenology. (See also Lloyd 2007, 37). Butler, in my contention, struggles to free herself from her phenomenological heritage, and, as Toril Moi (1999, 56) points out, also from her existentialist heritage. As should be evident, however, I also believe it is quite possible to read Butler in a way that productively opens up for that heritage.
11. Merleau-Ponty assigns this sense of the notion of style to Husserl. While Merleau-Ponty’s writings on style are primarily concerned with artistic style in painting, painting constitutes only one manifestation of a general phenomenon of style designating the intimate interrelation between embodied subjectivity and its world. For an account of the notion of style in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, see Singer (1981). Heinämaa has written extensively on the phenomenological notion of style in relation to contemporary feminist thought, making a convincing argument for its usefulness for understanding gender, (see, for instance, Heinämaa 1996; 1997; 2003).
12. Merleau-Ponty (1968) for instance discusses lived embodiment in terms of *intercorporeality*, a notion used to describe an original constitutive interconnection between bodies.
13. Butler (1990a, 136) famously argues that scripted gender identities and “the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core” are “maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality.” The reiteration of gender norms that produces “the peculiar phenomenon of a natural sex, or a real woman” through a set of performative corporeal styles, over time come to “appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes which exist in a binary relation to one another” (Butler 1988, 524; see also 1990a, 140).

Furthermore, according to Butler, it is not only sexual difference in terms of a binary opposition between male and female that is maintained for the purpose of reproductive heterosexuality. She famously argues that also *desire* is produced within this frame and governed by what she calls the “heterosexual matrix”, a “grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized” (Butler 1990a, 151, note 6). The heterosexual matrix, writes Butler, grounds its own constructions through exclusionary, regulatory practices that produce what they claim only to discover. Further, how one is sexed is regulated in a binary relation, which fully excludes one sex/gender from the other. The differentiation of the two opposite sexes/genders has a strengthening effect on both of them; the more the gender terms are differentiated from each other, the clearer and more distinguished is the core and definition of each term. The identity of one gender depends on the exclusion of another and the exclusionary practices constitutive of gender differences reinforce and stabilize specific gender identities, which in a binary relation are limited to being only one of two.

14. Already in the preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty (1962, xi) writes, “there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” and in *The World of Perception* (2004, 88), “there is no ‘inner’ life that is not a first attempt to relate to another person.”
15. Butler’s literal use of the term expression, writes Stoller (2010, 101), assumes that “what is expressed is the result of a pre-existing self that ex-presses something from the inner to the outer.” The assumption is “that something is pressed or squeezed out, like juice from an orange, mustard from a mustard tube, or toothpaste from a toothpaste tube. Everything is ready to be squeezed out: the juice, the mustard, the toothpaste, and perhaps gender identity or any other essential being” (Stoller 2010, 107). It is on the basis of such a literal and simplistic understanding that Butler (1990a, 25) rejects the notion of expression and, in relation to gender, argues that there is “no gender identity behind the expression of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (see also Butler 1990a, 7, 33, 136).
16. The very expressivity of expression depends on its incorporation of both these elements of reiteration and creation. The purely creative and the purely repetitive, argues Merleau-Ponty (1962, 389–92; 1973, 13), are impossible extremes that the event of expression can approximate but never reach. If an act of expression were to be purely creative, it would express nothing for it would have no past to provide it with meaning to “frame” or found the meaning of its expression. And along the same lines, if it were to be purely repetitive, it would have nothing to express for it would merely reiterate what had already been expressed and completely lose its voice in the fixed forms of ready-made expressions. As Waldenfels (2000, 92) writes, pure creation would be “a saying without a said” while pure repetition

would be “a said without a saying.” Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on both the creative and the reiterative elements of expression paves a path that avoids reducing subjectivity to either an inner core or an outer surface. In the same way as embodied subjectivity is neither mind nor body, the event of expression can be reduced neither to pure experience nor to already established forms. Expression as a framework for understanding subjectivity, on this account, captures the predicament of human existence of being both, and simultaneously, a subject for the world and an object in the world. Instead of reducing the subject to an expressive essence (consciousness, mind or soul) or to a discursive effect, it provides a foundation necessary for a sense of self while still recognizing the instability of any foundation. Merleau-Ponty insists that it is not because an inner thought or experience and an outer gesture or language are separate parallel realms that we express ourselves, as if from one to the other, but, rather, it is the event of expression that constitutes them as parallel orders. The weakness of every parallelism, or dualism, is, he writes “that it provides itself with correspondences between the two orders and conceals the operations which produced these correspondences by encroachment to begin with” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 18).

SAMMANFATTNING

Performativitet framträder som ett centralt begrepp i Judith Butlers *Gender Trouble* och är väletablerat inom ett brett feministiskt forskningsfält. I artikeln kartlägger och undersöker jag spår av fenomenologisk filosofi i Butlers performativitetsbegrepp, spår som Butler själv förhåller sig till med viss ambivalens och som sällan diskuteras i feministisk litteratur om performativitet. Jag lyfter fram tre aspekter av performativitet, nämligen konstitution, stil och mening som varande i ständig tillblivelse, *in statu nascendi*, och som alla är centrala i fenomenologin, med syftet att synliggöra en dubbelhet i performativiteten av identitet som å ena sidan kulturellt och institutionellt konstruerad och å andra sidan som intentionell och subjektivt levd. Mitt mål är att därigenom undvika en förståelse av performativitet i antingen strikt voluntaristiska termer av individuell valfrihet eller termer av absolut determinism.

Keywords: performativity, expression, constitution, style, subjectivity, identity