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# As the World Turns: Ontology and Politics in Judith Butler\*

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*What ought 'foundations' for political thought look like in a postmetaphysical world? I argue for a "weak" ontological model of 'foundations' and employ it in a critical reconstruction of Judith Butler's work. My specific intention is to show that this model provides a better understanding of both the strengths and weaknesses of Butler's writings than does her own notion—shared by many poststructuralists—that one does not need ontology to sustain ethical and political reflection, or, at best, only an austere minimal one.*

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A guiding imperative of Judith Butler's thought is the commitment to "a problematizing suspension of the ontological." Drawing upon the momentum of both feminist and poststructuralist thought, she understands her task to be an "interrogation of the construction and circulation" of ontological claims. By this, she means an investigation of the multitude of ways in which notions of being have traditionally been construed as "pre-linguistic" and thus as having an uncontested status in accounts of subjectivity, society and politics:<sup>1</sup> When

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1. Judith Butler, "The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess," *differences* 2 (1990): 105-06. The following abbreviations will be used for referring to Butler's books:

- BTM* *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
- ES* *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).
- GT* *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).
- PLP* *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997).

an account is rooted in an “ontological essentialism,” Butler contends, there is an occlusion of power, for such ontology invariably contains a “normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground.”<sup>2</sup> This allows categories of identity, for example gender, to present themselves as beyond contestation.

Despite Butler’s thoroughgoing critique of ontology, it is nevertheless becoming increasingly clear, as her work develops, that she is herself affirming an alternative ontology. Such a claim probably sounds like the opening move in a strategy aimed at demonstrating that Butler is entangled in some kind of performative contradiction: while she understands herself to be critiquing all ontology, she is inconspicuously generating another one as her arguments deploy themselves. But this is not my strategy. Rather, I largely agree with her critique of “ontological essentialism” or what I call “strong ontology,” and I applaud her tentative—although sometimes almost disavowed—steps toward a different type of ontology. So my concern in this paper is not with exposing contradictions, but rather with reflecting upon how successful Butler is in shifting from one type of ontological foundation to another—although in the latter case one would have to speak of ‘foundations.’

One can envision this alternative type of ontology in different ways. In order to have a basis upon which to begin evaluating what Butler is up to, however, I am going to specify this alternative as a “weak ontology.” I have laid out the broad outlines of this idea elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> In the most general sense, weak ontology refers to what persuasive argumentation in regard to basic concepts should look like in a postmetaphysical world. What is at issue is how we should now construct pictures of self, other and world, and link them to some affirmation of ethical and political life; in short, how we ought to configure our most basic affirmative gestures of practical reason.

Weak ontologies emerge from the conjunction of two insights: acceptance of the idea that all fundamental conceptualizations of self, other and world are contestable, and awareness that such conceptualizations are nevertheless unavoidable for any sort of reflective ethical and political life. The latter insight demands from us the affirmative activity of constructing foundations, the former prevents us from carrying out this task in a traditional fashion.

One of the hallmarks of weak ontology is resistance to portraits of human being and world that assume a “disengaged self.”<sup>4</sup> Weak ontologies articulate

2. *GT*, 16, 20; *BTM*, 219.

3. See my “Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection,” *Political Theory* 25 (August 1997); and the “Introduction” to *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* (Princeton University Press, forthcoming, 2000).

4. The term “disengaged self” comes from Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 21.

a “stickier” conception of subjectivity. What exactly this amounts to varies among weak ontologists, but they all share certain distinctive common qualities. Weak ontologies do not proceed by categorical positings of, say, human nature or telos, accompanied by a crystalline conviction of the truth of that positing. Rather, they offer figurations of human being in terms of certain existential realities, most notably language, mortality or finitude, natality and the articulation of “sources of the self.”<sup>5</sup> These figurations are accounts of what it is *to be* a certain sort of creature: one entangled with language; conscious that it will die; possessing, despite its entanglement and limitedness, the capacity for radical novelty; and, finally, giving definition to itself against some ultimate background or “source” that evokes awe, wonder, or reverence. This sense of an unavoidable background is *misconstrued* when grasped either as something with a truth that reveals itself to us in an unmediated way or as something that is simply a matter of radical choice.

I use the term “existential realities” to claim that language, finitude, natality and sources are in some brute sense universal constitutives of human being, but also that their meaning is irreparably underdetermined in any categorical sense. There simply is no demonstrable essence of language or true meaning of finitude. Weak ontologies offer figurations of these universals, portraits whose persuasiveness is not simply a matter of correspondence to reality, but also of aesthetic attractiveness and historical appropriateness.

Since weak ontologies make no claim to reflect the pure truth of being, one cannot derive any determinate, incontestable principles for ethics and politics from it. The fundamental conceptualizations such an ontology provides can at most prefigure practical insight or judgment, in the sense of providing broad cognitive and affective orientation. Practice draws sustenance from an ontology in the sense of both a reflective bearing upon possibilities for action and a mobilizing of motivational force.

With this sketch of an alternative sort of ontology in place, let me turn back to Butler. Along with her thoroughgoing critique of strong ontology, there is the admission that foundations are both “contingent and indispensable.”<sup>6</sup> This simple statement embodies, however, a persistent tension, one which frequently manifests itself in the work of poststructuralist and postmodern thinkers. Sometimes they deny the necessity of foundations altogether. But when indispensability is admitted, the affirmative task presents itself as immensely difficult. Its difficulty results, of course, from the very power of the critiques such theorists have offered of prior ontological formulations.

5. Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 21.

6. Butler, “For a Careful Reading,” in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, S. Benhabib, J. Butler, D. Cornell, and N. Fraser, eds., introduction by Linda Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1995). 133.

Those critiques highlight the dangers residing in any attempt at affirmative gestures. The upshot, unsurprisingly, is a tendency to keep ontological affirmations austere thin or minimal.

I want to suggest that ontological *thinness* ought to be distinguished from ontological *weakness*. The former refers to a reticence to affirm very much ontologically; the latter to the way one affirms. The problem with the former is its failure either to figure enough existential universals or to sketch persuasively how the ontology prefigures ethical-political values. In my terms, a weak ontology that is too thin will not be very “felicitous.” A felicitous weak ontology has a kind of richness to it, with that term implying that the ontology satisfies the various criteria I have delineated. Just as with soups, so with weak ontologies: a rich one is usually more satisfying than a thin one.

One thing that makes Butler’s work so fascinating is how these issues play out in the development of her ideas after *Gender Trouble*. The tension over ontological thinness—although obviously not framed in such terms—arises in the context of critiques of that work. *Gender Trouble* unmaskes the ontological essentialism at work in various conceptualizations of subjectivity, gender and the body. Butler’s point is to expose ontological claims in these domains as nothing more than dissimulation strategies of discursive regimes of power. There is no entity—whether the subject, the gendered subject, the body, or whatever—which hovers, as it were, behind its acts; rather such entities are always “*produced or generated*” in the very performance of linguistic actions. The continual reiteration of social scripts—and thus regimes of power—is what gives life and specific shape to what are then mistakenly identified as pre-existing entities with ontological status.<sup>8</sup> Despite the novelty of Butler’s way of conceiving the relation of power and language, critics have argued that her notion of the “performative” self is so thoroughly embedded within the flows of power, that she (like Foucault) makes it impossible to imagine a subject having the capability of critical agency; that is, the wherewithal to turn against power.<sup>9</sup> Although Butler broaches this problem in *Gender Trouble*, it is only in succeeding reflections that it receives more adequate treatment. By tracing this elaboration, one can begin to see her counter-ontology emerge (I).

7. I use the adjective “felicitous” to draw attention to the fact that the aptness of a weak ontology is not captured by the notion of truth, at least in the sense of a strong ontology’s claim to represent the true structure of being. J. L. Austin used “felicitous” to describe speech acts that were apt or performed successfully by meeting a variety of conventional expectations. In a vaguely analogous way, I take a weak ontology to be more felicitous the more it meets the expectations I have just delineated.

8. *GT*, 136, 143, 147.

9. See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” 20-21; Nancy Fraser, “False Antitheses,” 67-69, in *Feminist Contentions*; and Peter Digeser, *Our Politics, Our Selves: Liberalism, Identity and Harm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), ch. four.

After elucidating this development, I take up the question of Butler's tendency to join her acceptance of the indispensability of ontological foundations with a reticence to flesh hers out more—the problem of thinness. I show how this tendency yields some difficulties that show up both in how well the ontology prefigures her ethical-political values and in how well it figures the existential universal of finitude (II).

After pushing this issue of ontological reticence against Butler, I conclude by backing off a bit. In her recent work, *The Psychic Life of Power*, there is an analysis of melancholia and mourning that constitutes a significant enrichment of her ontology, providing a more satisfactory figuration of finitude (III).

### I. "An ontology of present participles"<sup>10</sup>

If one characteristic of a plausible, weak ontological rendering of human being is an account of language that displaces the disengaged, sovereign conception of subjectivity, then Butler's ontology certainly can make this claim. But the very radicality of that displacement in *Gender Trouble* creates some difficulties. One is how the fact that human beings have bodies seems to have become an epiphenomenon of performativity. Another problem is that it is not entirely clear how, specifically, discursive power "produces" subjects. Finally, despite her claims that subjects can resist power, her own theory may not in fact allow adequate comprehension of the critical agency she wishes to affirm. As I trace Butler's effort to wrestle with these problems, the specific contours of her alternative to a strong or "essentialist" ontology will become apparent. Once these contours are visible, I can then better assess how well her thinking aligns itself with the other criteria of a felicitous weak ontology.

Reflecting upon the constitution of the subject, Butler writes: "That one comes to 'be' through a dependency on the Other—an Hegelian and, indeed, Freudian postulation—must be recast in linguistic terms. . . ."<sup>11</sup> For this purpose, she adopts an image employed by Louis Althusser to capture the idea of subjectivity being simultaneously constituted by power and given recognition. A policeman on a street yells "Hey you there!" and a passerby stops and turns in response, acknowledging the policeman's call. In this "interpellation," as Althusser calls it, the passerby is "hailed" into being in effect; he/she is officially accorded subjectivity and given recognition, but on power's own terms.<sup>12</sup>

10. Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Performing Feminisms*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 272.

11. *ES*, 26.

12. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971).

The core of what fascinates Butler here is the idea of being “hailed” or “called” into social or “linguistic life.”<sup>13</sup> But the constitutive process apparent in this image seems to be less thoroughgoing than Butler herself demands. After all, isn’t there a fully formed subject—the passerby—who enacts the turn to authority? Butler is amply aware that the example is limited in its heuristic value; she acknowledges that we cannot just think in terms of isolated scenes. She asks us to imagine rather a lifetime of being hailed into discourse, beginning with the doctor who announces: “It’s a girl!” Butler would have us reconstrue this familiar speech act as the beginning of a lifelong chain of “girling” utterances that enact certain scripts as normal and others as abnormal. With this expansion of the temporal horizon and application of the notion of performativity, the relatively sovereign subjectivity of the passerby begins to dissolve. It is replaced by the image of a subjectivity produced or constituted by the insistent, interpellating “demand” of “discursive power.”<sup>14</sup>

Butler also departs from the literal sense of Althusser’s scene in that she finds the image of the call as a sovereign performance of the policeman misleading. Like Foucault, she wishes to displace our propensity to seek a “who” that is responsible for discursive power. The felicity or success of the policeman’s utterance does not proceed primarily from his will or intention, as J. L. Austin was aware, but rather from convention:

The policeman who hails the person in the street is enabled to make that call through the force of reiterated convention. This is one of the speech acts that police perform, and the temporality of the act exceeds the time of the utterance in question. In a sense, the police cite the convention of hailing, participate in an utterance that is indifferent to the one who speaks it. The act “works” in part because of the citational dimension of the speech act, the historicity of convention that exceeds and enables the moment of its enunciation.<sup>15</sup>

Thus it is the reiterating function of language that is primarily carrying and reproducing dominant norms and creating the effect of sovereign, disengaged subjects by the continual process of calling them into social existence. We are, in short, “interpellated kinds of beings,” continually being called into linguistic life, being “given over to social terms that are never fully one’s own.”<sup>16</sup>

Butler’s ontology then is one in which the basic ‘things’ are persistent forces. But we must be careful not to imagine these in subjectified terms.

13. *BTM*, 121-24; *ES*, Ch. One; and *PLP*, Ch. One.

14. *GT*, 145; *ES*, 34, 49, 155; *PLP*, 107; and “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 271.

15. *ES*, 33.

16. *ES*, 26; *PLP*, 28.

Thus, power is not an anonymous *subject* that initiates discrete *acts* of constitution or construction. There is rather only “a process of reiteration by which both ‘subjects’ and ‘acts’ come to appear at all. There is no power that acts, only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence.”<sup>17</sup>

However overwhelming this world of power persisting, insisting, compelling, demanding and hailing may sound, Butler does not think that any of this implies that subjects are dopes of discursive power. Reiterating is always potentially open to resignifying in ways that may contest the smooth reproduction of the dominant terms of discourse. Butler has described this subversive potential as “power’s own possibility of being reworked.” She employs such a curious locution to keep us from refiguring subjectivity again into a form that is self-causing in its critical agency.<sup>18</sup> But, even when one follows this line of thinking sympathetically, one is left only with the formal idea that discursive power reproduces itself imperfectly or unstably. What is not yet clear in Butler’s account is *why* or *how* this imperfection might ever be taken advantage of intentionally by an actor.<sup>19</sup> In her account of subject constitution so far, there is really nothing one could use for making much headway toward an answer. Before turning directly to the resources Butler develops for such an answer, I want to consider briefly how she has tried to respond to criticism of her account of the body. This is done in the context of a further augmentation of her ontology of present participles.

The criticism in its simplest version takes the form of questions like: if the body is really thoroughly a constitutive effect of some discourse, how is it that, regardless of the discourse that is prevalent at any given place and time, I feel pain when colliding with a door frame? *What*, one asks, is colliding with that frame?<sup>20</sup>

In response to such objections, Butler suggests:

To claim that discourse is formative is not to claim that it originates, causes, or exhaustively composes that which it concedes; rather, it is to claim that there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body. . . . In philosophical terms, the constative claim is always to some degree performative.

. . . To “refer” naively or directly to . . . an extra-discursive object will always require the prior delimitation of the extra-discursive. And

17. *BTM*, 9.

18. Butler, “Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of ‘Postmodernism,’” in *Feminist Contentions*, 47; and *BTM*, 15. See Nancy Fraser’s criticism of this expression in “False Antitheses,” *Feminist Contentions*, 67.

19. Cf. Butler’s definition of agency, *PLP*, 15.

20. See Digeser, *Our Politics, Our Selves*, 153-56; and Kathleen Jones, *Compassionate Authority: Democracy and the Representation of Women* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 79, 218.

insofar as the extra-discursive is delimited, it is formed by the very discourse from which it seeks to free itself.<sup>21</sup>

Butler's point, then, is not to collapse materiality into a linguistic idealism; but to avoid any ontological positing of materiality that places it firmly outside of language, because that very positing is itself accomplished in language. She tries to express this relation of language and materiality in her own ontological idiom as follows. We should figure the materiality of the body—manifesting itself in domains as varied as chemical composition, metabolism, illness, death—not as a passive medium, but rather as a persistent

*demand in and for language*, a “that which” which prompts and occasions. . . . [W]ithin the cultural fabric of lived experience, [it calls to be] fed, exercised, mobilized, put to sleep, a site of enactments and passions of various kinds. To insist upon this demand, this site, as the “that without which” no psychic operation can proceed, but also as that on which and through which the psyche also operates, is to begin to circumscribe that which is invariably and persistently the psyche's site of operation; not the blank slate or passive medium upon which the psyche acts, but, rather, the constitutive demand that mobilizes psychic action from the start, that is that very mobilization, and, in its transmuted and projected bodily form, remains that psyche.<sup>22</sup>

The materiality of the body is a “referent” that is not fully capturable by language, but that takes its place in language as an “insistent call” to be attended to.<sup>23</sup> With this notion, Butler installs in her ontology a second site of insistence, alongside that of interpellation. Interpellation is an insistence that subjects *be* this or that and continually account for themselves. This additional site of insistence, materiality, also presses something toward intelligibility; but that something, materiality, is also conceived as always exceeding the grasp of language. Thus it seems curiously to be a force that aligns itself with discursive power insofar as it is responsible for the inexhaustibility of the latter's task. The force of interpellation will always be called forth anew, since the material referent of naming is always beyond its reach.

This postulation of a second ontological force (and thus source of the self) extricates Butler from the anomalies of a linguistic idealism, but it does not seem to have augmented the overall ontological picture to a point where the emergent property of critical agency acquires adequate clarity. Progress on this front has come in the context of Butler's recent efforts toward “thinking

21. *BTM*, 10-11.

22. *BTM*, 67.

23. *BTM*, 67.

the theory of power together with a theory of the . . . psyche.”<sup>24</sup> Butler regards this task as important not only because it can help us better comprehend agency, but also because it can make clearer the phenomenon of submission in the constitution of the subject. For Butler, subjectivation in Foucault’s sense is productive (of agency and other things), but it also brings about a submission, and she seeks to understand the specific mechanisms of psychic life through which these effects occur.

Psychoanalysis would seem to have a ready answer to the question of agency and resistance to power: resistance can be traced to some “internal” psychic entity that is prior to, and thus in some sense beyond, “external” power. But Butler is wary of any simple positing of an ontologically distinct, inner sphere of “eternal psychic facts” assuring us that some specific resistance to power is, as it were, built into being as necessary.<sup>25</sup>

Butler turns once more to Althusser’s scene to open up this problematic terrain. What she finds unexplained in both Althusser and Foucault is why the passerby turns to answer the policeman. Power “hails,” but why does one submit to its call? Any attempt to answer this question is made more difficult by remembering that the process of turning is also constitutive of subjectivity. There is, in short, no fully reflective subject who is choosing to submit. The submission Butler is seeking to explain precedes the reflective self—that is, the self with a conscience.

Drawing on both Freud and Nietzsche, Butler understands conscience as forming under the force of the prohibitions of power. Desire turns back upon itself in the form of a will in the service of a regulating regime, that is, of terms not one’s own. The resulting pain of self-denial and self-beratement is compensated for, as Freud saw, by the investment of erotic energy in the prohibitive activity of this emergent entity of conscience. The conscience can thus never be an adequate site for thinking critical agency, since it is, in its very constitution, in complicity with the violent appropriation of desire by power.

A conceptualization of conscience in these terms helps to generate a sharper focus on the underlying issue of submission. A more precise phrasing of the question of why the subject turns can now be offered: Why does desire cooperate with its own prohibition? Butler’s answer rests on her postulation of a “desire to persist” that characterizes human beings. This is not a desire for mere physical survival or to align with some metaphysical essence; it is rather the desire for *social* existence, *linguistic* survival. Moreover, this desire has as its “final aim” not some particular model of existence, but rather merely “the continuation of itself.” It is thus “a desire to desire” that will cooperate with the prohibition of any particular desire that endangers its continued

24. *PLP*, 3.

25. *PLP*, 127-29.

access to the terms of social existence. Here, then, is the psychic mechanism of submission: “the desire to desire is a willingness to desire precisely that which would foreclose desire, if only for the possibility of continuing to desire.” One attaches to what is painful rather than not attach at all. This impulse, this passionate, “stubborn” propensity to attach is something that “precede[s] and condition[s] the formation of subjects.”<sup>26</sup>

This deep embedding of submission in psychic life, would seem to make the problem of conceptualizing agency *more* difficult in two senses. First, given one’s stubborn attachment to the dominant terms into which one has been interpellated, any resistance to them means risking a kind of social death. This is indeed what Butler wants to claim. Second, the idea of critical agency becomes more difficult because there seems to be no psychic mechanism by which there could even be such a space of possible experience. Stubborn attachment seems unshakable.

Butler contends, however, that this is not the case. For if a regulatory regime is secured only as it calls forth and constitutes a desire for existence within a specific set of terms, it means that there is a certain “detachability of desire.” Desire blocked or foreclosed can invest itself in that very prohibition.<sup>27</sup> But with this capacity of desire there also comes a certain susceptibility of power.

If desire has as its final aim the continuation of itself—and here one might link Hegel, Freud, and Foucault all back to Spinoza’s *conatus*—then the capacity of desire to be withdrawn and to reattach will constitute something like the vulnerability of every strategy of subjection.<sup>28</sup>

In this moment of detachability there emerges that “formative and fabricating dimension of psychic life” in terms of which one can conceive a resistance to power that is capable not just of blind recalcitrance, but also of rearticulating the dominant terms in which a specific form of social existence is offered.<sup>29</sup>

Critical agency, for Butler, thus seems to gain its condition of possibility from a “constitutive desire,” the “desire to desire.” This desire is potentially more stubborn, resourceful and opportunistic than the passionate attachment that forms the submissiveness of subjectivity. Butler figures this desire as a sort of insistent demand or becoming. Thus it appears to be of a kind with the other two ontological forces I have delineated. Each is a force in the sense of an insistence; none is an entity in the sense of being fully describable as subjects or objects. Power, materiality, and the desire to desire are thus all refer-

26. *PLP*, 27-28, 61-62, 102, 130.

27. *PLP*, 55, 60-62, 101

28. *PLP*, 62.

29. *PLP*, 60, 64.

ents that “cannot be finally named.”<sup>30</sup> The “it” of these forces is like the “it” of “it is raining.”

Collectively these insistences configure that *turning* that so fascinates Butler and in the context of which subjectivity is engendered. But this configuration allows a space of variation. Not only can a normalized subject be engendered but also a critical one. The latter can enact “a different kind of turn” by pursuing strategies for resignifying the dominant terms of social life. We thus ultimately possess, Butler contends, the possibility of cultivating “a more open, even more ethical kind of being, one of and for the future.”<sup>31</sup> In the next two sections, I will try to tease out a more specific content for this figure of agency.

## II. “Indispensable” Ontology

To sum up Butler’s ontology as I have construed it so far, we are beings with a “primary vulnerability to language,” a dependence on “discourse we never chose.” We are this “linguistic bearing” that is always already negotiating—as we ‘turn’—three ontological forces: interpellating power, materialization and the desire to desire.<sup>32</sup> Drawing a rough analogy with Heidegger, the “*Ereignis*” or “event” of being—better yet, *eventing* of being—is this turning. And, accordingly, the forces that constitute the turning function as Butler’s “sources of the self.” To be within their sway is to have been always already ‘thrown’ into terms of existence that can be negotiated but not chosen. Within such an ontology, critical agency emerges not with the possibility of escaping from the turning, but rather with the possibility of continuing that turning in a somewhat different way, a way in which one redirects how the three forces continue to press upon and partially constitute one another.

With this account fleshed out, I turn now to the issue of its relation to the ethical-political. When, as noted earlier, Butler describes foundations as “indispensable,” she is speaking specifically about normative foundations for political action. She asserts that effective feminist, or gay and lesbian, politics requires affirming certain claims about identity and generalizable interests. Following Gayatri Spivak, she speaks here of an “operational essentialism” that has value only for immediate purposes, and only as long as one remembers the necessity of decentering these normative claims at a higher level of reflection. In effect, we can never forget that foundational affirmations secure themselves only by means of a set of “exclusionary moves,” through which

30. *ES*, 125; *BTM*, 67.

31. *PLP*, 130-31.

32. *PLP*, 2; *ES*, 26, 30.

some identities and bodies are interpellated as abject and marginal, as ones that do not “matter.”<sup>33</sup>

This last claim has both ethical and ontological commitments implicit within it, as Butler is well aware. And yet this awareness is tinged with uneasiness. She expresses some reluctance to be very explicit about this precise issue, preferring instead to merely assert that whatever justification one would give here, it would not be one whose truth anchors us to some metaphysical reality, but rather one whose truth would have to be subject to the process of contestation and historical-cultural translation.<sup>34</sup>

This last contention certainly accords with the idea of weak ontology. But there is nevertheless something in Butler’s reluctance that creates difficulty for her. I want to suggest that her effort to avoid too much reflection on foundations has had a negative residual effect on her own constructions. For Butler, an effective break from strong ontological foundations can only be made good by articulating an austere minimalist or thin ontology. While the imperatives of such thinness may run parallel for some distance with those of what I call weakness, the latter are not reducible to the former. The point of this contrast is to suggest that Butler’s ontological austerity in some ways undermines the felicitousness of her project in terms of both the adequacy of its ontological figures and in the sense of their prefiguration of ethical-political orientation.

Making good on this claim requires first some description of the sites where she does draw explicit, coherent connections between her ontology and ethical-political commitments. Some of the prefiguration here, as I will illustrate, is admirably done; some less so (1). Then I want to consider a site where a specific ethical-political commitment implies an ontological figure that she does not articulate (2). Finally, I will press an argument to the effect that she is misarticulating both ontological and ethical-political reflection in her conceptualization of finitude, a site crucial for any weak ontology (3). With this issue, as well as with the preceding one of an ontological figure implied but not articulated, the root of the difficulty is traceable to Butler’s tendency to ontological thinness.

1. The most carefully developed of Butler’s ethical-political prefigurations is her account of critical agency and resistance, an account that constitutes a real advance for Foucauldian-inspired social theory. The interpretations of language, emphasizing interpellation, reiteration, and resignification, as well as the interpretation of attachment to existence as a desire to desire that eludes full interpellation, prefigure in an original way the idea of a dif-

33. “For a Careful Reading,” 133; “Contingent Foundations,” 49, both in *Feminist Contentions*; and “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” 280.

34. “For a Careful Reading,” 140.

ferent turn in relation to ethical-political life, one more consciously resistant to interpellation.

One weakness of this projected connection, however, is the recurrent, but rather vague, appeal to what sounds like an utterly new ethics and politics, one that is certainly but ineffably better. Recall her statement that the critically turning subject is “a more open, even more ethical kind of being.” This sort of projection, with its appeal to “futural forms for politics,” is a relatively familiar one within poststructuralist and postmodern thought. It carries a persistent utopian hope of a “not yet,” but by itself it remains blithely unspecific about normative orientation in the here and now.<sup>35</sup>

In Butler’s case, this kind of inflated gesture is partially balanced by the insightful way she has prefigured at least one sort of orientation to politics in the concrete present. This is perhaps most clearly displayed in her thinking about a nest of questions concerning the appropriate political response to “hate speech.” Here the issue is speech or images that injure or “wound” their addressees because of their race or sexuality. In recent years, concern about the power of “words that wound” has often manifested itself in demands for state intervention to penalize or censor such speech. Butler, however, is highly skeptical of such calls. This skepticism is, I would suggest, engendered at least partially by her distinctive ontological perspective. My point here, as with any weak ontology, is not that the perspective determines categorically some specific political judgment, but rather that it helps engender certain dispositions toward ethical-political life that alter the affective and cognitive direction one takes into specific issues.

What disturbs Butler about calls to censor words or images that wound is the accompanying understanding they carry regarding how language, power and subjectivity work. Language is conceived as being wielded by a power holder so as to effect the subordination of the addressee. The saying of certain words or representation of certain images performs an action, accomplishes a harm. This mode of thinking clearly draws the performative dimension of language to the fore, as Butler does herself. But there is a distinct difference here. For the prohibitionists, harmful speech is seen as having a *necessary* effect; saying necessarily does just what the speaker intends: enacting subordination and silencing the addressees in the sense of undermining their freedom to take part in public communication. Butler calls this the “illocutionary model” of hate speech. It asserts that:

35. *ES*, 161. For criticism, see Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Reconstruction and Deconstruction in Contemporary Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), ch. 4; and my *Political Theory and Postmodernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 51-53, 75-84.

hate speech constitutes its addressee at the moment of its utterance; it does not describe an injury or produce one as a consequence; it is, in the very speaking of such speech, the performance of the injury itself.<sup>36</sup>

Butler does not deny that there are illocutionary speech acts, but she questions whether the isolated picture of a *necessarily* effective speech act is any better as a general model of injurious speech than Althusser's isolated picture of interpellation is as a general model of the reproduction of discursive power. In both cases, too much occurs with necessity: too much sovereignty is accorded to the intentions of the speaker and too little resistant agency is accorded to the addressee. Butler believes we should think about injurious speech on a "perlocutionary" model where saying something initiates a set of consequences or effects; this saying and its consequences are temporally distinguishable. The word and the wound do not fuse into one.

Even when the gap between them is quite small, it is crucial to emphasize that gap, because it is the space of possible failure and resignification. Butler points here to the way the word "queer" has undergone a resignification in recent years in the United States, with the addressees of hate speech in this case progressively wresting its significance away from what it has conventionally been and appropriating it as a term of pride.<sup>37</sup> Such an occurrence cannot even be conceptualized when one thinks in terms of the illocutionary model. Within its portrait, speakers wield injurious words with crushing effect; and addressees are automatically constituted as victims. Not only does this occlude the space of possible non-state centered political agency, but it also perpetuates a "sovereign conceit" about actors. Those in positions of power are imagined as in full control of speech—a control limitable only by that greater sovereign, the state. Similarly addressees are imagined as capable of attaining, at least ideally, a condition where the terms of discourse are "their own." Both notions rest on a delusion that forgets we are all always already interpellated in a multitude of ways.<sup>38</sup>

A second prefiguration that is quite pronounced concerns identity and identity politics. From the first articulations in *Gender Trouble*, one senses that Butler affirms an ontology that conceives being as *potentiality*. As her ontology has taken on more coherent shape, this has not changed. As she says, "we might reread being as precisely the potentiality that remains unexhausted by any particular interpellation."<sup>39</sup> Such a formulation has the effect, as critics have noted, of making identity formations, whether individual or collective,

36. *ES*, 17-19.

37. *ES*, 17, 158.

38. *ES*, 16, 39-40.

39. *PLP*, 131.

somehow “essentially” suspect. Butler seems to be saying that we need to cultivate an attitude toward identities, according to which we “wear” them as necessary for specific purposes and “shed” them when they no longer serve those purposes. She hopes for a political world in which “identities . . . are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand.” Identity, Butler concludes, is best seen as nothing more than a site of “insistent rifting.”<sup>40</sup>

I do not think Butler intends here to imply, as one critic puts it, that all identity is “inherently oppressive.”<sup>41</sup> But given her ontological formulations, it is hard to see how she can resist the slide toward this kind of implication. If she cannot, a certain sense of implausibility begins to infect her entire project. Yet, as I elaborate later, it is possible to take issue with Butler on the identity question without rejecting her entire project.

2. As with all of the best poststructuralist and postmodern philosophy, there is in Butler a deep ethical sensibility inspiring the formulations. This sensibility engenders hope for a different sort of self and community, where the stickiness of language and power would be negotiated in a more ethically admirable fashion. Butler speaks of “fundamentally more capacious, generous, and ‘unthreatened’ bearings of the self.” Joined with this ethical image of the self is that of a political community for which the slow and careful “work of cultural translation” is central; where difference is honored in the context of an ethos that continually draws one toward the other but is alert to that interpellating insistence that always endangers the construction of interpretive schemas. In such a community, one cultivates an openness to those moments of “unexpected innocence,” when the dominant terms of political discourse are brought into question by novel resignifications.<sup>42</sup>

Yet it is not clear what ontological prefiguration supports this ethos. Butler provides the figure of a different turning, elaborated from the ideas of reiteration, the insistent desire to desire, and insistent interpellation. Together, they display a being with the difficult possibility of articulating its potential in ways not at first apparent. This way of rendering the unpredictable, irruptive quality of human action certainly provides a provocative portrait of the existential universal of natality. What is not apparent, however, is any prefiguration of the strong sense of generosity present in Butler’s ethos. By this I mean there is nothing in the ontology with which the ethical idea of *generosity toward becoming* resonates, draws sustenance.

What might such an ontological figure look like? Let me draw here again on the later Heidegger’s notions of “*Ereignis*,” the eventing or presencing of

40. “Force of Fantasy,” 121; *GT*, 16.

41. Fraser, “False Antitheses,” 71.

42. “For a Careful Reading,” *Feminist Contentions*, 140; and *ES*, 161.

being, and "*Gestell*," that disposition toward being which he finds to be so prevalent in the modern West. *Gestell* refers to a disposition within which being is taken as stuff to be grasped, mastered and used by a disengaged subject. Heidegger wants to encourage a relaxation of this posture of grasping. One cultivates an attitude more receptive to the sheer "event" of the presencing or "worlding" of being: its continual becoming in a profuse, unmanageable manifold. What I am particularly concerned to highlight in this ontology is the connotation of *giving* that is implied when Heidegger continually speaks here of the "*Es gibt*" of being. This familiar, everyday German phrase is typically translated as "there is" or "there are," as in: "There is a tree in the park." But the verb in this phrase is "*geben*," "to give," and it is to this aspect of the phrase that Heidegger wants to draw attention. The presencing of being, its manifolding, is a "giving" to us.<sup>43</sup>

This sketch of relatively familiar Heideggerian concepts is intended simply to suggest one way in which a kind of generosity might be figured in an ontology that does not depend on the idea of a beneficent god. Of course, such a figure, by itself, does not automatically ground a notion of ethical generosity such as the one Butler affirms. It does, however, throw into relief the character of Butler's world. Hers is a world of pressures, demands, insistences, a world in which one is hard pressed to see any ontological prefiguration of that virtue of generosity upon which her ethical-political hopes so crucially turn. But it is only with the cultivation of such a virtue that Butler's moments of "unexpected innocence" will occur at all.<sup>44</sup>

3. I want to turn now to a problem in Butler that has to do not with the lack of ontological prefiguration of an explicit ethical affirmation, but with a site where both the ontological figure and the ethical sensibility seem misarticulated. In order to get a sense of the significance of this site, let me return to an issue laid aside earlier, Butler's view that identity is best interpreted as nothing more than a site of "insistent rifting."<sup>45</sup>

She is brought to this extreme formulation because anything short of it seems to her to imply necessarily aligning identity with some sort of ontologically secured essence or "home," which in turn functions only to mask power and convention. Her central notion of human being as sheer potentiality straining against the adhesiveness of interpellation is intended to prefigure

43. Heidegger, "Zeit und Sein," in *Zur Sache des Denkens* (Tubingen: Max Niemayer, 1969), 5ff.

44. One might usefully compare Butler's connection of ontology and ethical-political orientation with the better elaborated one of William Connolly in *The Ethos of Pluralization* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1995). See also my "'Critical Responsiveness' and Justice," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 24 (January 1998), 73-81.

45. "Force of Fantasy," 121.

just such a decentered place for identity in ethics and politics. “Proliferation,” struggling free of given terms of identity, is a value that trumps any other.<sup>46</sup> One is, of course, never free of identity formations—of terms not one’s own—but one can learn to bear them lightly, shed them more readily.

As I said earlier, it is difficult not to sympathize here with critics who find that Butler’s ontology prefigures an ethical-political world in which all identity is somehow oppressive. In short, she has no ontological figure that lends the stickiness or adhesiveness of identity anything other than a negative value. This lack ultimately stems, I think, from the problem of providing a satisfactory ontological rendering of finitude.

Human being, for Butler, is becoming, potentiality, proliferation, the movement of desire to desire. Curiously, the fact that this becoming *ceases* at some point is of no constitutive concern. In this forgetting, Butler makes us into proliferation creatures of infinite duration. We reiterate without end. For creatures such as this, identity categories are at best grist for further proliferation.

Butler mentions life and death in her discussion of the “array of ‘materialities’ that pertain to the body, that which is signified by the domains of biology, anatomy, physiology, hormonal and chemical composition, illness, age, weight, metabolism, life and death.” These ‘materialities’ constitute a “persistent” force on human consciousness, but they are not fully identifiable, ontologically, prior to the various “interpretive matrices” through which we always encounter them.<sup>47</sup> In general, there is nothing implausible about this strong hermeneutical way of proceeding here. What is questionable, however, is how “life and death” are simply arrayed in a list of phenomenal “domains” like our “chemical composition” or “weight.” In weak ontological terms, she has failed to give any distinctive figuration to the existential universal of finitude. What she needs is some rendering comparable to the one she gives language, when she comprehends human being as constituted through “a linguistic bearing” toward one another. This bearing is “something without which [human beings] *could not be said to exist*.”<sup>48</sup> A felicitous weak ontology owes us, for comparable reasons, a comparable figuration of the structure of finitude.

A constitutive part of the stickiness of human beings is being stuck on a journey we never chose; we did not select its starting place and we cannot change the kind of end it will have. This end confronts us necessarily with a gap between the human and the beyond human. Finitude is, to speak like Butler, a distinctive “that which” which demands our interpretive efforts. Were Butler to have given finitude more ontological force in her account, then it would have been less easy for her to reduce identity to the status of a site

46. *GT*, x, 93.

47. *BTM*, 66-67.

48. *ES*, 30, emphasis added.

for ceaseless rifting. For her, identity formations are clothes to be shed according to the purposes at hand. But if we think of the structure of finitude as a journey of limited duration, then the clothes we wear are not simply a subset of all potential attire. The crux of things here is that even the new identities I struggle into become part of that set of the only ones I will ever wear.<sup>49</sup> Identity, in its particularity, has, accordingly, a kind of weight for human being that is poorly comprehended when understood only as oppressive. Butler's mistake here is curiously analogous to that of some orthodox liberals who find arguments about the weight of culture to be of marginal significance, because, it is asserted, the "freewheeling" disengaged self can live "in a kaleidoscope of cultures." The changing of one's culture, even when it is not a particularly free choice, is thus to be taken as a relatively costless shift.<sup>50</sup>

An instructive way to highlight the significance of the insight about the weight of identity (whether sexual, familial, cultural, etc.) is to bring it to bear upon Butler's own vision of the ethos of a good political community. She emphasizes, as shown above, the central importance of the difficult and careful work of "cultural translation" across differences of identity. The crucial question to pose here is: How careful will I really be in interpretive encounters, if at heart I take the other's particular identity formations to be just so much congealed potentiality which needs to be loosened up? In a certain sense, I just won't see the point of carefulness in my engagement with the other's identity.<sup>51</sup>

Understanding identity in relation to a vivified sense of finitude can, however, provide just such a point. And yet it does not have to accomplish this at the cost of according that weight the significance of truth; in short, one is not according it the status of one's true essence, one's secure home in a particular identity. For a weak ontology, such a seeking of final security is its own kind of forgetting of finitude. The pleasures of this kind of homecoming induce an inattentiveness to the constitutive gap between the human and the beyond human. Vivifying finitude in everyday life means cultivating a quiet, ongoing resistance to finding one's truth in some identity; but it also means giving place to the constitutive weight of concrete identity.

### III. The Insistent Ambivalence of Loss

I have characterized Butler's ontology as comprised of three modes of insistence; and I have criticized it to a degree for its tendency to thinness. Now I

49. Cf. the related concern of Kathleen Jones, *Compassionate Authority*, 218.

50. The statement about living "in a kaleidoscope of cultures" is from Jeremy Waldron. He is quoted and criticized by Will Kymlicka in *Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 84-85.

51. "For a Careful Reading," *Feminist Contentions*, 140; and *Boston Review* (1995).

want to allow this picture to become somewhat thicker by turning to a topic whose ontological implications are more readily apparent when taken up against the background of my preceding discussion.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler engages the issue of melancholia. This is part of her broader exploration of how Foucauldian social theory should understand psychic life. In what follows, I first want to elucidate Butler's notion of melancholia with an eye to drawing out its ontological dimensions (1). Then I consider what difference this makes in relation to the enrichment of her overall ontology, both in terms of its prefiguration of ethical-political insight and its figuration of finitude (2).

1. In a 1917 essay, Freud developed an account of the psychological condition of "melancholia" through a contrast with "mourning" (*Trauer*).<sup>52</sup> Both, he explained, were reactions to the trauma of the loss of an object of love or desire. Mourning is, in short, the healthy resolution of this situation; the person comes to accept the loss and go on with his/her life. Melancholia, on the contrary, is Freud's description of a syndrome of symptoms associated with a failure to accept the loss. Instead of giving up the object, the person internalizes it in such a way that the ego becomes a substitute for that object. And yet, since the ego is ultimately an unsatisfying substitute, it becomes not just the site of love but also of hate and aggression. Above all, it is this "ambivalence that distinguishes melancholia."<sup>53</sup>

Butler pushes Freud's reflections in a number of distinctive directions. First, the trajectory of desire that is melancholia is not explainable as one possible scenario within the preexisting internal psychic space of ego and super-ego. Rather, the loss that engenders melancholia is actually itself constitutive of that topography and its entities. There is no ego prior to loss and the ambivalent reaction to it that is melancholia: "there can be no ego without melancholia." Moreover, if melancholia plays such a role, then it is not something like an unhealthy variant of mourning, but rather something that "makes mourning possible."<sup>54</sup>

Accordingly, melancholia takes on a peculiar status: "Melancholia does not name a psychic process that might be recounted through an adequate explanatory scheme." Instead, it "returns us to the figure of the 'turn' as a founding trope." In effect, rather than a psycho-logic that describes the possible economy of certain psychic entities, Butler is offering further elaboration of her onto-logic. It is, I think, best described as another dimension of that onto-logic of turning that I have already explicated. The "melancholic turn" refers specif-

52. Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology* (New York: Collier, 1963), 164-79.

53. *PLP*, 169, 187.

54. *PLP*, 170-71, 174, 178.

ically to the redirection of attachment from the object to that which is constituted by this redirected force of desire: “the psychic topography of super-ego/ego” which is traversed by ambivalence. The significance of Butler’s emphasis on this turn is that it installs an “ambivalent reaction to loss” as a constituent of human being in a way that is not reducible to analysis in terms of any of the other three ontological insistences that I distinguished earlier.<sup>55</sup> In short, with this notion of the force of loss and the ambivalence it necessarily engenders, Butler delineates a fourth mode of constitutive insistence.

Although the ambivalence of loss is a distinctive insistence, its manifestation is always intertwined with the other three. Obviously that which one loses may be intimately related to that which one acquires through the attachments engendered by interpellation. This connection is brought out clearly in the instance of melancholia to which Butler directs the most attention: “gender melancholy.” In her interpretation, the interpellated “accomplishment of heterosexual ‘being’” takes place through a primary “foreclosure of homosexuality”: the loss of the possibility of the same sex as an object of desire. But this loss, constitutive yet disavowed, has a continuing effect, because it marks “the limit to the subject’s sense of *pouvoir*, its sense of what it can accomplish and, in that sense, its power.” The subjectivity that is constituted by interpellation is thus also “haunted by an inassimilable remainder,” which emerges as gender melancholy.<sup>56</sup>

A heterosexual society is thus characterized by a “constitutive melancholy.” As a result, the homosexual signifies for the heterosexual “an object which, if loved, would spell destruction.” This pervasive threat of dissolution of self, when combined with the aggressiveness spawned by the melancholic reaction, creates a potent mix in terms of social power. For the aggressiveness that is initially self-directed in the symptoms of heightened self-beratement of conscience can be turned outward as well. The interpellative power of naming is thereby redoubled in force, for it can effectively enact a political “delineation of the field of . . . objects . . . marked for death.”<sup>57</sup>

Melancholia thus appears to signify another sort of deep vulnerability to power. But just as with the stubborn attachment portrayed earlier, here as well there is some possibility of beginning to turn slightly, but significantly, differently. Just as the detachability of desire gives us the possibility of critical subjectivity in general, so in this dimension it opens the possibility of working melancholy into mourning. Given the constitutive character Butler assigns to loss and ambivalence, this possibility is not to be imagined as the total transcendence of the effects of melancholy, either by the individual or society. Accordingly, what Butler means here is merely the idea of turning, working,

55. *PLP*, 168, 174.

56. *PLP*, 23, 29, 162.

57. *PLP*, 23, 27. Butler also analyzes the issue of “gay melancholy,” 147-50.

cultivating oneself in a different direction. With regard to the problem of gender melancholy, this would mean, for example, contesting public discourse that marks gays and lesbians as objects that are in essence ungrievable and whose deaths from AIDS are thus in some sense relatively acceptable to the dominant heterosexual population. Avowing loss here would mean taking seriously “the task of finding a public occasion and language in which to grieve this seemingly endless number of deaths.”<sup>58</sup>

2. Let’s consider more closely the underlying claims that animate this line of thought. Butler’s assertions are quite strong. In the case of sexuality, the constitutive loss of the same sex as an object of desire manifests itself in the dominant heterosexual population as a “pervasive melancholy.” Butler would even suggest that ours is “a culture of gender melancholy,” exhibiting both aggression toward gays and lesbians and an incapacity to grieve the immense loss of life from AIDS.<sup>59</sup>

This sort of wholesale projection of individual pathology onto the level of cultural character typically tends to raise as many questions as it answers. For example, one might ask here: Does Butler’s claim really extend equally to all heterosexual societies throughout history and across cultures? Although such questions are amply warranted here, pushing them too hard would obscure a key point. Butler freely admits that her cultural claims are somewhat “hyperbolic.” In this sense, her characterization of a “melancholic” society is intended to have an effect analogous to Foucault’s characterization of a “disciplinary” one; that is, its primary intention is to jolt us in specific ways and reorient our attention. In this case the jolt is to involve how we think about gender and political life, more specifically the patterns according to which identity, sexual desire, repudiation and aggression circulate. Understood in this fashion, Butler’s assertions about our melancholic society sound less implausible. She is not seeking the psychoanalytic truth of our culture, but rather a “dramatic language” for attending very differently to undeniably significant political problems.<sup>60</sup>

It is important at this point not to let this hyperbolic gesture in regard to gender melancholy engulf the entire sense of Butler’s claims about loss and ambivalence. She is thematizing a constitutive insistence of human being that is not limited in scope to issues of sexuality and culture. Seen in this light, the reflections on ambivalence and loss start to come into focus as precisely the sort of figuration of finitude that I earlier argued was lacking.

My complaint about finitude was couched in terms of Butler’s reading of identity as a kind of infinite potentiality, definable merely as a site of “insis-

58. *PLP*, 138.

59. *PLP*, 138, 140.

60. *PLP*, 149-150.

tent rifting.” The emphasis on melancholy, however, gives identity an undeniable quality of stickiness. Loss and the ambivalence it entails are not aspects of identity one can simply shed. They set parameters for who I can be and what shape my “performativity” can take. “There is no break with the *constitutive historicity of loss* to which melancholy attests.”<sup>61</sup> With this shift in her thinking, Butler begins to provide some of that specific weight or density for identity that had been missing, and whose lack has helped encourage the criticism that all identity is, in her eyes, “oppressive.”

Identity, in this new formulation, is no more inherently “oppressive” than gravity. As a result, Butler’s ontology will not prefigure a radicalism that is incapable of distinguishing between the constitutive density of identity and further, more questionable, claims about truth in identity. This point is crucial in how one engages the ‘other’ ethically and politically. Without a figuration of this density, an ethos of generosity will tend to slip subtly and too quickly into frustration, impatience and a preemptively strategic attitude.

The connection between melancholy and mourning also plays a crucial role in the more adequate figuration of finitude. When loss and ambivalence are constitutive of human being in the way Butler suggests, then the idea of a different turning becomes intrinsically intertwined both with continually working on aggression and mourning loss.

Mourning accordingly gains a sense that is not restricted to an attitude taken up on the occasion of a specific loss. It can now be understood as a more complex, persisting disposition, within which one attends more consciously to the kind of being one is. Loss is constitutive of us; and our ethos of everyday life can be infused with a disposition that attends to that reality, or with one that ignores it. The disengaged self is an entity that lives in such blissful ignorance. It is autonomous, sovereign, always almost infinite in its possibilities. It is “a subject who might already be something without its loses.” But if loss and its trace are always constitutive, then to accept that picture of “autonomy . . . is to forget that trace.” The specific sense that Butler wants mourning to draw from her new ontological source is of a remembering, an avowal of loss, of “unlived possibility.”<sup>62</sup> Such an avowal, I would suggest, becomes a crucial way in which a being for whom loss is constitutive disposes itself to its finitude.

By itself, this approach to mourning might seem to prefigure an ethos of overly passive humility. But here one begins to see the value of engaging the topic of finitude initially through melancholia. When the issue is not only one

61. *PLP*, 194, emphasis added. Cf. Adam Phillips, “Keep it Moving: Commentary on Judith Butler’s ‘Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification.’” Commending the new direction in Butler, he writes: “If the idea of performance frees identity into states of . . . possibility, mourning refers those same identities back to . . . parameters that seemingly thwart our options;” *PLP*, 156.

62. *PLP*, 139, 195-96.

of loss, but also of ambivalence, there remains the question of aggression. Turning differently thus must involve not only mourning but also a sort of work on the aggression and resentment entailed by loss. This counter-aggressiveness can be exerted in two alternative, related directions. First, it can be turned upon the excessive self-beratements of conscience; that is, against conscience that is “heightened” by an aggressive moral rigorism. And, secondly, it can be turned upon political life insofar as it enlists such rigorism in its marking out of some social subjects as officially ungrievable or “marked for death.”<sup>63</sup>

Thus, the ontological thematization of ambivalent loss gives Butler a way of prefiguring an activist, contestatory ethos of self-cultivation and political commitment. Within such a world, a recourse to passive humility alone fails to engage adequately the terms of one’s human predicament. Simple humility, in hoping to finesse aggressiveness, will always run the danger of quietly intensifying its righteousness with an unconsciously accumulating reservoir of aggressiveness. The notion of the “melancholic turn” of human being thus also preserves in a modified form the Nietzschean warning about some of the implicit dangers in Christianity.

This portrait of Butler as a weak ontologist may seem forced at points. Clearly her negative gestures against modes of strong ontology are more explicitly elaborated than her affirmative shaping of something different. Nevertheless, such shaping is undoubtedly taking place. The real issue then is whether Butler wishes to align her efforts with the imperatives of ontological weakness or with those of ontological thinness. If she chooses the latter, then the development of her work after *Gender Trouble* has to be cast in a somewhat negative light. If thinness is the ideal, then her work will have to appear as a progressive falling away from that ideal, a putting on of weight. If, on the other hand, Butler embraces the imperatives of weakness, her work shows engagement in a salutary process of filling out some necessary dimensions of a felicitous ontology. A clear affirmation of this alternative would also, of course, present her with some substantial challenges. For example, in regard to what I have identified as her sources of the self (the four insistences that constitute the “turning”), Butler has been less than a model of clarity. If she were to foreground them more consciously, would the composite portrait be compelling? Further, as I tried to show earlier, her strong ethical affirmations of generosity and new forms of politics have a tendency at present to float free from her ontological commitments. Can she articulate persuasive ontological figures that overcome this shortcoming? My intention in the present context is not to propose answers, but rather simply to pose these questions as ones that become pressing, once Butler’s project is interpreted as poised between the alternatives of weak and thin ontology.

63. *PLP*, 183-94.

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<sup>3</sup> **Weak Ontology and Liberal Political Reflection**

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