



## Interview with Professor Judith Butler<sup>1</sup>

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First of all, we would like to thank you for your cooperation with the editorial board of *Sapere Aude* Journal, Brazil. It is a great honor for us to have you here, Professor Judith Butler, for this interview.

**1. *Sapere Aude*:** You wrote an essay dedicated to Jacques Derrida, shortly after his death in 2004, which was published in the *London Review of Books*. It is, in fact, a beautiful text that recognizes the qualities of a great philosopher. In this essay, it becomes evident to us, your readers, something you and Derrida knew how to demonstrate really well in the works

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Butler is Maxine Elliot Professor in the Departments of Rhetoric and Comparative Literature and the Co-director of the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley, USA. She is the author of many texts, such as *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth-Century France* (Columbia University Press, 1987), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990), *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Routledge, 1993), *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997), *Excitable Speech* (Routledge, 1997), *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (Columbia University Press, 2000), *Precarious Life: Powers of Violence and Mourning* (2004); *Undoing Gender* (2004), *Who Sings the Nation-State?: Language, Politics, Belonging* (with Gayatri Spivak in 2008), *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (2009), and co-authored volumes: *Is Critique Secular?* (2009) and *The Power of Religion in Public Life* (2011). She has also won at 2012, the philosophy award, Theodor Adorno Prize, for her contributions to questions of gender, sexuality, critical theory, and moral philosophy.

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you both published: the possibility of establishing a line of thought in dialogical dimensions. Both you and Derrida carry on a textual dialogue from distinct perspectives, whether it is in conceptual terms and performative languages, or in historical-discursive terms, pointing out important philosophical traits in the various names that permeate the history of our philosophical culture, and establishing through them distances and approximations. A good example of this dialogical concern of yours is found in the preface and introduction of some of your books, such as *Subjects of Desire* and *Gender Trouble*. Especially in the 2004 book, you write that Derrida helps us read from new perspectives. In this notion of "reading," our ability comprehend is inscribed, as it "relies on our capacity to interpret signs". You conclude, however, by means of a Derridean interpretation, that we cannot believe that language always confounds our intentions, but only that our intentions "do not fully govern everything we end up meaning by what we say and write". In this regard, would you please comment a little on your intention of writing something in homage to this noble philosopher? In addition, would you tell us if your dialogical concern – which is a major issue in the philosophy of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – is offered as an emphasized rhetorical effect as well as a means of questioning methodological formulations in the act of philosophizing?

**Judith Butler:** First, let me say that I am most honored to receive your questions and will try to do justice to them. It is difficult, of course, because I cannot easily ask you questions about your question, so I have to discern something about what is wanted, and what it is that I can offer. As we know, sometime what is wanted is the same as what is offered, but very often in these dialogic moments, a rift emerges, and we have to understand more about the question and the questioner, and more about the one who is asked to respond.

Although I was never a student of Derrida, I heard him speak several times, probably close to twenty times, and this happened over a period of around 20 years. So I was able to note a certain change in his style, and by the time he started to work on mourning, pardon, the death penalty, and forgiveness, I saw that there was a post-Levinasian relation to the other that had become increasingly important to him. I did not know him well, only conversed with him a few times (though I participated in a seminar with him in the 1990s). My own early views on performativity were, in part, derived from his work – the emphasis on how a

law can bring into being the very phenomenon it regulates, and the importance of citationality to understanding the speech act. But my concerns were at that time restricted to gender theory within the United States, and I was perhaps mixing French theory with US politics in ways that were certainly not fully legible to those outside (or even in France).

In any case, as I changed, I watched him also change, so that by the time he died, I was very mindful of the important writing he had done in The Work of Mourning. I saw that he was honoring and recognizing those with whom he had been in dialogue, even if there were critical and abiding differences of opinion between them. He was trying to name and honor the interlocutors that made his own work possible. He was at that time living, and they were not, and it was his task, as a living philosopher, to continue to speak with those who were gone, to address them, to establish them again in language, and to acknowledge the ways those philosophers had become essential to the philosopher he was. I took this as an action of friendship, and offering of recognition, and a way of incorporating that loss into his own writing – a melancholic version of mourning.

I did not think very much before I wrote that piece honoring him. But I was aware that he had been severely criticized by those who sought to discredit his philosophical and literary contributions. And I wanted to put my name behind his, or next to his, or insist on the importance of this man and his work. I believe that sometimes death can become the occasion in which those with destructive intentions unleash their criticism, and I wanted Derrida's name to be honored or, at least, I wanted to say that I honor him, and that my own thought is bound up with his, even if we did not always agree. In fact, I think the world is more impoverished without his thought, and it is left to those of us who are much weaker thinkers to nevertheless find our way.

2. **Sapere Aude:** Let's talk about a very special work of yours, published in 1989, *Subjects of Desire*. As some of us here in Brazil only had access to the book in its Spanish version, *Sujetos del Deseo*, published in 2012 (which led us to seek the original one from 1987), it to us a very recent and current work. In the chapter referring to *(post) Hegelian themes in Derrida and Foucault*, there is a discussion about the analogical possibility between Jean Hyppolite and Jacques Derrida, taking both in consideration as readers of Hegel. You write that, through the rupture between sign and meaning, Derrida makes explicit that "the failure

of sign reveals the absolute subject as full of metaphysical ambition and utterly helpless to achieve that ambition through language," and that, furthermore, this failure shows that "'subject' is itself the fiction of a linguistic practice that attempts to deny the absolute difference between sign and signified." This means, according to Derrida, a true "unmasking of the linguistic artifice" that produces and supports the subject in its fictional efficacy. Moreover, you understand that, in Derrida, there is evidence for a need for a critique of the subject and of the *referentiality* metaphor: "the subject only exists as a user of the referential sign", and the critique of referentiality implies that the subject as a figure of autonomy is no longer possible, except as a fiction given to itself by language.

Accordingly, if we could transport this analysis of yours to your later concerns, which have emerged since *Gender Trouble*, for example, discussing studies and problems of gender, hierarchy, exclusion, and trends of Feminism, would it be possible to say that your critique of the identity demands of culture in some way correspond to Derrida's analyses of such "linguistic artifices" that insistently produce certain fictions of subject in its fictional efficacy?

**Judith Butler:** Of course, we are now in a certain problem of the intellectual time-zone. I wrote that work on Hegel nearly 30 years ago, so when you offer me a sentence from that time, I scrutinize it with some curiosity. I don't really know what that author could have meant, but I understand that the proposition belongs to me or, rather, to this name, so I must respond, yes?

I do think, continue to think, that when we say that a particular notion of the subject is a "fiction" or rests upon a certain "fiction", that we are not saying it is false or dismissable. On the contrary, fiction has become all the more important, even necessary, when it turns out that none of us could really refer to ourselves or the world without fiction. At such a point, we do not lose the veracity of the self or its world, but we realize something about the conditions under which that veracity is established. I believe it was probably Nietzsche who started all this when he claimed that even our propositions, "This is true!" or "This is good!" were performative utterances of a certain kind, establishing through their very enactment a version of what is true and what is good. J.L. Austin tended to see this possibility, though he did not pursue its consequences. Of course, the performative

production of a certain reference is something that happens in poetry all the time, but perhaps what happens in poetry lets us understand something about the more ordinary way that referential discourse works. To say that it is fictional is to say only that a certain effect has been produced, emphasizing the “productive” dimension of an act. In Derridean terms, that act has to recite and call upon a citational legacy in order to act at all, that is, to bring about effects. At the same time, we understand that there is no possibility of experiencing a world without some description of that world, which means that the world only arrives for us through one description or another, and that there are various ones. One could say that this leads to relativism, but it is actually a universalizing claim. So perhaps what we call fiction is not falsehood or artifice, but part of the universal dimension of referential discourse.

**3. *Sapere Aude*:** Taking into consideration the dialogical base that evidently supports your works, in several of them your dialogue not only with Derrida, but mainly with Michel Foucault, is rather explicit. In France, there are those who even consider you as a philosopher who has a certain continuity with Foucault's work and not just a dialogue with it. We might mention, in this case, the work of Guillaume Le Blanc, which attributes the originality of your thinking to the fact that the deconstruction of gender norms is viable not through a liberation from these norms, but through a kind of subversion developed in the very act of attending to these norms. Thus, identities do not precede the norm exercise, but it is the exercise itself that ends up creating identities. In other words, the repetition of norms is always accompanied by the possibility of subverting them. Would you please discuss precisely the importance of Foucault's work for your own, specifically for your formulation of gender performativity?

**Judith Butler:** Foucault has certainly been important to me – there is no doubt. But many would say that my work in psychoanalysis makes some of what I do quite inimical to the Foucaultian project. And, as you know, the differences between Foucault and Derrida are not to be underestimated. Le Blanc is right that norms are enacted, and that the scene of that enactment opens up the possibility of subversion. But norms can be enacted and close down the possibility of subversion. And sometimes certain norms cannot be re-enacted

subversively at all – the task of resignification has to come to an end. And other times, that resignifying task simply has to “cease” for awhile, when, for instance, “Peace” becomes a way of waging war, or “democracy” becomes a way of imposing governments. We do not have to give away the term, but sometimes we have to work hard to make sure it does not confirm a status quo that we oppose.

Gender performativity surely draws from Foucault in the sense that gender norms are bound up with power, and power is not only repressive, but also generative. So, like Foucault, I move away from the framework in which there is only repression, on the one hand, and liberation, on the other. And yet sometimes there is repression, and it has to be worked through, uncovered, challenged. It is one thing to claim that repression cannot serve as an adequate model for the understanding of power; but it is quite another to say that repression has no place in a theory of power. I hold to the first claim, but not the second.

Perhaps gender performativity can be linked with what Foucault referred to as the making of new subjectivities. If so, we would have to be able to conceive of those new subjectivities as exercises of freedom within and against a scene of constraint.

4. *Sapere Aude*: If it is true that Foucault is so influential in the dialogical development of your thinking, and at the same time Hegel was also a crucial philosopher in your own development, we would like to know how one would harmonize such distinct ways of thinking the question of the subject in these philosophers. You tell us:

"There is the refrain that just now, when women are beginning to assume the place of subjects, postmodern positions come along to announce that the subject is dead."

*(Feminism and the question of postmodernism)*

How do you think it is possible, in the twenty-first century, for so many *aporias* to emerge in the ways of thinking and the forms of discursive demarcations in contemporary philosophy – especially with respect to the delimitations of Feminist-based philosophy, which addresses this problem?

**Judith Butler:** I am quite sure that we should not seek to “harmonize” these various views of the subject. I think we can draw upon these theories to build our own, and that means

bringing different theories into a kind of productive clash with one another. The point is not to build a synthesis, even if there is some syncretism to what I do. The irreconcilable dimensions of these theories are precisely the contemporary occasions for new thought. That new thought does not have synthesis as its aim, but only a way of grasping new formations of the subject.

As for feminism, most activists know that part of the task of feminism is precisely to track and to call for changes in the very meaning of what it is to be a woman. Can a woman be X and do Y? That is so often the question that begins any feminist dilemma. It is the very definition of the gender that comes into crisis. Indeed, without that crisis in the definition of gender, there would be no feminism. So we should be glad that the subject of feminism is not yet decided. It means that we have a future of political change in front of us.

***Sapere Aude***: We would like to thank you very much for this interview conceded to *Sapere Aude* Journal of Philosophy from Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais, Brasil. We hold you in the highest esteem and congratulate you for the Adorno Prize, received in 2012, for the sum of your work, especially in gender, sexuality, critical theory, and moral philosophy.

