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# Sex and Gender Through an Analytic Eye: Butler on Freud and Gender Identity

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**SEX AND GENDER THROUGH AN ANALYTIC EYE:**  
Butler on Freud and Gender Identity

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**SEX AND GENDER THROUGH AN ANALYTIC EYE:  
Butler on Freud and Gender Identity**

INTRODUCTION

In her book, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler reinforces the conception held by many feminist philosophers that gender identity is not natural but rather culturally-constructed. Butler supports this conception of gender mainly by reading (and misreading) Freud. I will undertake a critical reconstruction of Butler's claims about gender identity which are based on Freud. In order to complete this project, I will outline (1) currents of feminism leading us to this question of the constructedness of gender, (2) Freud's theories, especially his account of sexual development and (3) two of Butler's main criticisms of Freud. Through this exploration, I will explain Butler's use of Freud in constructing a theory of gender identity.

The main challenge of this project is to "translate" Butler's claims into the style of writing and thinking familiar to analytic philosophy. Butler's text is difficult, jargon-ridden, and dense. Further, she does not always explicitly state her arguments. Both the locating and the reconstructing of Butler's claims will be challenging. A clear reconstruction will require that I translate her writing into the analytic style. In making this change, my goal is not to comment on the relative value of the writing styles characteristic of analytic and postmodern philosophy. What I concern myself with, rather, is presenting Butler's ideas in what I believe is less complicated, and more accessible, language.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

When assessing Butler's claims about the constructedness of practically everything, one might wonder how feminist philosophy ever got *here*. To help the reader understand this, I will briefly recount how the two "waves" of feminism arose and how Judith Butler fits into the feminist debate.

There is no need to list the many forms of women's oppression; it has occurred throughout history and throughout the world. Civil and religious law have bestowed rights upon men that have been denied women. The hierarchy of the home has ranked men above women and has treated women as servants, property and objects. Yet, there have been huge changes in women's situation in recent years. Many of these changes were due in part to the feminist movement. Feminism, broadly defined as a movement for the emancipation of women, has probably existed in some form or another as long as women have been oppressed, but I begin my history with nineteenth-century feminism. I choose this era of feminism, called the "first wave" because it marks the origins of feminist theory as it is practiced in the academy today. First-wave feminists claimed that women deserved the same rights as men and their main political task was to win the vote for women. There were two distinct philosophical tactics that feminists typically used to argue for women's rights: arguments from sameness and arguments from difference. Some stated that women and men should enjoy the same socio-political status because men and women were basically the same. Others worked for the same end, but reasoned that women had specific female characteristics, and that these characteristics were valuable. Some theorists even employed both tactics. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, a US suffragist active in the 1850s, was one of these theorists. Stanton argued for women's suffrage because she thought "the rights of every human being are the same and identical." However, she also claimed that women would make a distinctive contribution to the voting population, and, because of their distinctive characteristics, women would balance the vote of men.<sup>1</sup>

Whether these first-wave theorists were using difference, sameness or both to fight for women's rights, they shared certain assumptions that the next "wave" of feminists would come to challenge.

Before 1950, people generally did not think it problematic to assume that sex was something that had simple objective reality; there were men and there were women, and every person was surely one or the other. Furthermore, men and women each had their own distinct characteristics. Men were supposedly more aggressive, logical, and mechanically-minded than women, while women were supposedly more passive, emotional, and nurturing than men. Desire, too, was bound up in the difference between the sexes. Normally, it was thought, men desired women, and women desired men. There were counter-examples, of course; some women were logical, while some men were emotional, and some men desired men while some women desired women. But these people were considered exceptions to the rule. Mainstream society saw them as confused, sick, or even sinful. The popular view was that at least some, if not all, of the ways that people behaved were determined by their sex. To a large extent, biology was thought to be destiny.

In *The Second Sex* (1949), Simone de Beauvoir challenged this predominant conception of sexual difference. Beauvoir famously claimed in the book that “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”<sup>2</sup> Beauvoir’s revolutionary claim was that what it is to be a man or a woman has more to do with culture than with biology. Of course biological differences existed, she thought; Beauvoir did not challenge what she saw as anatomical facts. However, she suggested that our *understanding of what it is to be sexed* came from culture, not from biology, and that people confused this cultural phenomenon of gender with the biological reality of sex. A woman, in Beauvoir’s view, was not something that one simply was because of her biology. Women were “made” through society’s investing of cultural significance onto the bodies in which they were born. This process was continuous, so “women” were always becoming women; they were constantly reassessing what it meant to be gendered as women within their cultural context.

In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir also claimed that women were “sexed” by being differentiated from men. Beauvoir argued that theorists in the Western philosophical tradition saw things in terms of being true or false, good or bad, light or dark, etc., and that they sometimes used these binaries to explain concepts that were not diametrically opposed. Beauvoir thought that sexual difference was one of these

concepts to which binaries were incorrectly applied. What was worse, when sex was framed in terms of these binaries, the good, true, light side of the binary was associated with men, while women were associated with the evil, false, dark side. Another offense of the Western thinkers, thought Beauvoir, was that they gave the female side of the binary no positive reality. The positive/negative contrast is easy to see in the light/dark binary: light has positive reality, while darkness only negative, the lack of light. Like the light/dark example, women were seen as a lack, specifically the lack of being men. Because they were the only ones with positive reality, men were the only ones that were truly sexed; women were the Other, not-Men.

There are many examples to support of Beauvoir's claim that women are negatively defined in the men/women binary. One that is perhaps most deeply ingrained in our culture is the biblical creation story from Genesis 2. In this story, the man, Adam, is created first, and the woman, Eve, is created second and literally *from* him. Adam has positive reality—he was created by God, for God's sake. God created Eve as well, but it was from a piece of Adam's body. Furthermore, Eve's designated purpose at the time of her creation was to be Adam's helper and companion. In the same story, Eve is the temptress who lures Adam into eating the apple and is therefore responsible for humanity's being banished from paradise. In this one story, we have a portrayal of the woman as the Other (she is created from Adam), and also the woman as the temptress, falling to evil. The binary is clear: man is good and woman is not good.

Drawing heavily on Beauvoir, second-wave feminism emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Second-wave feminists challenged earlier assumptions about the role that sex played in the formation of the identity. These feminists used the distinction between anatomically sexed bodies and the cultural consequence of those sexed bodies suggested by Beauvoir and created a way to refer to each of these components: they asserted that characteristics and behaviors were one thing and bodies were another, and that the relation between the two was not as simple as previously thought. Feminists designated biological difference 'sex', and used the terms 'female' and 'male' to refer to the sexes. Indicators of sex included external and internal organs, hormones, chromosomes and secondary sex characteristics.

'Gender', on the other hand, was deemed the cultural construction of sex: gender was what it meant to be sexed within a culture. The terms 'feminine' and 'masculine' were used to refer to the genders.

## ENTER BUTLER

Judith Butler joined the debate when the second-wave sex/gender distinction reigned and when the distinction was thought to parallel the distinction between nature/culture. Butler supports this second-wave conception of gender and provides further support for it through her reading of Freud. In her analysis, we find new support for the second wave's conception of gender as a social construct, as well as new suggestions about how the process of social construction could take place.

Butler says that our conception of gender is false. We take our gender identities to be something real, when they are really illusory. We take them to be based on our sex, which we think is natural, but they are in fact based on culture, which is not natural. Butler's claims about gender are strong, but it is important to distinguish them from an even stronger claim that she does *not* make. She *does not* say that there is no fact of the matter when it comes to gender. What we think is there is not actually there, but that does not entail that there is nothing actually there, if you will. Butler leaves it up to her readers to make the further conclusion that there is nothing real out there to discover about gender.<sup>3</sup>

Butler's method is somewhat different from that of traditional philosophers. Butler does what she calls a *genealogy*, or a historical critique. The term 'genealogy' comes from Foucault. He defines genealogy as "the union of erudite knowledge and local memories which allows us to establish a historical knowledge of struggles and to make use of this knowledge tactically today."<sup>4</sup> He says that genealogies are "...the tactics whereby, on the basis of the description of...local discursivities, the subjected knowledges which [are] thus released [and] brought into play."<sup>5</sup> This type of analysis draws heavily on empirical and historical evidence. Butler surveys history in search of how our perceptions were formed and then evaluates the product of this historical process in order to undo those subjugated

knowledges. Through her genealogy, she builds speculative theories and points us in a new direction for understanding gender identity.

## BUTLER & FREUD

Sigmund Freud's place in the history of feminist philosophy is one of contention. Some feminist theorists see him as the enemy, a thinker caught in and reinforcing an oppressive, patriarchal code. Other feminist theorists see him as an ally and his work as the inspiration for the sex/gender distinction. Butler's reading of Freud falls somewhere in between these two views. She uses Freud to support the second-wave feminist claim that gender is a cultural construct and to better explain how this process of construction occurs. As well as drawing from Freud's theory to support her claims, Butler also critiques Freud. According to Butler, Freud suggests there is no natural gender, but backslides into a theory in which gender must be natural. Butler states that Freud relies on natural "dispositions" in his theory of gender formation. If dispositions are natural and have a part in forming gender, then gender must be, at least in part, natural. But Freud claimed that gender was not natural, says Butler. Butler sees this as an inconsistency in Freud's theory. After her critical reading, Butler develops her own theory, based mainly on Freud's. She suggests that she can resolve the inconsistency in Freud's theory by rejecting the appeal to dispositions, and she thinks she can use other elements of Freud's theory to construct a new account of gender formation. So, Butler takes what she likes—the conception of gender as constructed—and rejects what she doesn't—some of the elements of Freud's picture of gender construction. She concludes that when the problems with Freud's theory are explained away and a new theory is assembled out of the parts of his theory that work, she has a plausible account of gender formation and its overlay onto the sexed body.

I attempt to give an explanation of Butler's reading of Freud. Before going on to Butler's critique, though, I give my reading of the sections of Freud with which Butler is concerned. In my opinion, Butler has a tendency to "use and abuse" theories from which she draws. In her writing, she



deals with sources briefly, and then leaves them. This treatment allows her to make quick progress in her argument, but it also leaves background unfilled and her objections unanswered by the writers she critiques.

## FREUD

The main part of Freud's theory with which Butler deals is his explanation of sexual development. This theory is found in Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, *Sexuality and Psychology of Love*, *The Ego and the Id* and (though Freud didn't realize it at the time it was published) "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud outlines what he believes to be the original state of children, the way they take their parents as love-objects, the way they reject their parents as love-objects, and the way they compensate for the loss of these love-objects.

To understand Freud's theory, we first need to understand two of his terms, *object* and *aim*. Object and aim are the two components of what Freud calls sexual desire. According to Freud, the aim is the sexual desire itself, the feeling. The object is the thing at which the desire is directed.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the aim is what you want to do, and the object is who you want to do it with.<sup>7</sup> Throughout life, we experience deviations in both our aim and our object of our desires. Deviations in the object occur when an individual desires one person (or thing), but then shifts this desire to another person (or thing). Deviations in the aim occur when the character of the desire changes. Deviation of aim and object are a normal part of sexual development, but there are perverse types of deviation, and the lack of deviation can also be perverse. For Freud, the terms 'normal' and 'perverse' have no value judgements attached. Freud uses the term 'normal' to refer to the normative, that is, the social norm. He uses the term 'perverse' to refer to deviations from the social norm.

In *The Three Essays*, Freud directly challenges the common conception that children are not sexual.<sup>8</sup> Freud states that people are naturally *polymorphously perverse*. The first pleasure that a child experiences is the satiation of hunger. The child eats by sucking, so the first aim is the activity of sucking. This aim is projected onto the mother, the one who typically feeds the child. More specifically,

the first object is the mother's breast, from which the child sucks and receives sustenance. But from here sexual desire develops with constant shifting of object and aim through various stages and with no set destination. Eventually, the wanderings of the constant shifting lead the child to the Oedipus complex. It is through the solution of the Oedipus complex that sexual desire reaches its normative (or non-normative) end.

The Oedipus complex happens in the following way. At some point in development, the sexual desire for the mother's breast intensifies and broadens to encompass the whole mother. Though the child's objects continue to shift, the child never fully lets go of his or her desire for the mother, and eventually that object reasserts itself. The child now fully desires the mother and recognizes that the father is an obstacle in her or his way of realizing the desire with the mother. The child regards the father as a rival for the mother's love and wishes to get rid of the father in order to take his place with the mother. This feeling of rivalry for the father is thereby paired with the feeling of identification with him (a desire to take his place, to become him), and the result is an ambivalent feeling for the father by the child. Freud believes that, up to this point, the development of boys and girls is much the same. The original aim (sensual sucking) and object (the mother) are the same, as is the identification with the father.

But desire does not end there. Made possible by their original bisexuality, both the girl and boy child develop not only a desire for the mother, but also a desire for the father. Freud's explanation for why the boy comes to desire the father is sketchy. Freud says:

...in boys the Oedipus complex has a double orientation, active and passive, in accordance with their bisexual constitution; [a boy desires his mother and wants to take his father's place as the love-object of his mother, but] a boy also wants to take his *mother's* place as the love-object of his *father*—a fact which we describe as the feminine attitude.<sup>9</sup>

In *The Ego and the Id*, he contrasts his realization that each child desires both parents with his contention earlier in his career that the boy desires only his mother. In this passage, he calls his former version of Oedipus, when each child desires both parents, the 'complete' Oedipus complex. He refers to the desire

for the parent of the opposite sex the 'positive' component of the complex, while he calls the desire for the parent of the same sex 'negative':

Closer study usually discloses the more complete Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children: that is to say, a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object-choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, Freud offers little more help in understanding why the boy takes on the desire for his father.

However, Freud gives a more complete explanation of why the girl takes on a desire for her father. Freud postulates that the little girl sees the little boy's genitals and realizes he has a penis, and that she doesn't. According to Freud, this incites in her an immediate desire to have a penis, as the boy does. According to Freud, "She makes her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it."<sup>11</sup> This phenomenon is what Freud calls *penis envy*. One consequence of the development of penis envy is that the girl loosens her relation with her mother as the love-object. Freud is not sure quite how this works but believes that it has something to do with the girl blaming the mother for her lack of penis because the mother was the one who created her. The girl replaces her desire for a penis with a desire for a child, which, she takes it, her father can provide her: "She gives up her wish for a penis and puts in place of it a wish for a child: and *with this purpose in view* she takes her father as a love-object. Her mother becomes an object of jealousy."<sup>12</sup> So, the girl's mother remains a love-object, and the girl's father become a love-object through her transference of desire for a penis to the desire to have a child.

The boy also reaches a point when he discovers his genitals and how they differ from those of the little girl. In the genital stage, Freud says, the little boy "discovers" his penis—that is, it becomes the center of his attention, his primary sexual object. He explores his new discovery by handling it, but is told by his parents not to do this. In his parents' admonitions of his behavior the boy detects a threat—probably not explicit, but still understood by the boy child—of castration. The boy pays no heed

to these warnings until he sees the genitals of a girl. When he sees that the girl has no penis, he assumes that she has been castrated, just as his parents had threatened they would do to him. After all, she does seem to the boy to be just like him except in this one respect. When he sees one who is, presumably, castrated, the threat his parents have leveled at him becomes of much greater concern. The threat of castration is so powerful that it serves to squelch both the boy's desire for his mother and his desire for his father. The boy realizes that his father has a penis and his mother does not. The boy thinks that all people without a penis have been castrated, and so gathers that his mother, too, has been castrated. He realizes that to achieve his desire for his father, he would need to take the place of his mother, and to take her place, he would need to be like her. Because the boy thinks his mother is castrated, he concludes that he would have to become castrated to realize his desire for his father. The boy also thinks that if he were to take the place of his father and realize his desire for the mother, his father would punish him by castrating him. The boy's narcissistic attachment to his anatomy makes both of these options unacceptable for the same reason—because he would be castrated. So, the boy gives up his desire for his father *and* his mother:

But now the acceptance of the possibility of castration, the recognition that women are castrated, makes an end of both the possibilities of satisfaction in the Oedipus-complex. For both of them—the male as a consequence, a punishment, and the other, the female, as a prerequisite—would indeed be accompanied by a loss of the penis.<sup>13</sup>

In Freud's view, this is how the boy resolves the Oedipus complex.

For the girl child, the reason for giving up the parents as love-objects is less clear. Freud suggests some ways it might come to pass but admits he is unsure:

In girls the motive for the destruction of the Oedipus complex is lacking. Castration has already had its effect... [the desire for the parents] may either be slowly abandoned or got rid of by repression, or its effects may persist far into women's normal mental life.<sup>14</sup>

Freud believes that this process has to do with the girl wanting a child and realizing that her parent love-objects cannot provide this child for her. Her mother is unable because of her biology, and though her father has a phallus, he has chosen her mother as his love-object and is unavailable. Making this realization, Freud states, the girl gives up the parents as love-objects.

On Freud's theory, both the girl and the boy, for their respective reasons, acquire and then renounce their sexual desire for the mother and father. To explain how children compensate for this loss, Butler turns to Freud's explanation of melancholia. Melancholia is a disorder that Freud theorized as a result of his observation that those that suffered a loss of a loved one sometimes developed a condition of extreme self-reproach. In many patients, this feeling of self-reproach would develop to such an extreme that they would cease to eat. Freud endeavors to explain why those who had suffered a death of someone close to them might react by criticizing themselves to such an extreme. After observing many patients, he realizes that many of the reproaches the melancholic utters do not seem reasonably to apply to the melancholic. However, those same reproaches, perhaps with small modifications, *do* fit the lost object. So, a woman who had lost her husband might reproach herself for her laziness, when she was, in reality, not lazy at all. But laziness could have been one of the complaints for which the woman had reproached her deceased husband. Freud states: "So we find the key to the clinical picture: we perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego."<sup>15</sup>

Why would the patient shift their reproach from lost loved ones onto themselves? Freud says that it is because the object has been taken into the melancholic's identity. Freud outlines the process. A person feels an attachment to a love-object. The love-object dies, and the attachment is destroyed. At this point, the normal reaction would be for the person to withdraw her feelings for the lost love-object and deflect those feelings onto another object. The melancholic, though, does not accept the loss of the love-object. To keep the object alive in some sense, the melancholic internalizes the object. The melancholic identifies with the lost object. So, instead of deflecting the feelings for the lost object, the melancholic internalizes those as well. The reproaches that she used to level at the object are turned inward, where the object now resides.<sup>16</sup>

At the time he wrote "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud described the process of losing an object and then internalizing that object to compensate as an occasional occurrence and a disorder. When he wrote *The Ego and the Id*, though, Freud's opinion had developed. By this time, he thought that the

process of internalization and identification present in melancholia was common. He says this process is essential in the formation of the identity.<sup>17</sup> It is a process, he says, that is triggered by the death of loved ones, but that also can occur when an object is lost through the severing of emotional ties. When the child gives up his or her parent, the child is severing the emotional tie of sexual desire. Thus, as Butler says, this loss (of the parent) is frequently countered by “a setting up of the object inside the ego” just as happens in melancholia with the death of a loved one.<sup>18</sup>

When the child suffers the loss of the parents as love-objects, the child internalizes and identifies with one of them. As Freud sees it, the boy commonly internalizes his father and reinforces his identification with him. Conversely, the girl commonly internalizes and identifies with the mother. Less commonly, the child internalizes the parent of the opposite sex. Freud says the explanation for this pattern of internalization, in which boys identify with their fathers and girls with their mothers, is the ‘disposition’ naturally within the child:

It would appear, therefore, that in both sexes the relative strength of the masculine and feminine sexual dispositions is what determines whether the outcome of the Oedipus situation shall be an identification with the father or with the mother. This is one of the ways in which bisexuality takes a hand in the subsequent vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex.<sup>19</sup>

According to Freud, then, each child has both a masculine and a feminine disposition, and the relative strength of these two dispositions determines the parent with which the child chooses to identify. It is at this point when the child makes this choice that the child “consolidates” his or her gender identity. When the child identifies with the father, Freud says, it consolidates the masculinity in the child’s character. Likewise, when a child identifies with the mother, it consolidates the femininity in the child’s character.<sup>20</sup> This is how Freud believes gender identity is formed.

## BUTLER’S CRITICISMS

Butler has problems with Freud’s theory. The most obvious points of attack would be where Freud himself admits that he cannot fully explain something—such as why the boy ever takes his father

as an object at all—but these are not the points that Butler focuses on. Butler wants to uncover more basic problems. She deals with the implicit assumptions underlying explicit theory. Her conclusion is that Freud does not satisfactorily describe gender identity formation because he fails to let go completely of a conception of gender as “natural.” As Butler sees it, Freud claims that we are all polymorphously perverse, and so suggests that gender is not natural. But, claims Butler, when Freud states that dispositions are what determine which parent each child identifies with, he is claiming that there *is* something natural about gender. Moreover, with his theory of dispositions, Butler claims that Freud also assumes a heterosexual norm. I find Butler’s criticism of Freud is informative, though partially misguided. I will begin with one shallow concern that I believe arises only from Butler’s misreading of Freud. Then, I will present what I think is her deeper concern. It is this concern from which we can draw a better understanding of gender identity.

The shallow criticism that Butler raises is that she thinks that Freud assumes that the boy’s original desire is for the mother only and that he has no reason to think this. If the boy is bisexual, she seems to say, then he should “originally” desire both the mother and the father. Butler says that Freud postulates an original desire of the son for the mother, but not the father. After explaining the desire for the mother, Butler says: “With the postulation of a bisexual set of libidinal dispositions, there is no reason to deny an original sexual love of the son for the father, and yet Freud implicitly does.”<sup>21</sup> I think that this criticism is confused in more than one way. First, in Freud’s theory, no desire is “original.” We do not come with certain desires in place at birth. According to Freud, desire develops from the first pleasure, the satiation of hunger. Sucking breast milk is the process by which this satisfaction is achieved, and the breast, and then the whole mother, becomes the first sexual object. Second, as shown by my explication above, there *is* a reason that, at one point, the mother is desired and not the father. The mother is the one providing the satisfaction. It is her body that the child sucks. Third, this criticism makes it sound as if Butler thinks that Freud is claiming that we are all actively bisexual at birth, as if we all come equipped with sexual desires for certain objects. In truth, Freud says the child is bisexual in the sense that (s)he has the potential to direct her or his aim anywhere. This means the child has the potential to take either male

objects, female objects, or both. There is no reason to think that Freud is being inconsistent when he claims that the child is bisexual and yet desires the mother without desiring the father.

The deep concern that Butler voices is that Freud thinks of desire as fundamentally heterosexual and natural. She says that Freud claims to consider the child as bisexual from the beginning. This would mean that the child could desire either or both of the parents. Freud does suggest that both parents are desired, however, he separates the part of the psyche that desires the father from the part that desires the mother. The “feminine” part of the boy desires the father, while the “masculine” part desires the mother.

Butler states:

The conceptualization of bisexuality in terms of *dispositions*, feminine and masculine, which have heterosexual aims as their intentional correlates, suggests that for Freud *bisexuality is the coincidence of two heterosexual desires within a single psyche*. The masculine disposition is, in effect, never oriented toward the father as an object of sexual love, and neither is the feminine disposition oriented toward the mother (the young girl may be so oriented, but this is before she has renounced that “masculine” side of her dispositional nature). In repudiating the mother as an object of sexual love, the girl of necessity repudiates her masculinity and, paradoxically, “fixes” her femininity as a consequence. Hence, within Freud’s thesis of primary bisexuality, there is no homosexuality, and only opposites attract.<sup>22</sup>

So, Butler says, Freud thinks that the two genders can both appear in one individual, but the desires of the two gender identities are still both heterosexual. To be truly bisexual, *one* identity would have to desire *both* the male and female, and that is not what happens in Freud’s theory. According to Freud’s theory, Butler says, when a boy desires his father, it is the “feminine” part of him that desires the father, never his “masculine” part. In true bisexuality, there is an element of homosexuality that is here absent, Butler seems to claim. Freud’s “bisexuality” is just “double heterosexuality.”<sup>23</sup> Butler says that “within Freud’s thesis of primary bisexuality, there is no homosexuality, and only opposites attract.”<sup>24</sup>

To make the distinction between bisexuality and double heterosexuality clearer, let us step back for a moment and consider how these desires reside differently in the psyche of the bisexual and the double heterosexual. A man that, in Butler’s opinion, is truly bisexual desires women, and so is attracted to the opposite sex, but also desires men, and so is attracted to the same sex. If we assigned gender identities to the two desires within him, he would claim a masculine heterosexual and a masculine



homosexual. One masculine identity that desired males would exist, while another masculine identity that desired females would exist alongside. This is the case of a man who is “truly” bisexual, in Butler’s opinion. The identity of Freud’s “bisexual” child would divide up differently. If the “bisexual” child’s identity was split in two, we would have a masculine heterosexual identity and a feminine heterosexual one; one masculine identity that desired females would exist, and one feminine identity that desired males would exist. Admittedly, these identities are hypothetical. While the bisexual and double heterosexual do not actually have two identities, thinking of them in these terms helps to illustrate where Butler thinks Freud went wrong. Freud links desire directly to gender identity. Butler’s problem with the theory is that only the ‘feminine’ disposition desires males, and only the ‘masculine’ disposition that desires females. Again, this is only a double heterosexuality.

Butler is correct in her critique of Freud’s theory of “bisexuality,” but she stops short of where this critique is heading her. Butler is right in claiming that Freud’s dispositions are inexorably linked to type of desire. For Freud, it is only with the ‘masculine’ disposition that one desires females, and only with the ‘feminine’ disposition that one desires males. This is clear from the way Freud proceeds from his introduction of dispositions into a discussion of bisexuality in children.<sup>25</sup> He also seems to use the term ‘feminine’ interchangeably with ‘desiring a male’ and ‘behaving like a girl’ in his explanation of a boy’s desire for his father:

Closer study usually discloses the more complete Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children: that is to say, a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object-choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves *like a girl* and displays an affectionate *feminine* attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and hostility towards his mother. (emphasis added)<sup>26</sup>

In this passage, Freud discusses a boy’s desire for his father in terms of behaving “like a girl” and having a “feminine attitude” towards the father. This usage is clear. Freud seems to be saying that the feminine disposition simply *is* the desiring of the male (the father). This should lead us to say not that Freud mistakenly linked desire with disposition, but that perhaps this is just what Freud *meant* by ‘disposition’.

My claim that Butler misread the meaning of 'disposition' is only strengthened by another criticism that Butler herself raises: that Freud does not give an adequate explanation of what dispositions are. His vague use of the term could easily allow for a confusion of meaning such as the one I am suggesting. Though Butler could have revamped her understanding of the term, one can imagine why she would not choose to go the redefinition route. If we were to take the term 'disposition' to mean something like 'the proclivity for this individual to desire males', then the interest of Freud's theory for the gender theorist would all but completely drain out. As a gender theorist, Butler would rather interpret these passages in Freud as saying something about gender rather than as saying something about sexual orientation only, for example. I am not claiming that sexual orientation is the extent of Freud's meaning. However, I do think that Butler should explore other conceptions of the meaning of the term 'disposition' before pronouncing it flawed and rejecting it.

The fact that Freud declines to explain clearly what he takes dispositions to be concerns Butler. In Freud's theory, Butler argues, the boy must give up his desire for his mother and his father. When the boy does so successfully, he identifies with the father to compensate for the loss of the love-objects. The reason the child chooses this resolution and not the other is because, in identifying with his father, he is following his disposition. But Butler finds no proof that these dispositions exist. She cites Freud where he hints that he does not know how to describe the dispositions as support for her claim.<sup>27</sup> We have no explanation of the dispositions or any proof that they exist, and Butler thinks we will never get any, either. If they do exist, she argues, we will never know it. We have no way of identifying our masculine and feminine dispositions at the outset, she says. After the processes of loss, internalization and identification begins, we take on feminine and masculine elements into our identity which were not originally there. These constructed gender formations are indistinguishable from natural dispositions. As a result, masculinity and femininity exist in our identities, but we have no way of knowing which elements of our gender identity are natural, and which are products of internalizations.

Butler takes this line of reasoning even further. If we don't have any evidence for the natural gender dispositions and can't explain what is natural and what is not, it could be that these "dispositions"

exist, but are not natural after all. Butler suggests that maybe the conception that we have of gender dispositions is itself a production of the internalization/identification mechanism:

But what is the proof Freud gives us for the existence of such dispositions? If there is no way to distinguish between the femininity acquired through internalizations and that which is strictly dispositional, then what is to preclude the conclusion that all gender-specific affinities are the consequence of internalization? On what basis are dispositional sexualities and identities ascribed to individuals, and what meaning can we give to “femininity” and “masculinity” at the outset?<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps our perceived “dispositions” are constructed by a series of internalizations.<sup>29</sup>

This possibility leads Butler to suggest that the only reason that Freud connects the feminine disposition with a desire for the male and the masculine disposition with a desire for the female is that he, again, assumes a heterosexual norm. She says: “To what extent do we read the desire for father as evidence of a feminine disposition only because we begin, despite the postulation of primary bisexuality, with a heterosexual matrix for desire?”<sup>30</sup> Freud posits bisexuality, claims Butler, but the heterosexual conception of desire still lurks behind his view, and comes to the fore in his account of dispositions. It is only because we are (perhaps even subconsciously) expecting women to desire men and be feminine that Freud theorizes a feminine disposition that desires men.

So, Freud takes bisexuality to be primary, but doesn't follow through. Butler gives following through a try. She creates a theory of gender formation without using prediscursive gender inclinations. She suggests that when boys give up the desire for the mother, they tend to identify with their father, not because of Freud's dispositions, but because of societal pressure. It is Freud's suggestion that the fear of castration influences the boy to give up the mother. Butler employs the castration complex in a different way. Butler suggests that a different fear of “castration” convinces the boy to identify with his father instead of his mother. This “castration” is “the fear of “feminization” associated within heterosexual culture with male homosexuality.”<sup>31</sup> The boy needs to give up the desire for his mother and his father. When he gives them up as love-objects, he internalizes one of them to compensate for the loss. This internalization can be of either the father or the mother. The father is chosen because of the societal threat of the stigma of being gay. This explains the internalization without the use of dispositions.

Butler's theory is compelling. Pinning gender choice on societal pressure is plausible. It is plausible, first, because we have no real evidence for 'dispositions' and we do have evidence for the contrary, that the original constitution of children is polymorphous perversity. If I had to guess, I would say that when Freud said that a girl more often had a stronger 'feminine disposition' than 'masculine disposition', he just meant that the girl was more likely to identify with her mother. This identification would mean that the girl would act similarly to her mother and, because it is something that her mother does, this would include desiring the male. When construed this way, the dispositions no longer exist in any meaningful way; they lose their power. They become ratios of probability, if anything. If a girl's feminine disposition is "stronger" than her masculine disposition, then she is more likely to identify with her mother and take on all the characteristics that that identification entails.

Second, unlike the shadowy dispositions, we do know that societal pressure exists and has power. There is a stigma in our culture against being a homosexual male. A homosexual male is seen by many as "less of a man" than a heterosexual male. The castration metaphor is a bit gruesome, but it is appropriate. The phallus is connected by society with manliness, surely. Being actually castrated, then, makes a male "less of a man" in some sense. If a homosexual is seen as "less of a man," this is somehow similar to castration. This surely makes just as much sense—if not more—as Freud's original version of the castration complex. The parents would not actually castrate the son. The castration is symbolic; it would mean taking away something that the boy valued. Societal standing is valued and might be taken away if the boy chooses to identify with his mother instead of his father. So, societal "castratio," with no help from dispositions, is a plausible reason for the boy to identify with the father.

The social pressure picture also helps fill in one of the gaps in Freud's theory, though Butler does not mention it. If the penalty for choosing the parent of the opposite sex to identify with is societal and symbolic, then we can make sense of the girl's choice to identify with her mother. Freud claims that the girl comes to desire both her parents. He also claims that she gives up this desire. However, Freud was unable to fully explain the girl's motivation in renouncing her sexual desire for her parents. The boy could be threatened with castration; the girl is immune to this threat. In her mind, claims Freud, she is

castrated already. However, if this “castration” is really a metaphor for societal disapproval, then the case can be easily modified to apply to a girl that chooses the parent of the same sex. Homosexual women suffer from a similar stigma as homosexual men. It could be argued that society sees these women as less womanly than the heterosexual women. So, though it is not manliness, and not due to castration, homosexual women are still being deprived of something that they might want—to be identified as full-fledged women. This pressure could influence girls to identify with their mothers instead of their fathers.

## CONCLUSION

Butler’s interpretation of Freud, and the theory of gender that she derives from it, is interesting. It gives us a way to think about gender most likely differently than how we typically do. However, we should not simply accept it and be satisfied. My criticisms above are just a few that one can advance toward this theory. I chose to limit my criticisms to Butler’s application of Freud’s theory. This means that I addressed the accuracy of Butler’s construction of Freud. My questions were: (1) Did Freud actually state what Butler claims he stated? and (2) Were Butler’s criticisms of Freud legitimate? In some sections, I claimed her criticisms were legitimate, while, in other parts, I claimed they were based on her misunderstanding of Freud’s texts. However, there is much more to be done with this subject than simply the narrow criticism that I undertook. Butler incorporates much of Freud’s thought into hers and, in doing so, incorporates any problems that it may possess. Thus, it seems worth asking whether or not Freud’s theory is sound. If Freud’s theory is not, then Butler’s is not, either. I will not attempt a full evaluation of Freud’s theory—that is another project—but there are a few concerns that are worth mentioning here.

First, Freud’s theory is incomplete; Freud himself admits this. There are things Freud claims but cannot support. Freud cannot, for example, fully explain why the boy takes up a desire for his father, but he insists that the boy does so. Butler’s version of Freud’s theory aids this problem by positing societal castration. This modification allows for a better explanation of why the girl gives up her desire for her

parents, but it by no means solves the problem of the incompleteness of his theory. This one improvement still leaves many more elements of Freud's theory incomplete.

Second, Freud uses clinical evidence to support his claims, and clinical evidence is riddled with problems. One problem is that the population that the clinician has to work with necessarily limits clinical evidence. Freud's clinical evidence is especially poor off in the respect: Freud's patients were, almost exclusively, all from Vienna, all upper class, and all troubled by some sort of disorder. Populations differ in different situations. With such a homogeneous group to work with, Freud likely ended up with skewed results. Also, the way that Freud went about confirming his theory is not the way that is generally accepted in psychological research. He did not make hypotheses and test his predictions. Freud only tried to explain phenomena after the fact. Thus, Freud's theory is lacking in a quality that scientists require of their theories: it does not have testable predictions.<sup>32</sup>

This criticism reaches virtually all of Freud's theory. One example is his process of internalization and identification. Without strong evidence, the existence of this process is suspect. If clinical evidence is not strong, then there is not sufficient support for the existence of this process. The process of internalization and identification are central to Freud's theory of gender. If the process becomes suspect, then so does the whole theory. Another example is his theory of penis envy. When little boys and girls realize the difference in their anatomy, there is no reason that they would both come to the conclusion that the girl is castrated. What's more, there is no reason that the girl would decide "in a flash" that she wants what the boy has. There is, perhaps, a societal significance and power of the phallus that would make the girl desire to have a penis, but not at this stage of development. At this early age, the girl would not appreciate the cultural significance of this body part. Thus, penis envy does not make sense. If clinical evidence is without decisive merit, then Freud's account of penis envy is not convincing. If it is not convincing, then we can reject it and create another gap in Freud's theory of sexual development.

Third, even if we assume that internalization and identification really happen in sexual development, there are specifics needed to complete the theory that do not necessarily appear. At the

critical point in gender development, when the children give up their parental love-objects, Freud says the children must internalize just one parent. But there is no reason that identification would need to be limited to only one. Freud is clear in his belief that the process of internalization and identification is ongoing. We continuously give up and internalize objects throughout our lives. Why the child would necessarily give up the parents at the same time and choose to identify with only one is unclear. There is no reason that the child would not give up the parents at different times, and identify with each in turn, taking elements of each into his or her identity. Even if the mother and father objects are renounced simultaneously, there is no reason to think that only one would be internalized. Perhaps a dual internalization and identification could occur; both parents could concurrently be taken in and identified with. That only one parent is internalized is a huge assumption on Freud's part, and it is not supported.

Given these holes in Freud's theory, it would seem that Butler's theory, too, suffers from fatal flaws. To correct this, she would have to deal with these problems in Freud's theory and either fix them or find another way to ground her own theory. However, she does neither of these things. Moreover, these are only a few of the issues that we would need to address for a complete evaluation of Butler's work. My list of problems is by no means exhaustive. Acknowledging that these problems, for now, remain unsolved, we can make the intermediate conclusion that Butler's theory of gender formation is interesting, but inconclusive. In the development of feminist philosophy, Butler leaves us a step further forward than we were before. She reminds us how fundamental the heterosexual norm is to Western thinking. She reveals that even Freud, whose theory had a part in displacing the heterosexual norm, still relies on its assumptions. She also advances Freud's theory by ridding it of some of these inconsistencies: she rejects dispositions and suggests societal castration. Butler gives a sketch of the development of gender identity, even if this sketch is imperfect and incomplete. It is a helpful effort in our continued endeavors to understand gender identity. Her theory provides us with both an additional way to understand gender and an opportunity for further critical development in gender theory.

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## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> Craig, Edward, ed., *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, volume 3. New York: Routledge, 1998: 579.
- <sup>2</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de *The Second Sex*, trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949/1972: pp.
- <sup>3</sup> Butler does go on to say that not only is gender not based on sex, but that sex, too, is a cultural construct based on gender, and that we mistakenly posit it as natural. This claim goes beyond the arguments of this paper, but it is important to note.
- <sup>4</sup> Foucault, *Two Lectures, Power/Knowledge*, p. 83
- <sup>5</sup> Foucault, *Two Lectures*, 85
- <sup>6</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1962, 1-2.
- <sup>7</sup> This phrase is taken from David Fryer.
- <sup>8</sup> Note that here by 'sexual' here Freud does not mean that they are interested in, or even aware of, sexual intercourse. 'Sexual' desire could be a desire for any sensual pleasure. Pleasure derived genitally would be only one type of 'sexual' pleasure in Freud's theory.
- <sup>9</sup> Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, 175.
- <sup>10</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *The Ego and the Id*, trans. Joan Riviere, ed. James Strachey. New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1960, 28.
- <sup>11</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff. New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1963, 175.
- <sup>12</sup> Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, 180-181.
- <sup>13</sup> Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, 169.
- <sup>14</sup> Freud, *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, 182.
- <sup>15</sup> Freud, Sigmund, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay. New York/London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1989, 586.
- <sup>16</sup> This also explains a curiosity of the melancholic: While a healthy person typically feels shamed by his or her self reproaches, a person with melancholia does not feel this shame. They have no qualms about pronouncing their shortcomings in public. Freud explains that this makes sense if the reproaches are, at their base, about someone else. If those with melancholia are really speaking about someone other than themselves, then there is no need for them to feel shamed.
- <sup>17</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 23.
- <sup>18</sup> Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," as quoted in Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York/London: Routledge, 1990, 58.
- <sup>19</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 28.
- <sup>20</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 27-28.
- <sup>21</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 59.

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<sup>22</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 61.

<sup>23</sup> "Double heterosexuality" is my term.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 61.

<sup>25</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 28.

<sup>26</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, 28.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 60.

<sup>28</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 61.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 60.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 60.

<sup>31</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 59.

<sup>32</sup> Myers, David G., *Psychology*. Holland, MI: Worth Publishers, 1992, 420.