

Increasing visibility of sexual minorities—those who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community—stimulates advancement in the metaphysics of gender. Two positions are available for detailing gender: gender essentialism and gender non-essentialism. Essentialism says that gender requires essential gender qualities; properties that gender must necessarily have. Non-essentialism denies the existence of essential gender qualities and defines gender as a conglomeration of accidental gender qualities; properties that become associated with gender, but are not necessary to gender. In *Gender Trouble* (2002), Judith Butler objects to the gender binary. She explains the binary as emerging from a gender matrix. However, she protests against the assumptions of the gender matrix, thereby calling the binary as a whole into question. As an alternative to the traditional view, Butler proposes a novel gender system: the gender performativity theory. Butler also considers the ethical implications of the traditional gender system, arguing that it produces and maintains gender inequality. Her performativity theory of gender, which describes gender as a continuous set of actions coded according to gender, is an attempt to reduce this injustice. In this paper, I will provide objections to Butler’s rejections of the matrix and then object to her view of gender.

Section I is devoted to the gender matrix. In section I A, I will present the gender matrix. In section I B, I will present Butler’s objections to the matrix. Finally, in section I C, I will present my responses to Butler. Section II is concerned with Butler’s performativity theory of gender. In section II A, I will present the theory and, in section II B, I will discuss its fallacies and concerning implications.

I A

Butler explains that the gender matrix produces two intelligible genders, which establish the gender binary. She says that, “‘Intelligible’ genders are those in which some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (Ibid., 23). In other words, the matrix validates the identities of those who possess particular configurations of biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. There are two intelligible genders: 1) cisgender heterosexual men, people with male genitalia who identify as men and are attracted exclusively to women, and 2) cisgender heterosexual women, people with female genitalia who identify as women and are attracted exclusively to men. The dimorphic quality of intelligible genders emerges from the assumption that biological sex, of which there are two, produces essential gender qualities exclusive to each sex. Thus, the sex of the genitalia, whether it is male or female, dictates the essential gender qualities

present in the individual. People who fail to satisfy the intelligible gender conditions are termed “unintelligible” and perceived to be "developmental failures or logical impossibilities from within that domain” (Ibid., 24). According to the matrix, any person who is not a cisgender heterosexual man or woman are of the unintelligible gender. Thus, discrimination appears to be inherent to the binary system, as intelligible genders are accepted while unintelligible genders are rejected. Butler presents the gender matrix in order to explain the gender binary, but in no way does she accept it.

I B

In her first response to the matrix, Butler argues that the logic supporting the matrix fails to entail dimorphic intelligible genders. According to the matrix, two particular combinations of biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation are required for an identity to be intelligible. She notes that assuming a binary construction of sex does not entail a binary construction of gender because the gender qualities associated with men are not exclusive to the male sex and the gender qualities associated with women are not exclusive to the female sex. Consider a stereotypical quality of men in the United States: preference for red meat. However, this preference is not exclusive to cisgender heterosexual men. Cisgender heterosexual women can also have a preference for red meat. Because gender qualities such as preference for red meat are not exclusively related to a particular intelligible gender, Butler claims that "the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders" (Ibid., 10). Thus, she concludes, "a gender cannot be said to follow from a sex in any one way" (Ibid., 10). Butler objects to the matrix because it establishes essential gender qualities that are present in both intelligible genders. Her objection rests on the assumption that essential gender qualities require exclusivity. She observes that no gender qualities are exclusive to a particular gender, which results in her rejection of essential gender qualities. In rejecting essential gender qualities, Butler denies the gender matrix because it requires essential gender qualities.

Butler continues to critique the matrix by attacking its assumption that biological sex possesses essential qualities. She poses a series of questions intended to illustrate the definitional vagueness of sex and arrives at the following conclusion (Ibid., 10-11):

If the immutable character of sex is contested, perhaps this construct called “sex” is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was

always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all.

Given its association with a number of definitions, Butler is skeptical about biological sex containing essential qualities. Her skepticism emerges from the assumption that the unanimous judgment of a group entails essential qualities. Considering a person who deviates from the biological norm will help clarify her argument. A person may possess most characteristics typical of the male sex, including XY sex chromosomes, male hormone levels, and a penis. However, this person was born without testicles. Is this person any less male than a person with two testicles? Butler anticipates that responses to this question would differ. Remember that her view assumes homogenous judgment to be evidence of essential sex qualities. So, under her view, the diversity in responses reveals that biological sex does not possess essential qualities, resulting in her rejection of the gender binary.

I C

Butler's initial objection to the gender matrix emerges from the assumption that exclusivity is necessary for essential qualities. She presents qualities possessed by both men and women to conclude that gender has no qualities exclusive to itself. However, essential qualities do not require exclusivity. Recall that essential qualities are defined as properties that an object must have. This definition allows for an object to possess a quality that is essential to itself, but not exclusive to itself. Therefore, multiple objects can possess the same essential quality. In the context of the gender matrix, this means that one intelligible gender could possess an essential quality and that quality could also be essential to the other intelligible gender. In other words, the matrix allows for gender qualities, such as preference for red meat, to be essential to one or both of the intelligible genders. Thus, Butler is mistaken in assuming that essential gender qualities must be exclusive to a particular gender.

In her second objection to the gender matrix, Butler responds to the assumption that biological sex is dimorphic. She uses the definitional multiplicity of biological sex to argue that biological sex does not possess essential qualities. In this position, she makes the assumption that unanimous judgment is required for essentiality. However, unanimous judgment does not entail essential qualities. Once again, recall that essential qualities are defined as properties that an object must have. The essentiality of an object's properties is unaffected by external judgments, just as it is unaffected by exclusivity. Consider a bachelor. It is essential that this person is an unmarried man. Some may observe this man and

assume he is unmarried. Others may observe this man and assume he is married because of the gold ring he wears on his ring finger. However, this man is not legally married, he just enjoys wearing a gold band on his ring finger. The external judgments regarding this man's marital status do not affect the essential quality of a bachelor: one who is an unmarried man. Likewise, the external judgments of biological sex do not affect its essentiality, thereby invalidating Butler's counter argument. Her rejection of the matrix requires the assumption that unanimous judgment entails essential qualities. However, this assumption is false, so she is not justified in rejecting the matrix.

II A

Butler denies the gender matrix and proposes an original conceptualization of gender called the gender performativity theory. Her theory concludes that "within the inherited discourse of the metaphysics of substance, gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Ibid., 33). The gender performativity theory rejects essential gender qualities and establishes gender as actions that arise from accidental qualities. Butler references Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* to clarify her theory. He says that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything" (Nietzsche, 1887, 45). Although "the doer" and "the deed" appear to be separate objects, Nietzsche argues that they are the same. Butler uses this logic to ground the gender performativity theory, which explains gender and gendered actions as the same object. According to the theory, gender is a performance made up of actions coded gender-wise by culture. In American culture, women are associated with behaviors like body hair removal and sitting cross-legged. The gender performativity theory says that these behaviors literally are womanhood because womanhood is a composition of actions coded woman-wise. Butler's theory was critical to the development of feminist philosophy, a sphere of thought devoted to achieving gender equality. Feminists used the gender performativity theory in an attempt to dismantle gender essentialism and provide a stronger argument for gender non-essentialism.

II B

In its attempt to define gender, the gender performativity theory demonstrates two sets of circular reasoning, with one resulting from the other. The theory initially encounters circularity in its classification of gender. It defines gender as actions coded according to that gender. This definition of gender threatens the concept of gender because it relies on itself to explain itself. If gender is defined as actions

coded according to that gender, then gender requires actions, but these actions require a concept of gender. Thus, gender relies on itself and the first issue of circularity emerges. This issue arises because the gender performativity theory rejects essential gender qualities. An object can possess either essential or accidental qualities, so by denying essential gender qualities, the view assumes accidental gender qualities. This means that all of the qualities associated with gender are not necessary to gender, from which a second circularity issue emerges. The circularity of accidental gender qualities looks like this: women prefer pink because they are feminine, but femininity includes a preference for pink. These accidental gender qualities fall into an endless regress, with one accidental gender quality developing from another accidental gender quality. These two sets of circularity, 1) that gendered actions require a gender concept and 2) that accidental gender qualities require other accidental gender qualities, present grave issues for the performativity theory.

Furthermore, the circularity of gender illuminates a conceptual dissociation. The theory requires the amalgamation of gender and actions in order to deny essential gender qualities, yet it assumes a separation between gender and actions. Thus, by assuming essential gender qualities while also denying essential gender qualities, a logical contradiction emerges.

The theory could escape the circularity issue and the logical contradiction by adjusting its position on essential gender qualities. If the view accepts essential gender qualities, both objections would be resolved. The endless regress would be avoided because gender would develop from actions coded according to essential gender qualities. Furthermore, the logical contradiction would also dissolve as essential gender qualities would differentiate from gendered actions. The theory would escape two logical fallacies if it established essential gender qualities as a component of gender.

The weakness of the gender performativity theory is also evident in its implications. Extreme gender fluidity is one of them. By establishing gender as actions, gender identity becomes transient. If a person executes a continuous set of actions coded woman-wise, that person would be considered a woman. However, if, in the following moment, that same person executes a continuous set of actions coded man-wise, they would be considered a man. The theory makes gender extremely fluid, which seems counterintuitive to the general approach to gender as an identity that persists through time.

The gender performativity theory is particularly threatening to identities that require essential gender qualities such as the transgender identity. A transgender person identifies with essential gender qualities different from the ones associated with their genitalia. However, the gender performativity theory denies essential gender qualities, therefore invalidating the transgender

experience. Furthermore, the theory says that gender qualities that the trans person identifies with are accidental qualities, contingent on social construction. According to this logic, the dysmorphia a trans person experiences would disappear if gender expectations were terminated. However, a female trans person does not say that they identify with the social expectations of women. They may prefer ballet and crossed-legged sitting to football and man-spreading, but a person can identify as a man and prefer doing these things. Instead, they are saying that they identify with the essential gender qualities of a woman. Although gender identification may appear to be an external judgment, it is not. Recall my claim that essential qualities are independent of external judgments, in which external judgments are the conclusions that people draw from observing another person. External judgments require at least two people present, one to act and the other to judge. Personal identification, however, requires only one person and is not concerned with action, but with emotion. Thus, gender identification is not an external judgment. Skeptics of the transgender identity often ask, how can a trans woman know what it feels like to be a woman? Well, how does a cisgender woman know what it is like to be a woman? I argue that both people are referencing essential gender qualities when they describe their gender identity. Therefore, essential gender qualities are required for the identities of both the transgender woman and the cisgender woman. Without essential gender qualities, the personal experiences of both intelligible and unintelligible genders are undermined.

This is an issue for Butler because she developed her theory with the intent to minimize sexism, a view that subjugates women on the basis of essential gender qualities. Butler undermines sexism by denying essential gender qualities. In the 1999 preface of *Gender Trouble*, she explains her intention in authoring the book. She says, “This book is written then as part of the cultural life of a collective struggle that has had, and will continue to have, some success in increasing the possibilities for a livable life for those who live, or try to live, on the sexual margins” (Ibid., xxvi). She expresses a devotion to sexual minorities and presents her work as proof of her commitment to gender equality. However, her theory’s denial of essential gender qualities promotes a different form of sexism that discriminates against trans people. Although this discussion exceeds the realm of metaphysics and ventures into ethics, it is critical to the validity of Butler’s argument because she commits the exact evil she intends to devastate.

The gender performativity theory, like many other non-essentialist views, condemns essential gender qualities on the assumption that differences in essential qualities entail inequality. I propose that essential gender qualities can differ without entailing inequality. Consider the difference between a bachelor and a bachelorette. To both identities, being an unmarried person is essential.

However, the genders of these unmarried people differ. The bachelor must be a man, while the bachelorette must be a woman. Inequality is concerned with an uneven distribution of justice, but gender differences have no ethical implications. Thus, inequality does not follow from the essential differences between a bachelor and a bachelorette. Likewise, inequality does not follow from the difference in essential gender qualities. Therefore, the non-essentialist's concern regarding the ethical implications of essential gender qualities is unfounded.

In an attempt to minimize sexism, Butler objects to the binary system of gender and then proposes a novel gender theory: the gender performativity theory. In response to her objections, I argued that exclusivity and unanimous judgment are not necessary to essentiality, which allows the gender matrix to withstand Butler's criticism. Then, I rejected her theory due to its circularity, logical contradiction, and exclusivity. I also recommended that Butler give essential gender qualities further consideration because the theory would escape these issues if it endorsed essential gender qualities. My responses allow the gender matrix to emerge from Butler's objections unscathed and expose weaknesses in Butler's gender performativity theory. My replies are an issue for Butler because, according to her view, the matrix institutes inequality on the basis of essential gender qualities. Given the problems the performativity theory faces, I urge gender theorists, particularly those who strive for gender equality, to resist demonizing the existence of essential gender qualities.

Chan, Natalie

April 20, 2020

Butler, Judith. *Gender trouble*. New York, London: Routledge, 2002.

Nietzsche, F. W., *On the genealogy of morals*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989.