Gender, language and philosophical reconciliation

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> "I never attack persons; I merely avail myself of the person as a strong magnifying glass that allows one to make visible a general but creeping and elusive calamity." – Nietzsche

Introduction

Wittgenstein once wrote that in philosophy, an important task is to express the critiqued thought processes so characteristically that the reader says, "Yes, that's exactly the way I meant it" (Wittgenstein 1993: 165). I have to confess that I think this advice must be taken with a pinch of salt in order not to forbid the most serious philosophical difficulties associated with these thought processes from being made visible. For one could just as well say that an important task in philosophy is to turn thought processes over in our minds in such a manner that we end up saying, "Oh, that's *not* what I intended," or, "I never thought of that." Philosophical critique brings out a neglected physiognomy of our thoughts: they may not be recognizable to someone not open to the critique, who therefore claims that the critique fails to hit the target.

Another reason why Wittgenstein's advice must not be taken too literally is its dependence on another individual – "the reader," who presumably is the one succumbing to the critiqued reasoning. Wittgenstein is drawing an analogy between philosophy and psychoanalysis, but as all analogies it has limited applicability. Several patients in psychoanalytic therapy can have similar problems; yet, the therapist cannot treat the problematic independently of these individual patients. But in philosophy, the same problematic can be exemplified by citing several authors, or

by citing none, and the critique *can* be deemed successful even if none of the cited "patients" give their assent. Psychoanalysts in such disagreement with their patients have failed. But in philosophy, disagreement *can* be interpreted as a sign of success. "Philosophical therapists" are detached from their "patients" and their "recovery": the analogy breaks down – unless "therapist" and "patient" happen to be the same person.

So do not take Wittgenstein's analogy as a pretext for sugary dialogues where "philosophical therapists" anxiously rub their cited "patients" the right way so as always to have their assent.

Taking them at their words, poststructuralist thinkers destabilize universalized and absolute truth claims of the philosophical tradition. This self-understanding, however, tends to have a *characteristic intellectual form* and to be expressed in *easily recognizable dramatic statements*, such as, "The one who speaks is not the originator of such speech" (Butler 1997: 39). There can be value in pointing out that language precedes its speakers, but I know of many philosophical occasions where it would be just as revealing to point out that language does not exist apart from our talking and acting; and still further occasions where it would be most appropriate to remark that speakers precede what is said: that *they* are the originators of the speech. Judging from how the quote dramatically continues, however, such possibilities are ruled out on grounds of principle: "… for that subject is produced in language through a prior exercise of speech." And then follows mentioning of notions from Althusser, Austin and Derrida, laying out language as a fundamental principle of life: as what *produces* gendered subjects and other forms of human life.

This is the universal form of Butler's thinking: *life is produced.* Moreover, the details of the *derivation* of life forms are always the same, as if a cosmic principle had been discovered. Life always is produced through ritualistic repetitions, reiterations, citations, repeated doings; and they always are compulsory. Reading Butler, life tastes "binding norms" as much as it tastes "unsatisfied will" reading Schopenhauer. – Might this aspect of the "destabilizing work" itself be in need of destabilization?

Butler makes many sharp-sighted and powerful remarks, as did Schopenhauer. Someone who reads Butler for these remarks (to learn or to disagree) may not entirely

recognize their Butler in what follows, for I take a step back and focus on the *universalized intellectualist form* of these remarks, and on claims I take to be associated with this reiterated or exaggerated *form*. Pondering the form of Butler's thinking takes us beyond Butler's aims and the context in which she writes.

If there is a "patient" in this text, it presumably is not Judith Butler, *but me having read her*. What I am saying is: I never criticise persons; I merely avail myself of the person as a strong magnifying glass that allows me to make visible deep-rooted intellectual tendencies that challenge me to philosophize.

1. Girl doing boys' things

A little girl tells how doing boys' things creates a tickling feeling in her brain (Davies 1989: 115-16). How can the emergence of the girl's feeling be described? Here are two possibilities:

(1) She is a girl. By acting as what she is not, by acting as a boy, she feels a tickle.

(2) Gender is performed. By doing gender differently than she usually does it, according to another category than she has been assigned, the girl feels a tickle.

I suppose that (1) can be associated with our ordinary, day-to-day language. Given the task of recounting what happened to the girl who did boys' things, many people would say some such thing. Description (1) is probably as good as any, at least as long as we do not pronounce it with a metaphysical accent. But the question then becomes: Is (2) a metaphysically safer description? Is it a theoretically more elaborate rendition of what we can mean by saying (1), if we manage to avoid the essentialist accent? If so, then (1) would be like a proverbial phrase, while (2) would be the preferred technical description of what (1) naively and unknowingly alludes to.[1]

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[1] I have simplified the example somewhat. Bronwyn Davies' book, *Frogs and Snails and Feminist Tales. Preschool Children and Gender*, contains interviews with preschool children. One girl tells how she would laugh if her brother got tap shoes and had dancing lessons, because "it's sort of a girl's thing," and "when the wrong kind of human does that, I get a (pause) tickle in my brain." Then she

If the ordinary description (1) can be excused as proverbial, but still is dangerously close to a form of metaphysics of substance, the invention of the technical language (2) looks like intellectually significant progress. In serious discussions, we ought to displace the ordinary language, and instead use technical language that more trustworthily reflects the performativity of gender. In the technical language, nouns are replaced by verbs and process words, and by the syntax of doing-constructions ("gendering," "doing gender" etc). Words such as "true," "real," "authentic," "being," and "natural" are avoided, except when they are used ironically.

2. Appearance/reality dichotomies

The step to a new intellectual language has an unexpected consequence. Since the technical formulations are imposed, normatively, as "what you *should* say if you want to avoid the essentialist logic of everyday language," the step that impressed us as intellectual progress recreates what is suspiciously similar to the most characteristic feature of metaphysics, namely, its dichotomy between appearance and reality.

The dichotomy is verbally placed on its head. "Truth," "reality," "nature," "being" – the big words that the philosophical tradition associated with its preferred intellectual languages – are now associated with mundane language (as if ordinary language and metaphysics formed an unholy alliance). But the tradition associated not only this vocabulary with its preferred intellectual languages. By heatedly imposing their sometimes enigmatic formulations as the most revelatory language, philosophers also associated the passion of truth, the stance of truthfulness, with their contrived languages, rather than with day-to-day language.

The poststructuralist denaturalization of the mundane order of life shares this heated intellectualist attitude with the philosophical tradition. For certainly there is a passion of truth also in Judith Butler. It comes to expression in the frenzy with which she develops her preferred language, and it shows in the equilibrist skills she has developed of avoiding falling down into the ordinary one.

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explains that she gets the same feeling when girls do boys' things. Finally, she admits that if she did boys' things (when nobody saw it), she would get the same tickling feeling in her brain.

3. My truthfulness?

There is a passion of truth in these notes too; a desire to speak the truth absolutely clearly. Philosophy would not exist without that desire. But it comes to expression in a will to overcome intellectualism. For suppose that our common language is *not* in an unholy alliance with metaphysics. Then the task would be to displace not our day-to-day language, but our illusions about it. Philosophy would be a work on *us*; not on language.

It may not be "critique of language" we need, but reconciliation with language.

4. Dissatisfaction with language

This paragraph collects examples of the tendency in philosophy and the human sciences to refashion language, intellectually and technically, as if one thereby achieved purer, truer, more trustworthy languages. Let us first listen to the sound of intellectual ideals:

> Science seeks to be a means towards the greatest possible conquest of the realm of truth by our knowledge. The realm of truth is, however, no disordered chaos, but is dominated and unified by law. (Husserl 1970: 18)

Husserl's confidence in law-governed unity as an intellectual ideal is unshakeable. It is, as a matter of course, a distinctive feature of "the realm of truth." To reflect this submissive orderliness of truth, language must be made to conform to the same intellectual ideal:

> Language offers the investigator a widely applicable sign-system to express his thoughts, but, though no one can do without it, it represents a most imperfect aid towards strict research. The pernicious influences of ambiguities on the validity of syllogistic inferences are familiar. The careful thinker will not therefore use language without artificial precautions; to the extent that the terms he uses are not unambiguous and lack sharp meaning, he must define them. (Husserl 1970: 23)

The logician Willard van Orman Quine hovers above language, judging its intellectual merits and drawbacks:

> Our ordinary language shows a tiresome bias in its treatment of time. Relations of date are exalted grammatically as relations of position, weight, and color are not. This bias is of itself an inelegance, or breach of theoretical simplicity. Moreover, the form that it takes – that of requiring that every verb form show a tense – is peculiarly productive of needless complications, since it demands lip service to time when time is farthest from our thoughts. Hence in fashioning canonical notations, it is usual to drop tense distinctions. (Quine 1960: 170)

The conversation analyst Emanuel Schegloff views the vernacular and its associated life ways as political propaganda to be exposed by technical research work:

> As a member of society, I perfectly well understand about social classes and all the rest of a moderately sophisticated citizenship; but the fact that I understand and see the world – or *can* see the world – in those terms *as a member of a society* is not the same as qualifying all those ways of seeing it technically, let alone subscribing to it and underwriting it as part of one's technical apparatus for understanding the world.
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> In fact, it's just the opposite. The more they recommend themselves to my vernacular understanding, the more suspect they ought to be for me as part of my technical apparatus. The common or vernacular culture is, after all, a sort of "propaganda arm" of the society, serving to undergird the cultural component of the more or less smooth functioning of the society itself, not to advance or enhance a rigorous *understanding* of society. (Schegloff 2003: 44)

Judith Butler, in the new Preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, sees the language of humankind as an obstacle that the intellectual must overcome:

> It would be a mistake to think that received grammar is the best vehicle for expressing radical views, given the constraints that grammar imposes upon thought, indeed, upon the thinkable itself. […] If gender itself is naturalized through grammatical norms, as Monique Wittig has argued, then the alteration of gender at the most fundamental

epistemic level will be conducted, in part, through contesting the grammar in which gender is given. (Butler 1999: xix-xx)

It is no coincidence that Butler's language is difficult to understand. Fundamental thinking requires, in her view, reshaped forms of vocabulary and syntax. Butler does not break with that intellectualist stance, characteristic of the philosophical tradition.

5. Metaphysics: language or attitude?

Let us return to the two descriptions of how the girl came to feel a tickle. Have I not been unjust to the invention of the technical description (2)? The ordinary description (1) does seem to express an appearance/reality dichotomy. It says that someone who *is* a girl acts *as* a boy. The girl's tickling feeling is explained as the result of a clash between boyish appearance and female reality. If that dichotomy is characteristic of metaphysics, and if the technical description (2) avoids it, must we not see the linguistic ingenuity that went into constructing it as a radical intellectual force that helps us see how one version of gender linguistically has established itself as "true being," as "natural sex" etc.?

Can the aim of overcoming metaphysics be realized by developing language that does not give rise to metaphysical thoughts? Is there a creative writing path around metaphysics? Can we avoid metaphysics by avoiding, as it were, philosophically dirty vocabulary and syntax? But then does description (1) use metaphysical language to start with?

Description (1) may appear to wear the appearance/reality dichotomy linguistically on its sleeve. But the adoption of description (2) as the metaphysically clean alternative recreates the appearance/reality dualism *in our attitude to the two descriptions*.

The heated adoption of (2) over (1) recreates the philosophical dichotomy. That is how the dichotomy existed in the philosophical tradition: in the prescription of some cleansed intellectual language as the truest, purest, most reliable language – as "what you should say" if you want to speak the language of radical philosophical revelation.

In the poststructuralist *stance*, description (1) is appearance and (2) is basic reality. Metaphysics is not a language, but an attitude towards language.

6. Traditional appearance/reality mediation

In traditional philosophy, reality and appearance had to be mediated. What is their relation? Here follows three examples of appearance/reality mediation.

First example: In the idealist Berkeley, the materiality and lawfulness of nature is only apparent and created by God's benevolence. There is no inherently lawful matter, only perceptions. "Things" are ideas in God's mind, and if the world appears orderly, it is because God thinks these ideas in an orderly fashion. If he wanted to, he could let the apparent world – the one science describes in form of natural laws – disintegrate into a chaos of perceptions. In Berkeley's *Principles of Human Knowledge*, then, appearance and reality are mediated by God's will. Interposing modern jargon, God's lawful thinking "naturalizes" our perceptions, making them appear as perceptions of substantive matter.

Berkeley's idealist critique of materialism resembles the postmodern obsession with an essentially *achieved* rather than given order of things.[2] For Berkeley, there was no matter before perception, just as for Butler there is no substantive gender before performance. "If these substances are nothing other than the coherences contingently created through the regulation of attributes, it would seem that the ontology of substances itself is not only an artificial effect, but essentially superfluous" – this is not an eighteenth century idealist on what he conceived as the superfluous notion of matter before perception, but Butler (1999: 34) on what she conceives as the superfluous notion of substantive gender before performance.[3]

Second example: In Schopenhauer, the world is essentially *Wille*. In and for itself, the world is a blindly acting and constantly unsatisfied willing. How then explain the world we perceive daily, the world of objects in time and space governed by the law

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[2] Ian Hacking (1999: 24) makes the same observation.
[3] "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 1999: 34).

of causality; the world as *Vorstellung*? To explain the relation between the world as it is in itself (*Wille*) and the world as it appears to us (*Vorstellung*), Schopenhauer used the notion of objectification: the will is objectified for us as objects in time and space. In Schopenhauer's system, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, then, appearance and reality are mediated by objectification.

Third example: In Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, real names must be absolutely simple and stand for absolutely simple objects in the world. But no names in our familiar language are real names, since they all stand for complex objects, which therefore are not real objects, which Wittgenstein demanded too must be absolutely simple. What, then, is the relation between the apparent names of our everyday language and the absolutely simple names that *must* exist beneath the homespun dress of language? Wittgenstein's answer, in the *Tractatus*, was that *logical analysis* would reveal that relation.[4]

7. Expression as appearance/reality mediator

We have above three notions – God's will, objectification, and logical analysis – serving mediating functions in appearance/reality dichotomies. If Butler elaborated on the metaphysics allegedly inscribed in the language of description (1), she would add a fourth traditional mediating notion: expression. In the metaphysics of common sense, the girl's female being normally "comes to expression" in her doing girls' things. When she does boys' things, her behaviour does not express some newly developed male being. The fact that she *is* a girl instead comes to expression in the brain tickle (in metaphysical vertigo, or comedy). For Butler, then, "expression" is a form of appearance/reality mediation characteristic of the common sense metaphysics she wants to displace.

From what I have said about metaphysics as the heated adoption of an intellectual language as the language of radical philosophical revelation, it follows that we can

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[4] "Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes" (Wittgenstein 1961: 4.002).

expect metaphysically mediating notions in the poststructuralist attempt to displace metaphysics too.

8. *Naturalization*

What is the poststructuralist view of the relation between descriptions (1) and (2) in the first section of this essay? Butler would say that description (1) uses the language of traditional metaphysics. It speaks of female "being" and about behaviour as expressive of, or as clashing with, that prior being. Description (2) instead speaks of a version of gender, in the form of performative reiterations, and of the girl's boyish behaviour as a momentary digression from her habitual repetition of gender norms. How are these two faces of gender mediated in Butler's thinking – on the one hand, as experienced by the girl, and as revealed by the intellectual language, on the other? What is the relation between the "mundane order of the girl's life" and the technical description of how that order is achieved?

The answer is: naturalization. The reason why the performativity of gender conceals itself as static and binary being (being either girl or boy) is that processes of naturalization are in work. Which are these processes? They are primarily linguistic and associated with the language of description (1). By (compulsively) using the ordinary description (1) instead of (2), gender is naturalized.[5]

By instead moving in the opposite direction, from the ordinary description (1) to what we *should say*, (2), gender is denaturalized, or deconstructed. Deconstruction, to a great extent, then, consists in moving from the ordinary to the contrived language (with its doing-constructions instead of nouns). The notions typically associated with the poststructuralist attempt to overcome metaphysics – deconstruction, denaturalization – seem to be metaphysical notions with their own forms of essentialism. They too mediate between the intellectually demanded "reality" and the mundane order of everyday "appearances."

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[5] It could be objected that naturalization, for Butler, primarily is a bodily process (rather than a linguistic one); that it is about the "gendered stylization of the body" etc. But these bodily acts are *described* (abstractly) by Butler in language roughly corresponding to that of description (2), in an attempt to expose the derived status of the language of description (1). This essay is about Butler's *thinking*, which attempts to denaturalize gender by "contesting the grammar in which gender is given" (see above, Section 4).

Reality is assumed to reveal itself behind the clouds of appearance only through intellectual analysis. That stance is perhaps part of the explanation why Bronwyn Davies is so enthusiastic about meeting preschool children who can talk with her about gender as "articulate intellectuals" (Davies 1989: 124). Only an intellectual language can give children the tools needed to navigate the dangerous archipelago of gender appearances.[6]

9. The thrilling difficulty of Butler's language

Butler excites her readers as Schopenhauer excited his. Metaphysics is not a bone-dry relic from the past. It still intensifies and elevates our basic feeling of life – for instance, the feeling of not fitting into society – as if it were an experience of the highest dignity; an insight into the fundamental processes of existence (be it the objectification of the unsatisfied will or the naturalization of gender norms).

Because so many find her difficult to understand, Butler sometimes is accused of being a bad writer. But the difficulty of her language is an achievement. As in Heidegger, it answers to the demand to avoid the ordinary language as contagious with metaphysics. Once that is acknowledged, it becomes clear that Butler is an advanced metaphysical writer who, according to the same intellectual demands, writes in the clearest and most basic of languages. If you can share some of that attitude, you may be moved by Butler's language and even find it beautiful.

> I am not trying to be difficult, but only to draw attention to a difficulty without which no "I" can appear. (Butler 1999: xxvi)

From my presentation of Butler as a metaphysical writer, one could get the impression that my aim is to reject her work on gender as a repetition of an ancient mistake. But the excitement (and opposition) her writing gives rise to, testifies not only to the fact

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[6] Davies' interview with the girl with the tickling feeling in her brain contains several intellectualist glosses (within square brackets) of the girls statements; glosses using the language of description (2), such as "Observing the 'wrong' behaviour in terms of gender category can set up such a feeling of dissonance within the brain that laughter is inevitable" (Davies 1989: 115). The girl, however, unhesitatingly speaks of girls and boys and uses the language of description (1).

that metaphysics still finds new wellsprings, but also to the fact that Butler's "destabilizing" work on gender touches something important. But what is it that she destabilizes – if we manage to overcome her, in my view, unjust and exaggerated (and very traditional!) mistrust of language?

10. What is destabilized?

Observe where I stand at this juncture. I suspect that there is a real point in saying that Butler is doing destabilizing work on gender. But I also suspect that the meaning of this destabilizing work is exaggerated through Butler's unforgiving attitude to language as metaphysical enemy. Butler appears to confuse what she is destabilizing with human language as such. That is a huge claim – I would even say, hubris – comparable to Schopenhauer's claim that *everything* in human experience essentially is objectified will. I want to see more clearly what Butler, as a matter of fact, is destabilizing. I also want to see what I believe already has begun to drift in human forms of life, independently of gender theoretical work, forming the contemporary background to Butler's theorizing.

11. Becoming reconciled with "Moses"; accepting what a name is

What would it mean to become reconciled with language and come to see that it is not the metaphysical monster Butler takes it to be?

In *Philosophical Investigations* (§79), Wittgenstein remarks that we often use names, such as "Moses," without a fixed meaning. If someone says, "Moses did not exist," it may mean a variety of things, which Wittgenstein exemplifies:

> the Israelites did not have a single leader when they withdrew from Egypt
> *or*: their leader was not called Moses
> *or*: there cannot have been anyone who accomplished all that the Bible relates of Moses
> *or: etc. etc.*

These fluctuating uses of "Moses" exhibit various meanings of "Moses," for example, as:

> the man who led the Israelites through the wilderness
> the man who lived at that time and place and was then called "Moses"
> the man who as a child was taken out of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter
> *and so on*

Having exemplified these diversified uses of "Moses," Wittgenstein goes on to note that a typical response to being told that "Moses did not exist," is to ask:

> What do you mean? Do you want to say … or …etc.?

Were there more than one leader? Was he not called "Moses"? As if these observations were not sufficient to shake our convictions about how uniformly names must function, Wittgenstein goes on to ask questions about the exemplified criteria for the use of "Moses." How determined are they? If by "Moses" we mean "the man who did what the Bible relates of Moses," then how much of what the Bible says must be false in order for us to say that Moses never existed?

> Have I decided how much must be proved false for me to give up my proposition as false? Has the name "Moses" got a fixed and unequivocal use for me in all possible cases? – Is it not the case that I have, so to speak, a whole series of props in readiness, and am ready to lean on one if another should be taken from under me and vice versa? […]
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> And this can be expressed like this: I use the name "N" without a *fixed* meaning. (But that detracts as little from its usefulness, as it detracts from that of a table that it stands on four legs instead of three and so sometimes wobbles.)
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> Should it be said that I am using a word whose meaning I don't know, and so am talking nonsense? – Say what you choose, so long as it does not prevent you from seeing the facts. (And when you see them, there is a good deal that you will not say.)
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> (The fluctuation of scientific definitions: what to-day counts as an observed concomitant of a phenomenon will to-morrow be used to define it. (Wittgenstein 1953: 79)

This paragraph can be said to contain "forgiveness work" aiming at philosophical reconciliation with the uses of names. Wittgenstein collects observations about our use of "Moses" to overcome almost unshakeable intellectual ideals, for instance, his own in the *Tractatus*, according to which each name *must* have a simple, fixed meaning in order to function as a name.[7]

Wittgenstein does not say, "Look at our uses of 'Moses' and learn that language, at least on its mundane surface, is not what it *must* be like in order to function as language. True language, with real names, must either be constructed or, through logical analysis, be discovered behind its disappointing everyday appearance." Such reasoning would exemplify the contemptuous attitude to language typical of the intellectualism of the philosophical tradition. Wittgenstein's reasoning rather is that what turns out to be empty and disappointing is his own intellectual ideal, his simplifying demand on what a (true) name must be like.

Wittgenstein "destabilizes" not language, but his own stubborn intellect.

12. Wittgenstein's appearance: nonsense

If there is such a thing as "appearance" in the later Wittgenstein, then it is identified with certain effects of intellectual ideals on thinking. Wittgenstein called these effects on thinking "nonsense." What corresponds to appearance in Wittgenstein, then, is nonsense. But in contrast to the tradition, this form of appearance does not characterize human existence, and the philosopher is not a hero who penetrates it.

Wittgenstein discovers appearance, not in human forms of language and life – the hubris of the all-too intellectual thinker – *but in the thinker*. By identifying appearance with philosophical nonsense, the philosopher takes the blame and becomes reconciled with the world. That, in my view, is how Wittgenstein "overcomes metaphysics."

The passion with which Wittgenstein exclaims "nonsense!" is similar to that with which philosophers always exclaimed "appearance!" That Wittgenstein's exclamation

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[7] For another illustration of this intellectual ideal, consider again Edmund Husserl's reasoning about language, ambiguity and fixity of meaning in Section 4 of this essay ("Dissatisfaction with language").

is directed towards the philosopher rather than human existence makes him difficult in a different sense than Butler is difficult.

Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following (1953: 185-242) can be read as a lengthened attempt by Wittgenstein to discover *his own role* in problems that apparently concern the rational justification for following the rule "+2" by continuing the sequence, "2, 4, 6, 8, 10," by writing "12, 14," rather than, e.g., "14, 18". It is not easy to smell one's own presence in problems so apparently sublime, and to acknowledge that the notion of rational justification here is an empty ideal, for which one needs to take the blame.[8]

It is through philosophical reconciliation that philosophy "leaves everything as it is" and stops reproducing appearance/reality dualisms. The difficulty of Wittgenstein's philosophy is like the difficulty of forgiving someone.

13. Butler's ideal of linguistic rigour

Although Butler, due to her free use of the idea of performative speech acts, can be loosely associated with linguistic philosophy, self-reflective reconciliatory work concerning language is absent from her writings (although a dimension of forgiveness is present in her work, as we shall see later). Thus, when definitions of sex in genetic research fluctuate so that external genitalia sometimes are used as a criterion of sex and on other occasions as a symptom – as in Wittgenstein's §79 above – instead of accepting this as how language functions, sometimes also in science, she ridicules the geneticists as if the fluctuation revealed that they use words whose meaning they do not know and thus are fooled into futile research:

> Indeed, if external genitalia were sufficient as a criterion by which to determine or assign sex, then the experimental research into the master gene would hardly be necessary at all. (Butler 1999: 147)

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[8] For a brilliant commentary on Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations, see Warren Goldfarb's paper, "Rule-Following Revisited."

Could we not rather view the geneticists' fluctuating criteria of sex as indication that perhaps language is not the metaphysical enemy that Butler takes it to be; in other words, as an invitation to become reconciled with language?

14. Becoming reconciled with gender nouns

Let us replace the little girl from Section 1 with a twenty-year-old who has more serious gender trouble. Mere tickling feelings are now produced rather in the heads of some of those she – or he? – meets in the street. How can the emergence of these feelings of uncertainty be described? Here are two metaphysically hostile possibilities (making me think of party members shouting their articles of faith at each other):

(A) She is ontologically woman! When people see her male attributes, they feel dizzy since reality clashes with appearance.

(B) Gender and sexuality are performed! When people see this unexpected combination of attributes, they feel dizzy since the divergent sequence of attributes questions the very possibility of "man" and "woman" as nouns; as names of stable gender substances.

Is this a striking description of our situation? Does our use of nouns such as "man" and "woman" and pronouns such as "he" and "she" commit us to metaphysics (A)? If I exclaim, "Jeez, that woman has many male features," do I implicitly claim that "woman" is the *inevitable* word, "since ontologically this *is* a woman"? If I want to avoid metaphysics (A), must I abandon the common language, with its nouns and pronouns, and instead choose something like the language of alternative (B)? Butler seems to hold such a view:

> If it is possible to speak of a "man" with a masculine attribute and to understand that attribute as a happy but accidental feature of that man, then it is also possible to speak of a "man" with a feminine attribute, whatever that is, but still to maintain the integrity of the gender. But once we dispense with the priority of "man" and "woman" as abiding substances, then it is no longer possible to subordinate dissonant gendered features as so many secondary and accidental characteristics of a gender ontology that is fundamentally intact. If the notion of an abiding substance is a fictive construction

produced through the compulsory ordering of attributes into coherent gender sequences, then it seems that gender as substance, the viability of *man* and *woman* as nouns, is called into question by the dissonant play of attributes that fail to conform to sequential or causal models of intelligibility. (Butler 1999: 33)

If gender is constructed as an abiding substance, then it should be contradictory to describe someone alternately as man and woman. Attributes can fluctuate, but substances must be rigid. But observe how we can respond linguistically to someone with unclear gender, by sometimes using "man," sometimes "woman"; sometimes "he," sometimes "she" – slipping between nouns and pronouns. Is it because we do not yet *know* the gender? It seems to me that I may say (perhaps narrow-mindedly), about a transsexual person, "That woman is dizzyingly male," and a little later, "That man has a vagina," without anything but a superficial sense of contradiction. I use the nouns with different types of criteria. I am suggesting that the use of gender nouns can fluctuate, just as the use of "Moses" fluctuates. For Butler, however, choice of gender noun is fraught with momentous consequences:

> If one sees a man dressed as a woman or a woman dressed as a man, then one takes the first term of each of those perceptions as the "reality" of gender: the gender that is introduced through the simile lacks "reality," and is taken to constitute an illusory appearance. (Butler 1999: xxiii)

If linguistic responses to ambiguous gender can fluctuate, then the "reality of gender" associated with gender nouns can be surprisingly fleeting. Rather than see the "dissonant play of attributes" as a challenge to the viability of gender nouns, one could see our linguistic responses to this "play of attributes" as demonstration that the criteria of "man" and "woman" fluctuate more swiftly than we first assume. Seeing "a woman dressed as a man" need not be a fateful metaphysical choice, but can be a matter of momentarily opting for certain criteria of gender, which the next moment are exchanged. What one moment is a male attribute of a woman the next moment is what we mean by "man" – and thus the man gets his vagina.

Another feature of ordinary and not necessarily enlightened speech is that our choice of word typically shows what we (momentarily) mean by the word. By spontaneously

using "woman" about a person with ambiguous gender, I show which criteria of gender I use, for instance, clothing, or genitalia, or voice, or behaviour, or genetics, or official documents, or whatever aspect of the situation that momentarily stands out as a basis for choice of the noun. By a few seconds later instead using "man," I show which criteria I jumped to. The result of using both "man" and "woman" about the same person is not necessarily a contradiction, since the meaning of the nouns can change with my spontaneous choice to use them. Language often functions this un-bureaucratically.

"Stop this deceptive narrow-mindedness! The transsexual probably does not want to 'fluctuate,' but wants to be viewed as either man or woman. This so-called un-bureaucratic feature of language is a form of violence!" I am not saying that the use of gender nouns *must* fluctuate. I point out that the use of gender nouns *can* fluctuate. But it can stop fluctuating too, for instance, if someone explains to us, "That is not a woman." However, that makes the parallel to Wittgenstein's discussion of "Moses did not exist" even more obvious. For we may find the statement "That is not a woman" (or "I am not a woman") ambiguous, and respond by asking, "What do you mean? Do you want to say … or … etc.?"

Here, an objection wants to make itself heard: "But is there not also the experience of wanting to use neither 'man' nor 'woman' about certain people because they fit into neither category? Is not that too a way in which we may respond linguistically to ambiguous gender; one which shows that language is not as plastic as you portray it as being, but presupposes static binary categories? Does not the dissonant play of attributes call into question the possibility of 'man' and 'woman' as nouns, after all?"

It is a fact that we sometimes want to use neither "man" nor "woman," because neither word seems fitting;[9] and some reject the nouns as descriptions of themselves. As long as I am not an immigration officer on duty, however, I am not obliged to determine a person's sex (according to some criterion). Perhaps I use different nouns or pronouns intermittently, or use other forms of referring expressions. And, most

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[9] One could view "perceived gender" as a perceptual *aspect* of a person: although it is rare, one can sometimes *see* (or hear, smell, touch) a person varyingly as man *or* as woman; and sometimes no gender aspect strikes us at all (as is often the case with infants and animals).

probably, over time, persons with unclear gender will make their gender (or non-gender) clear. Gender has a form of first-person authority. The point is not that we typically are this unconcerned about fluctuating or withdrawn sex determinations. We are typically not. The point is that *language* does not force us to distinguish a person's "real sex" from "apparent gender features," as if the existence of "man" and "woman" as nouns drew us into metaphysical form-filling mania.

So, is the transsexual a man, or a woman, or neither, or both? What should we say? Even when we know which choice a transsexual person has made, we may say, "She has decided that she is a man." Choice of noun or pronoun, by itself, is not fraught with metaphysical consequences where "reality," with thunderous voice, is separated from "appearance." The statements, "He is a woman," and, "She is a man," for instance, need not be slips of the tongue, but exemplify how nimbly we can opt for criteria of gender, even within statements. But, once again, is this not doing violence to the person who in this manner is forced to "fluctuate"? Perhaps, and perhaps not, and perhaps the fluctuation stops as the situation unfolds. My point is only that dissonant play of gender attributes does not challenge "man" and "woman" as nouns as much as it challenges a certain rigid picture of how nouns function. Therefore, saying, "Jeez, that woman is dizzyingly male," although it may be an expression of narrow-mindedness, is distinct, I think, from a metaphysical statement of kind (A). Consequently, the impression that description (1) (in Section 1 of this essay) wears the appearance/reality dichotomy linguistically on its sleeve – is "appearance."[10]

15. What is there to destabilize?

If our use of nouns pulsates and more or less goes wherever life goes – if language is that obedient to life – what is there for Butler to destabilize?

Consider a final version of the stubborn idea that what needs to be destabilized is language as such: "Even if we jump between criteria, we are not free to use penises and ties as criteria of womanhood, or vaginas and pink skirts as criteria of manhood.

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[10] I should perhaps add that I do not presuppose that the two nouns "man" and "woman" will accommodate any changes in human forms of life. The nouns *can* disappear or be complemented with other nouns. My aim is only to show that we can become reconciled with the language we have: it is not a metaphysical straitjacket.

The criteria, even though we jump between them, are ordered within a compulsory gender scheme, as either male or female." – Is only Humpty Dumpty free of metaphysics, because only he can mean whatever he likes with what he says? Is language repressive because we are not free to use *any* criteria as reminders of the fluctuating use of "Moses," for instance, "the son of God," "the king of rock'n'roll," or "faster than the speed of light motion in science fiction"?

My response to this final version of the mistrust of language is to start searching for what truly can (be felt to) stand in need of destabilization. As long as we do not see our situation clearly, we will multiply unfair accusations against language.

16. Imagine a church

Consider again the fluctuating uses of "Moses," this time in the context of a church in whose creed Moses is a central figure. In such a context, the fluctuation that Wittgenstein exemplified by saying that "Moses" may be defined as, *for instance*:

> the man who led the Israelites through the wilderness
> the man who lived at that time and place and was then called "Moses"
> the man who as a child was taken out of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter
> *and so on*

could be viewed as a threat to the church and to the coherence of its faith; as an attack from a dangerous philosophical sect of ambiguity. To keep the congregation together, theologians find it necessary to delimit the uses of "Moses" normatively by having the members of the church repeatedly pronounce the following creed:

> We believe that Moses was the man who led the Israelites through the wilderness, but condemn as heresy the blasphemous idea that he as a child was taken out of the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter. This is who the *true* Moses was; all other versions are false images of Moses' *reality*.

This is an imagined example, but it indicates how generations of theologians shaped the meaning of sacred notions, such as "God," "the Son," and "Holy Spirit." A creed,

such as the Nicene Creed, is not only an expression of religious piety, but also a web of normative delimitations of religious language, resulting in new regimented theological language, keeping the church together and hardening it linguistically against the attacks of various heresies. Every single formulation in the creed has been politically considered and contains polemical points against competing interpretations; conflicts between interpretations were occasionally so intense that they threatened the stability of the Roman Empire and forced the emperor intervene (I draw on Thalén 2008).

Theological language, then, partly is the result of political processes and functions as the church's linguistic armour against competing versions of the divine. It is noteworthy that religious language can be turned into this politically effective church armour through being regimented in definitions that are disguised as creeds; as statements about "what is true." By using "true" and "real" to give normative statements a coat of factuality (e.g., "the *true* Moses," "God's *reality*"), the resulting language appears to state timeless truths about divine substances, where some features are declared internal to the divine substance and others are explained away as external attributes, or heretic appearances.

Observe that our pedestrian use of "truth" – e.g., when we check the number of lottery tickets in a hat and declare, "The truth is: there are only five left" – is distinct from its use in the regimented theological language. There is no normative element in the pedestrian use of "truth," only confirmation of a fact. By disguising normative statements as creeds about the *true* x, or about x's *reality*, the theological statements appear to be revelations of higher facts. The delimitation of "Moses" in our imagined creed, for instance, is presented as though the author had looked into a magical hat – a holy book – and discovered the truth of Moses. Who dares to challenge the definition, *if it is the discovery of a higher fact*? The assemblage of the normative and the factual creates a sophisticated linguistic mechanism of power. The regimented metaphysical language becomes a way of disciplining the congregation. Because the church's normative decisions appear as discoveries, as revelations of divine facts, they acquire absolute authority.

17. Destabilizing the church

I find in Butler's thinking the following picture of human life. Humanity is formed through membership in an elusive yet omnipotent church of sex. What the congregation naively calls "life" is the reiteration of linguistic conventions, made compulsory by the assemblage of norms and reifying words in creed-like constructions such as these:

a *true* family consists of husband, wife and several children

a *real* woman knows how to please her man

authentic sexual desire exists between the sexes

…

Becoming human, for Butler, means repeating these statements, but not only in words, above all in deeds: in performative reiterations of the norms. Language – the unforgivable demon Butler sees in it – is like theological language. It is metaphysical language fusing the normative and the factual, thereby forcing the reiteration of the norms as if they were binding truths. Becoming a gender, for Butler, is a violent process of being subjugated by "the linguistic conventions that produce intelligible gendered selves" and that render nonconforming lives unintelligible.

By elaborating deconstructing language that separates gender norms from reifying words, Butler promises to denude what she calls the heterosexual matrix (creed-like norms such as those above; see Butler 1999: 47-106) and to indicate, however vaguely, the possibility of life less violently subjugated by gender norms. If I understand her right, then, Butler emphasizes not only the possibility of novel versions of gender, but above all the possibility of more peaceful ways of becoming human. Here is where I sense a perspective of forgiveness in her work. Is her deconstructing language meant to be a language of love?

But maybe the invention of the deconstructing language, which itself gives rise to so much irreconcilability,[11] is superfluous. How far is the church analogy valid? Can life

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[11] For instance, Toril Moi's (1999) eloquent critique of Butler seems to me a *polemical reaction* which does not take Butler (or the reaction itself) sufficiently seriously. Moi rejects Butler as an absurd poststructuralist, but in my view Butler deserves to be taken seriously as a (poststructuralist)

be conceived of as founded on normative statements? Is the extreme intellectualism of such a view valid even of the strictest church? And if the analogy is misleading and perhaps not entirely true even of the church, how can we understand the true meaning of Butler's destabilizations?

18. The smoker's incessant smoking

Before we question the church analogy and what it illuminates in Butler, we need to pause and consider what Butler's emphasis on repeated actions means:

> [G]ender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing or a static cultural marker, but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort. (Butler 1999: 152)

Imagine a being more obviously a doing, namely, being a smoker. Being a smoker is an incessant and repeated smoking. Smoking a single cigarette does not make a smoker. Tom Waits' line in the film *Coffee and Cigarettes* – "I have quit smoking, so I can have one" – therefore resembles what Wittgenstein called a grammatical remark, or a grammatical joke.

It is interesting that we are not tempted to reject the noun "smoker," even though being a smoker obviously is a repeated action. (Is it because the noun already contains traces of the verb? We unhesitatingly *use* it as a noun.) The fact that Butler's theory of performative gender both excites and provokes suggests that the theory highlights relevant facts *and* places these facts in a perspective that is far from self-evident. The theory emphasizes that being man or woman is more like being a smoker than we are inclined to think. That is a lasting observation.[12] Yet, the fact that the theory also puzzles indicates that what Butler means by performative reiterations is different from the everyday notion of repeated activity that we can associate with being a smoker.

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philosopher. There are intellectualistic tendencies in Butler that go far beyond poststructuralism, and which I try to identify in this essay as what each one of us need to come to terms with, in order to see what is truly problematic about Butler's work. Butler exemplifies widespread intellectual tendencies.

[12] That "man" and "woman" are nouns is philosophically full of pitfalls, since it downplays what is not thing-like in being man and woman. The question is: are the nouns a reifying surface on dynamic gender, or are nouns used more dynamically than we are inclined to believe? Should we blame language, or take the blame?

When Butler emphasizes performative reiterations, *what* is being repeated? Evidently, the repetitions occur when we live ordinary human lives. And, indeed, we have a notion of the repetitiveness of life, of the monotony of going to work every day etc. If this is what repetition means, then what is repeated is life itself, and it is repeated simply by living. This everyday notion of repetition cannot be what Butler means by performative reiterations, for it would contrast with her intellectual ambition of not taking the mundane order of life for granted; after all, "there is nothing radical about common sense" (Butler 1999: xix). The reiterations that Butler speaks of are not simply like smoking a cigarette every second hour, but more like acting according to a hidden agenda, or like being in the grips of a secret compulsion.

What for Butler is repeated, ultimately, is not the action that is repeated, but the underlying scheme, the norm, the linguistic convention that is reiterated *in repeating the action*. What is repeated is the elusive but logically basic "heterosexual matrix." In Butler's words, the heterosexual matrix is "hegemonic."

So, you think you are repeating what you did yesterday, that you engage in the same human practices; that life goes on. Oh no, in doing all these repetitions, something more elusive is again and again reiterated. There is compulsiveness in your repetitions with more secret sources than yesterday's actions. Human life is appearance, produced by hegemonic norms that compel us to cite them, endlessly.

19. Resemblances between Butler and Schopenhauer

In her metaphysical attitude to life, Butler often resembles Schopenhauer, when he complained that the world is so miserable that only the world itself can be held responsible. He explained suffering on the basis of elusive processes that cannot be named in day-to-day talk, because they precede human experience. This did not prevent Schopenhauer from naming them objectification and individuation of the blindly acting will. He took himself to be using philosophical language with cosmic powers of intellectual revelation. Butler, too, blames the state of the world on elusive processes that she again and again emphasizes come *before* the world of daily acting human subjects.

> Indeed, there is no "one" who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a "one," to become viable as a "one," where subject-formation is dependent on this prior operation of legitimating gender norms. (Butler 1993: 232)

Butler's poststructuralist critique of life could be called, "universalized conspiracy thinking," since, like Schopenhauer, she blames no one and nothing in particular. The wrong-doing cannot be isolated as part of the world, for what is blamed for the suffering, ultimately, is the world- and subject-formatting process itself. Not seeing this transcendental origin of suffering is viewed as a form of naïveté.

As did Schopenhauer, Butler indicates that although the troubles of the taken-for-granted world are produced by a pre-human mechanism, there are ways in which its effects occasionally can be reduced. In Schopenhauer, the blindly acting will can, temporarily, be bracketed by listening to music. More permanent relief from suffering occurs when the will is negated in someone; when someone becomes a saint. In Butler, occasional reliefs from the compulsive gender-formatting process appear more accidentally, in sexual and other practices that fail to repeat gender norms faithfully. Both authors emphasize that these relaxations from the world- and subject-formatting process do not occur as volitional acts, since repeated action is precisely how the source of the suffering is affirmed.

The big conspiracy of life is revealed in language corresponding roughly to description (2) at the beginning of this essay. It describes the elusive processes through which the appearance of day-to-day life is produced and expressed in the vernacular of naïve human subjects, that is to say, in language corresponding to description (1).

20. Elusive systems of power

Butler's metaphysics may not seem as outlandish as Schopenhauer's view that the world, as it exists for us, is objectified will. She may seem to describe the world of gendered subjects as produced not by ethereal processes of Schopenhauerian sort, but rather more politically by the society in which we live and by its law-enforcing

authorities – and by our forced subordination to these "juridical systems of power" (Butler 1999: 1-46). As Sections 18-19 of this essay hopefully make clear, however, this common sense reading of Butler misses the transcendental aspect of her reasoning. Although she speaks of "juridical systems of power," these systems cannot be named – as in law school – since the judiciary, the police force, and all officials and subjects of society, exist precisely as derived appearances, as products of more hidden systems of power. In her role of genealogist, Butler does not discuss, for instance, sexual violence "naively" as a real human problem, but rather more secretively as the product of transcendental violence. When a man beats a woman, the beating is itself the product of the violent subjugation involved in reiterating the linguistic conventions that produce men who intelligibly beat women. Butler always promises a deeper ahah-perspective on human suffering, as did Schopenhauer.

We now begin to see what produces the appearance of the inhuman ahah-perspective: a certain view of the relation between a norm and the following of the norm; a certain view of the relation between linguistic conventions and their "embodiment" in human day-to-day life. It was this view that the church analogy illuminated. It assumes that norm-like constructions have powers to produce life, as if day-to-day living consisted in "citing" norms in endless "performative reiterations."

21. Butler as a genealogist

Although Butler (1999: xxxi) cites Nietzsche as the instigator of the genealogical critique she develops in *Gender Trouble*, her poststructuralist version of genealogy differs from Nietzsche's on a vital point. Nietzsche's vividly sketched genealogies of good and evil never traced these ideas back to elusive normative matrixes. Nietzsche rather described these apparently abstract notions in their (historical) *contexts of human life*.[13] Genealogy, for him, returned what philosophers took to be abstract moral ideals back to their original home in human settings. He portrayed ways of living where certain sensitivities, desires and ideals belonged and had meaning; or

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[13] Although Nietzsche had impressive historical education, his often imaginative genealogy of morality can bring to mind Wittgenstein's *invented* tribes, such as the enslaved tribe in *Zettel* used to illuminate how different forms of life can be the foundation for different concepts. Nietzsche, I believe, was after the *human* origin (or home) of moral notions. The historical framework of his discussions easily overshadows how they "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (Wittgenstein 1953: 116).

where the sensitivities, desires and ideals of some form of life were coarsened when translated into other ways of life. Genealogy, for him, humanized and concretized apparently pre-human abstract ideals.

Nietzsche's form of genealogy presupposes human ways of talking and acting *as the fundamental facts of the inquiry*. For Butler, such an attitude is precisely the naïveté her genealogical critique is meant to expose. What is radical, for her, is disclosing human life as produced by phantasmagorical processes. Her genealogy is meant to trace the production of the *apparent* foundational character of day-to-day life. Her genealogical critique therefore resembles Schopenhauer's transcendental analysis of suffering more than Nietzsche's humanization of metaphysically idealized moral notions. In fact, one could view Butler's genealogy as the exact opposite of Nietzsche's.

Butler might object that she too presupposes that we talk and act; that it is the whole point of the idea of *performative* gender. What my comparison between Butler, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche is meant to show is that Butler is *doubling* the doing with a more secret doing, which for her is the fundamental doing.[14] When we talk and act, perhaps repeating yesterday's actions, something more elusive is simultaneously being "reiterated": regulatory norms are compulsively cited. This is the pre-volitional, performative aspect of the doing, which makes us appear to ourselves as gendered subjects who act volitionally.

> "Sex" is always produced as a reiteration of hegemonic norms. (Butler 1993: 107)

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[14] If one views the "doubling" of the doing as intellectually necessary, as the step to a proper philosophical attitude, one will view it as a challenge of utmost importance to characterize the fine nuances of this newly discovered primary realm. A result of this attitude is that the terminological apparatus will expand and change in ways that will be interpreted as intellectual progress. Thus, since Butler's doubled doing is problematic on its own terms, inviting as it does the question *who* is doing the doing, when the whole point is that it is a "doing to do," a doing that precedes the daily doings of gendered subjects, her terminological change in *Bodies that Matter* to talking about "materialization" of gender norms appears as a step forward, since "materialization" does not invite the question about a subject responsible for the materialization. Note that this terminological change does not delimit the relevance of my remarks to her earlier work, *Gender Trouble*, but accentuates the tendency on which I focus and makes the resemblance to Schopenhauer even more obvious.

It is this alleged priority of "the selfish norm" that is being questioned here. We are in the process of running Butler's genealogical thinking backward, toward its source in our difficult to overcome intellectualism.

22. Holding up a newborn: "It's a lesbian!"

In one of her Schopenhauerian attempts to indicate that there are loopholes in the compulsive world-formatting process, Butler mentions

> the peculiar pleasure of the cartoon strip in which the infant is first interpellated into discourse with "It's a lesbian!" Far from an essentialist joke, the queer appropriation of the performative mimes and exposes both the binding power of the heterosexualizing law *and its expropriability*. (Butler 1993: 232)

The heterosexually decreed course of events would be one where "the initiatory performative, 'It's a girl!' anticipates the eventual arrival of the sanction, 'I pronounce you man and wife'" (Butler 1993: 232). Such repetition of ritualistic events exemplifies, for Butler, the operation of the heterosexualizing law. The joke, "It's a lesbian!" *exposes* the law to us. Our laughter helps us see how the law already subjugates us. It exposes the compulsory idealization of the heterosexual bond. At the same time, the joke momentarily relaxes the law's binding power and, if I understand her right, indicates the possibility of alternative courses of events that could be initiated by holding up a newborn and saying, "It's a lesbian!"

23. The grammaticality of the joke

I want to say that the cartoon strip is a grammatical joke, in Wittgenstein's sense. As things now stand – as we presently talk and act – it is nonsense to look at a newborn child and exclaim, "It's a lesbian!" We can notice that a newborn became a girl, but we cannot notice that it became a lesbian.[15] That is a grammatical remark. However, we could imagine a people for whom the utterance would be commonplace. Girls are, as a matter of course, brought up to subsequently form lesbian relationships.

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[15] Another aspect of the joke is the association of a newborn with sexuality, but it seems Butler is not focusing on that aspect, and neither will I.

Imagining such a form of life, the joke stops being comical and its words acquire meaning. These people can look at a child and say that it became a lesbian, and not because they are clairvoyant (another grammatical remark). So, I may alternate between laughing at the joke and seeing a possible commonplace meaning of, "it's a lesbian." Language often is this pliable. It follows life, like a dog.

Let us imagine two peoples:

(1) The first people look at newborns and notice, "it's a girl," or, "it's a boy." Children are routinely brought up to form heterosexual relationships. These people laugh when they read the cartoon strip.

(2) The second people look at newborns and notice, "it's a lesbian," or, "it's a gay." Children are routinely brought up to form homosexual relationships. These people do not see the point of the cartoon strip.

Why do people (1) laugh when they read the cartoon strip? Is it because of "the binding power of the heterosexual law"? Why do people (2) not laugh? Does "the binding power of the homosexual law" prevent laughter? What is wrong with simply saying that the first people live heterosexual lives in which the utterance in the cartoon strip is (or plays on) nonsense, while the second people live homosexual lives where the utterance has meaning?

Consider these two types of explanations of laughter and non-laughter:

(A) Whether people laugh depends on how they live; it depends on the human context in which the cartoon utterance is placed.

(B) Whether people laugh depends on which sexual law subjugates them (or, to be more precise, which sexual law is in operation to produce "them").

Choice of explanation here resembles the choice of descriptions with which I introduced this essay. I suppose that Butler could accept explanation (A) as the naïve, common sense explanation. But, since there is nothing radical about common sense, explanation (B) would be her preferred, technical explanation of laughter and non-laughter. For, how else can we explain the *orderliness* of these two kinds of lives?

People (1) live heterosexual lives; people (2) live homosexual lives. How can those forms of orderliness come into existence and be maintained, unless we assume the operation of hidden laws … a la Edmund Husserl?

24. Digging for the ultimate explanation

What, for Butler, is unsatisfactory about laughter explanation (A) is that it naively takes the orderliness of our lives for granted as if it were a naturally given background against which we laugh at the cartoon utterance. This she views as an essentialist threat insofar as she believes it may naturalize the operation of the heterosexual law that she wants to expose. But that threatening picture neglects how explanation (A) works, since it places two forms of human life next to each other, and does not legitimize (1) over (2). Forms of life can be the natural and self-evident background against which we talk, act and laugh, and still be changeable.

But, then, why do human forms of life change? Is it not because something *makes* them change? New versions of the binding law produce and reproduce new life ways with new gendered subjects? In the ultimate analysis, then, when life changes, it must be because something else changes. By not always being repeated flawlessly, the regulatory norms change. That is *why* life changes, *when* it changes.

What weight can we attach to these "ultimate" explanations in terms of binding norms that Butler's intellectualism repeatedly demands? Since only transcendental accounts satisfy her "radical" demands, she rejects all explanations we *actually* can propose as causes of human change as merely of secondary significance: explanations that hide the production of the orderliness on the basis of which those commonplace explanations operate.

So, the explanation we *ultimately* need is in terms of "reiterating norms" – but since the norms precede day-to-day talking and acting, they can hardly be formulated in any known human language and are certainly not abided by any "one" (such naiveties would annihilate the status of the account as ultimate).

It anything needs to be destabilized, it seems to be the stubborn intellectual demands that repeatedly produce these "radical" explanations that no "one" asks for and no "one" gives.[16]

25. Initiating a grammatical diagnosis of the need of destabilization

We are now prepared to start diagnosing the need of destabilization that Butler's writing aims at by using an "explanation" of type (A); one which is more in line with Nietzsche's genealogical thinking, since it presupposes, as a fundamental fact, that we talk and act.

Let us assume that once upon a time, in a country far away, there lived a people of type (1). They raised their children to form heterosexual bonds. Immediately upon birth, they inspected their newborns and said, "it's a girl," or, "it's a boy," and showered them with images of heterosexual bonds. Homosexuality existed among these people, but it was not the norm. Observe that by "norm" I mean nothing transcendental. I mean the kind of explanations these children actually asked for ("why does Uncle Peter not have a wife?") and adults actually gave ("because he is different") using their day-to-day language. When these people heard the joke, "It's a lesbian," they laughed heartily, because a lesbian was something girls eventually turned out being. It was not something one discovered upon inspection of newborns, the way one discovered that a newborn was a girl.

Let us further assume that homosexuals formed a society of their own, or a subculture of type (2), of which "normal" people was unaware (or did not acknowledge). The homosexual subpopulation raised their children to form homosexual bonds. Reproduction was achieved through agreements. Immediately upon birth, they inspected the child and said, "it's a lesbian," or "it's a gay," and showered them with images of homosexual bonds. Heterosexuality existed in this subpopulation too, as a sub-subpopulation, but it was not the norm. Once again, I mean nothing transcendental, but the stuff children actually asked about and adults explained in day-

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[16] Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following (1953: 185-242) concerned such "ultimate" explanations of why we follow the rule "add two" as we do: explanations that no one asks for, no one gives, and no one responds to by continuing the series in one way or another.

to-day language ("why does big brother date a girl?"; "because he is different"; "oh"). When these people heard the joke, "It's a lesbian," they could see the point of the joke since society at large was heterosexual and their linguistic sensibility could resonate with heterosexual life forms. But it was easy not to laugh, because in their lives, whether a child was a lesbian was routinely decided at birth.

Finally, let us assume that the homosexual subculture, after some decades, became more visible. It became so well-organized that its habits, sexual reproduction system and kinship structure could claim recognition in the dominant society (once again, in a non-transcendental sense). The habit of determining whether a newborn was a lesbian would be sanctioned in terms of laws and rules for the exercise of public authority. We can imagine that this prospect of change was not welcomed by all in the dominant society. Since the idea of determining whether a newborn was a lesbian was nonsense in their life and language – for years they had laughed heartily at the cartoon strip! – they were not sure what would be sanctioned. Would their children be branded as homosexuals? Moreover, not being allowed to take their form of life for granted as self-evident, being forced to view it as a heterosexual version of life, next to the homosexual one, was seen as revolting.

In this situation of social change, we can imagine interesting things happening with this simple sentence:

one cannot see that a newborn is a lesbian.

Before the advent of social change, this sentence peacefully summarized a feature of the language and life of the dominant people. If a child did not understand the cartoon strip, adults thoughtfully explained the joke, using the sentence. If they introduced the explanation with phrases such as, "the truth is…," or, "the fact is…," these gestures did not express metaphysical claims; they only expressed, "this lies fast," as the rules of a game can lie fast.

As already touched upon, Wittgenstein called such sentences "grammatical remarks." They resemble what philosophers traditionally called analytic judgements and distinguished from synthetic (or empirical) judgements. The difference is that

Wittgenstein was a Nietzschean genealogist. He traced the abstracted statements that philosophers classified as analytic or synthetic back to their normal surroundings in human ways of life. When seen in the streams and currents of day-to-day living, the distinction between (in Wittgenstein's terms) grammatical and empirical sentences became floating.[17] It fluctuates with human culture, adopting historical dimensions it never had in the philosophical tradition. The following sentence, for instance,

moon travel is impossible,

could be said to have been a grammatical remark up until the latter part of the past century, when it became a false empirical generalization.[18] If my great grandmother met an American who said he just returned from the moon, she would have laughed or deemed him crazy. "Moon travel is impossible" summarizes an aspect of nineteenth century day-to-day language. There was no context in which someone could have "recently returned from the moon," not even an American. Today, however, we would consider the possibility of shaking hands with one of the astronauts.

That we laugh at the cartoon strip exemplifies what Wittgenstein meant by saying that a sentence like, "one cannot see that a newborn is a lesbian," is a grammatical remark. It exposes a form of life. As we happen to live and talk, the utterance in the carton strip is, or plays on, nonsense, "because one cannot see that a newborn is a lesbian." The grammatical remark, then, is *not* a heterosexualizing law which secretively *makes us* talk and act as we do. That would be the paranoiac intellectualism that puts life on its head that we saw in Butler. The remark highlights how we *already* talk and act. It exposes "what lies fast" (as the rules of a game). If we are to talk about foundations, day-to-day living is the foundation of the grammatical remark, rather than the other way round. "We talk and act. That is already presupposed in everything that I am saying" (Wittgenstein 1978: Part VI §17).

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[17] Wittgenstein's floating distinction between grammatical rules and empirical sentences is especially obvious in *On Certainty*.

[18] By "false empirical generalization" I mean this: the statement, "x has not been to the moon," may be true of most people, but it cannot be generalized. Some persons have been to the moon, and we have a notion of how it happened. Today, whether we shake hands with someone who has been to the moon is (or can in certain situations be) an empirical question; two hundred years ago it was not.

Let us return to the imagined society with its homosexual subculture. The sentence, "one cannot …," functions as a grammatical remark in the language of the dominant people. But if we move to the homosexual subpopulation, it is like taking the step to the twentieth century with regard to moon travel. Here one *can* decide that a newborn "became a lesbian," and quite trivially so, in the context of their lives, where children routinely are brought up to form homosexual relationships.

The question we need to consider is: what happens to the grammatical remark in the situation of social change that we envisaged? What happens when the people for whom the remark peacefully exposed an aspect of how they talked and lived feels threatened by a way of life in which the remark is a false empirical generalization?

26. *The intellectual rhetoric of "facts," "reality" and "truth"*

When grammatical remarks are threatened by changes in human ways of life, the intellectual discourses in which these changes are debated acquire peculiar properties. The debates we can imagine ravaging over the issue of whether one can see that a newborn is a lesbian will conceal that one debates a sentence with different status depending on its intimate human surrounding. Those who defend that one cannot see that a child is a lesbian defend a statement that, in their language and life, is a trivial grammatical remark. Those who question the statement question a remark that, in their language and life, has become a patently false empirical generalization. – Is this precarious dual aspect of the debated statement reflected in intellectual discourse?

Although what basically is at stake is a tension between forms of human life, between forms of language, we can easily imagine the two people fighting intellectually as if they debated the foundations of life, where the correct answer to whether one can see that a newborn is a lesbian is interpreted as support for one of the two life forms. Therefore, the grammatical remark is discussed *rhetorically* as if it were an abstracted empirical statement for which one can adduce evidence. The only "duality" of the statement that gets reflected in intellectual discourse is the alleged truth or falsity of a putative empirical claim. It is as if the rules of intellectual debate made us blind to what a Nietzschean or Wittgensteinian genealogy was designed to help us see: a proposition's rootedness in human life.

So, we can imagine those defending the abstracted remark saying things like:

> It is biologically *false* that one can see that a newborn is a lesbian; all available scientific evidence indicates that sexual orientation is decided much later in development.

While those who question the remark may say things like:

> Anthropologists have discovered several Polynesian people in whom the old women, as a matter of *fact*, inspect the newborn to see if it is a lesbian.

Hitting each other on the head with scientific evidence in this kind of conflict, I want to say, is resorting to empty gestures, to an intellectual rhetoric that conceals a philosophical helplessness so widespread that it almost could be said to belong to the human condition. Occasionally, all of us are like the philosopher of which Wittgenstein said:

> The philosopher exaggerates, shouts, as it were, in his helplessness, so long as he hasn't yet discovered the core of his confusion. (Wittgenstein 1993: 181)

The issue is not over biological or anthropological facts, truths and realities. That is just how we "shout" in helplessness; for instance, when the human life ways which normally form the self-evident background against which we talk and act change and we defend our way of living with intellectual means … as if *this* particular life was uniquely well-founded in the facts, in the truth, in the reality of all things.

27. Substantiating intellectual rhetoric

What is relevant for our purposes is that this foundation will be constructed as a linguistic norm, interpreted as if it stated a super-fact. The norm, in our example, is, "one cannot see that a newborn is a lesbian," but it would be rhetorically exaggerated by the intellectual as a higher fact:

The nature of lesbianism and the reality of childhood are such that one cannot, as a matter of fact, see that a newborn is a lesbian – and that's the truth!

Here, "truth" and "fact" are used not only to indicate "what lies fast." The phrases have become warlike, claiming that another game, with other rules, would be contrary to "the truth," or against "the facts" – implying that what lies fast *must* lie fast.[19] To ultimately defend the reified formula, to finally substantiate a particular version of sexuality as "the truth of sex," the intellectual must develop a *theory* of this verbally constructed super-fact: a theory that reveals an essentially hidden super-truth. Sublime theories of sexuality have been formulated, for instance, in German psychology and French structuralism, and in their subsequent combinations. These theories, which form the starting point for Butler's *Gender Trouble*, may not have been concerned with whether one can see that a newborn is a lesbian. But they did concern analogous matters, such as how certain childhood experiences and structural relations with Mother and Father give rise to normal heterosexual desires.

If we return to the two people who lived heterosexual and homosexual lives respectively, and if we try to remember how the putative "fact" that one cannot see that a newborn is a lesbian is contingent upon the form of life in which we place the sentence describing "it," it becomes evident that with these theories of sex, we have taken *two* intellectualistic steps away from the human settings that we truly need to consider, to discover the core of our confusion.

1. The first step is the step to intellectual rhetoric, where the grammatical remark is debated as an abstracted empirical proposition for which there can be evidence. (This step is almost spontaneous: it is taken in heated table-talk and agitated letters to the press.)
2. The second step is the development of a theory which is supposed to provide that evidence and settle the issue, constructed as a higher factual one. (This step requires more elaborate efforts, such as writing a treatise.)

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[19] Observe that this warlike use of "truth" and "fact" doubles the truths and facts and creates the appearance that there is a more fundamental level of truths and facts.

Metaphysics, one could say, is this second rung on the intellectualistic ladder.[20] A substantial portion of Butler's *Gender Trouble* is devoted to criticising – and using as a point of departure – such elevated psychoanalytic and structuralist theories of sex. In many of these theories it is indeed possible to identify a heterosexual matrix, namely, as an *intellectual scheme of thought*. Judging from Butler's account (1999: 82), one guesses that Freud was in the grips of such an intellectual matrix when he felt forced to explain bisexuality as the result of double dispositions in a single person; as if sexual desire was mathematically inconceivable without a relation between two sexual opposites, the masculine and the feminine. As Butler aptly notes, if only opposites attract, there is no homosexuality in Freud's thought scheme. However, to view this pertinent critique of certain *theories* of sex as an exposure of a "heterosexualizing law" in human life more broadly, is not to notice how far one has moved up and away on the intellectualistic ladder.[21] Butler takes intellectual rhetoric more seriously than it deserves.[22]

28. Butler destabilizes intellectual rhetoric

The philosophical exercises above – the reconciliatory work – have made our minds open for an answer to the question that has run through this essay. What Butler is trying to destabilize is the intellectual rhetoric that often takes the easy step (1) and occasionally also the elaborate step (2) on the intellectualistic ladder towards ultimate evidence.

Butler, however, does not view her destabilizations as being about a rhetoric that can be isolated from language more broadly. She *identifies* what she destabilizes with language, as if intellectual rhetoric was the mother tongue of humankind. That is why

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[20] My description of metaphysics as an elaboration of intellectual rhetoric, aiming at the ultimate evidence settling certain puzzling questions constructed as "higher" empirical ones, is inspired by Talbot J. Taylor's excellent and enormously instructive genealogy of linguistic theory (Taylor 1992).

[21] I do not deny that sexuality is an important topic on which theoretical and intellectual perspectives can be developed. I only draw attention to the fact that such theories easily play a problematic role of substantiating a rhetoric that misconstrues certain puzzling controversies as if they concerned higher empirical issues. My view is that Butler's critique and use of psychoanalytic and structuralist theories tend to be of this "elevated" kind.

[22] Perhaps the parallel between intellectual rhetoric and hate language (where, e.g., the gay is beaten for not being "a *real* man") partly explains why Butler takes intellectual rhetoric so seriously. The connection between metaphysics, violence and hate language in the tension between forms of life is a serious topic, but therefore it may also reinforce many of the philosophically problematic exaggerations that we discuss here, such as when ordinary language is associated with metaphysical claims.

her destabilizations can be viewed as hubris. Her diagnosis of the hollowness of the idealizing rhetoric focuses merely on the notion of *a* unique foundation. Stubbornly on the upper rung of the intellectualistic ladder, Butler sees foundations everywhere: every form of life has its own pre-human regulatory law.

I too feel the need of destabilizing intellectual rhetoric, but the genealogical considerations of this essay indicate that Butler's destabilizations are half-hearted and incomplete. She seems to think that destabilization is achieved through creative changes in intellectual rhetoric: avoiding reifying words or using them ironically; developing a doing-rhetoric instead of using nouns etc. etc – creating an alternative, constructivist rhetoric.

Our philosophical reconciliatory work has been a work *on us*. We tried to change not language, but our philosophical outlook. Examples that occasionally were quite comical helped us see how narrow the limits of intellectual rhetoric are – in both its essentialist and constructivist forms. We took intellectual rhetoric to have cosmic significance. Now we see it as the kind of derived appearance that Wittgenstein called nonsense, and for which we take the blame.

29. *What already is drifting*

If Butler helplessly gestures against equally helpless intellectualistic gestures, why is there a lingering feeling that there is a true message in her destabilizations?

Once again, the grammatical joke we discussed above has revealing potential. What triggered the dominating people's intellectual rhetoric? It was a tension between forms of life with an associated tension between forms of language. Although the difference can be surveyed, as when we placed people (1) and (2) next to each other, we typically are not prepared to describe it as a difference between (comparable) forms of life. Instead, it was experienced by the dominating people as an obscure threat from something incomparable. Although it sounded super-certain of itself, their intellectual rhetoric was triggered by this vague feeling of danger, which they did not examine closely. The possibility of seeing that a newborn is a lesbian was quickly and loudly discarded as absurd, as appearance, as contrary to the facts of sex etc. etc. …

with an unforgiving (and perhaps even violent) gesture. But we could quietly demonstrate the possibility.

Life is not a constant. The tension portrayed in our example almost belongs to the human condition. But some differences sometimes are more palpable, and maybe changes in life forms related to sex have been more noticeable the past decades. Changes in human life ways have triggered a slip of sentences that, in the new human landscape, no longer have the trivial grammatical status they once had. Just as "moon travel is impossible" no longer exposes how we live and talk, the following remarks have begun to slide:

> a woman cannot become a man
>
> a family consists of father, mother, and children
>
> marriage is a bond between man and woman
>
> a man cannot give birth to a child
>
> …
>
> one cannot see that a newborn is a lesbian [?]
>
> …

I speculate that if it was not for this slip of grammatical remarks, triggered by changed forms of life, the following type of rhetorical gesture would not have our ears:

> The two sexes are not naturally given. They do not exist until certain bodily features are singled out as the basis for binary categorization.

Butler's constructivist rhetoric exaggerates a postmodern feeling of being in the midst of an unending landslide, just as traditional metaphysics exaggerated the feeling of having stopped it and saved humanity from new ones. The lingering feeling that there is truth in Butler's destabilizations has its source in contemporary life, in streams and currents that are independent of Butler's work, but make us attentive to its rhetoric.

What made me feel uneasy about Butler's way of destabilizing intellectual rhetoric was how she throws suspicion on all forms of human life as if they must have obscure sources in inhuman realms dominated by law. What drove this investigation, what

was at the core of my confusion, was this dehumanizing, intellectualist "genealogy," which Butler shares with the metaphysics she wants to displace.

Let me end with a note of admiration. Although Butler thinks as if each form of life had its own regulatory law, she places these forms next to each other as comparable alternatives (on the same level). She is not placing them in a hierarchical order and she does not run into the kind of problems that Freud had to explain certain possibilities of human life. That *is* overcoming a widespread metaphysical tendency and a point where I think that Butler is more interesting than most of her critics.

30. Pulling threads together

How liberating it is to conclude a philosophical inquiry; to discover (for a while, one thinks) the core of one's confusion, after months of restlessness. I wish I could remain in this peaceful state. But I guess I should formulate some implications of this drifting about investigation – implications that may create more confusion and start up new inquiries.

> Routinely adding "compulsory" as a transcendental modifier to heterosexuality, as if one exposed a secret conspiracy of life, is an empty gesture. The emptiness of this gesture does not exclude, however, that heterosexuality, in today's tensions of life, often is compulsory (or "hegemonic") in a manner that we may want to change; but heterosexuality does not "come into existence" as a compulsory reiteration of hegemonic norms.

> The doing-idiom of description (2) is not, in principle, more revelatory than the commonplace language of description (1). Describing people as girls and boys, as men and women, is not underwriting the metaphysics of substance. However, a doing-idiom may *inspire* studies that expose the changeable human contexts within which there is such a thing as gender norms (norms *we* are sensitive to) and fluctuating uses of gender nouns.

> Intellectual rhetoric about "biological sex" can be likened to intellectual rhetoric about the "true Moses" or "God's reality." Biology often is confused with this

reifying rhetorical gesture, but so are the other notions that are more commonly used: true, real, factual, original, authentic, and natural. If there is a need to defend biology against essentialism – feminist biologists have seen this need – then there is a corresponding need to defend truth, reality, authenticity, and naturalness.

If language is rooted in elementary features of life that "lie fast," as the rules of a game lie fast (it goes without saying that they can change), then from Butler's critical-intellectual ambitions it follows that she must avoid familiar language and use language that apparently has no roots; a cleansed intellectual language that flits along. Day-to-day language must be avoided as contagious … *with life*! The cleansed language is taken for a syntactic gateway through which we can escape our common human limitations and become super-intellect with Schopenhauerian capacity to diagnose the evils of living. However, when Butler avoids familiar language as violent, her motivation to do so is rooted in a picture of language that we can show is intellectual appearance, or nonsense. Her guardedness is motivated with regard to intellectual rhetoric in its various substantiated forms; but the task is to see the difference and forgive language.

Where a traditional metaphysical approach would provide ultimate evidence that some local version of human life has universally valid foundation, Butler more pessimistically tries to expose how each version of life has its own regulatory law. Our way of overcoming metaphysics, through philosophical reconciliation, does away with the founded/founding dimension. The stubborn intellectual demands that produce the *appearance* of the appearance/reality duality are empty. When genealogical inquiries help us take the blame for the demands, we respond by climbing down the ladder, and the urge of climbing it to discover ultimate evidence is completely gone.[23]

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[23] In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein believed that his readers had to climb up the ladder of his propositions, and from that intellectually elevated outlook discover the core of their confusion. Only thereafter would they throw away the ladder. This was perhaps what he later came to see as the big mistake of his early work. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein still was a follower of Schopenhauer more than of Nietzsche. He later came to see that his readers' task was not to climb up ladders. Being troubled by philosophical difficulties, readers already were up there. The whole point is getting down. The whole point is Nietzschean genealogy.

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