

**JUDITH BUTLER AND THE QUESTION OF BEING: OUTLINE FOR AN
EK-STATIC ONTOLOGY**

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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

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I, Sanmit Chatterjee, registered on 26.09.2016, do hereby declare that this thesis entitled "Judith Butler and the Question of Being: Outline for an Ek-static Ontology" contains literature survey and original research work done by the undersigned candidate as part of Doctoral studies.,
All information in this thesis has been obtained and presented in accordance with existing academic rules and ethical conduct. I declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referred all materials and results that are not original to this work. I also declare that I have checked this thesis as per the "Policy on Anti Plagiarism, Jadavpur University, 2019", and the level of similarity as checked by iThenticate software is 8%.

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Introduction

Ek-static ontology – placing these two words next to each other forms an oxymoron, inciting trouble at the heart of its meaning. Does the qualifier “ek-static” function as an additive to ontology? Or does it allude to a rupture within the semantic topos of ontology itself? The habitual way of reading generally presupposes a simple motion within a narrative where a predicate is assumed to either expand or disprove a proposition. Whether it functions approvingly or in a negating manner, in both cases, the task of a predicate is to clarify the meaning of a preceding proposition. However, this framework, where propositions and predicates convey preexistent meaning, grants meaning a self-referential status, implying its existence at the origin of any act of communication. But despite being the origin of communication, meaning itself remains independent of it. Within such a scenario, interpretation entails deciphering communication to reach the plane of self-referential meaning, considered a domain of undifferentiated, pure presence.

Reading this in the context of Saussurian linguistics (Saussure, 2011), propositions/predications become synonymous with the signifier and meanings with the signified. Put simply, a signifier refers to something other than itself, and its role is purely referential, devoid of any ontological claim. On the other hand, signified is the concept or meaning that signifiers refer to. Whereas the signifier depends on the signified, the signified itself doesn’t depend on anything other than itself. It cannot be deciphered or decoded on any meta-level, it exists purely in and as itself. In this sense, it’s a self-sufficient, self-present domain of absolute interiority that elevates it to the status of what Derrida calls the “transcendental signified” (Derrida, 1982b, p.19). Several poststructuralist thinkers, including Judith Butler,¹ have questioned this kind of theoretical premise that operates based on a notion of full presence. This is something we will explore throughout this work, but in order to provide an introduction to the primary thesis, I would provisionally remain within the metaphysical understanding of language governed by the duality of proposition/meaning, or signifier/signified, and within this provisional understanding the bringing

¹ In 2020, Butler claimed that their preferred pronoun is *they/them/their*. Hence, in this dissertation, I have used this set of pronouns for Butler. However, as critical literature on Butler uses *she/her* to refer to them, I have kept feminine pronoun unaltered while quoting from these sources.

together of these two words – ek-stasis and ontology – proves anachronic since instead of a continuation or clarificatory negation, the qualifier “ek-static” conveys something completely opposite to what ontology stands for.

Ontology, putting it briefly, means the “doctrine of being” (Heidegger, 1999, p.1). But what is the doctrine of Being? Is it just a study of the entities or beings we see around us? Is being a mere ontic category? In his magnum opus titled *Metaphysics* (Aristotle, 2016), Aristotle establishes that the study of being does not merely interrogate this or that particular being. Rather, the doctrine of being, if we borrow Heidegger’s words, consists of a systematic study of being qua being. As Aristotle puts it, while there have been numerous interrogations into this or that particular being, the question remains as to what it means to *be* (Aristotle, 2016, p.104). Thus, the doctrine of being must address being-qua-being instead of interrogating being in the ontic sense. (Aristotle, 2016, p.48)

Since its inceptual moment, philosophy in the West has considered being-qua-being in terms of what Greek philosophers called *ousia*. Even though being is often offered as a simple English translation of the Greek word *ousia*, an analysis of the doctrine of being establishes that *ousia* has two primary aspects – constancy and presence. Combining these two aspects, being or *ousia* stands for constant presence. It means that it exists to the extent that it *is*, and its existence is pure in the sense that it is always present to itself, it is always self-referential. Thus, the being of beings would consist of that which exists beyond and before all contingencies. This existence can be empirical or theoretically presupposed, but whenever this conceptualization of being is invoked, it would imply the existence of a constant, self-present, self-sufficient, self-referential presence.

This notion of being has been foundational to Western philosophy and operated through various manifestations such as “eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth” (Derrida, 2001, p.353). Thus, the idea of a constantly present, unified, undifferentiated presence or being has been at the origin of the history of philosophy in the West, and it became more pronounced in post-enlightenment philosophy, and crafted an ethos of socio-political-ethical-philosophical thought. For instance, we can randomly look at two philosophical systems – marxism and feminism. If to Marx the worker remained at the heart of the project of humanity’s emancipation, then the arena of feminist theory operated, at least till the late 70’s, by placing the

self-referential category of woman at the centre. In both cases, the idea of a unified, undifferentiated, self-referential essence remained at the core of these categories. Despite all the contingencies, they implied the idea of some underlying elemental element, a sort of Aristotelian *hypokeimenon* that remained present at all times, unaltered and unaffected. In the context of feminist theory, one can think of Gayle Rubin's work as emblematic of this, which presupposed the presence of material bodies unmarked by sex/gender system to be the irreducible ground for the emancipatory politics of feminism (Rubin, 1975). Within feminist theory, in a similar vein, the category of matter – operating under various registers – functioned as the irreducible, self-referential, self-sufficient, constant presence. All such notions and operations of being operated within the ambit of classical ontology where being is determined as presence. Being as presence signifies something foundational, something that we cannot go beyond, an origin, a centre. It is something that arrests *play*, erases difference, subordinates them to “the full presence summed up in the logos”, and these are the “gestures required by an onto-theology determining the archeological and eschatological meaning of being as presence, as *parousia*, as life without difference” (Derrida, 1998, 71). This is the domain of classical ontology, and Derrida can be argued to be echoing Levinas here who, referring to how philosophy in the West has reduced the other(difference) to the same(presence), called philosophy “ontological” (Levinas, 1969, pp.42-43).

However, this is precisely what ek-stasis is opposed to. It implies displacement, a being-beside-itself, a being-out-of-its-place, a being in *différance*. If ontology signifies the study of being as constant presence, then ek-stasis, which denies constant presence, cannot be coupled with it. Therefore, placing the two words together opens the way for conceiving of being in an unconventional manner. The doctrine of being, when conceived through ek-stasis, allows us to think of it in terms of displacement instead of constant presence. It shows how originary displacement inaugurates being and how being as such *figures*² within this act of displacement. Thus, the interrogation into the question of being always exceeds and spills over its contours, and it is the relation to the outside that becomes formative of being. Such an understanding radically dislocates the classical conception of the doctrine of being, and places it within the framework of a different conceptualization where being figures in terms of its originary and constitutive relation to

² This implies that any notion of being is nothing but a figuration.

the outside, to the other. And as this dissertation intends to argue, this is precisely how the question of being emerges in Judith Butler's engagement with continental philosophy and critical theory.

Engaging with various manifestations of being-as constant-presence such as matter, gender, the body, the subject, and the human, Butler conceives being beyond the determination of presence and understands it through its constitutive relationality with what exceeds it. For Butler, it is not that being implies a prior presence and then finds itself in a relation with the other, with the outside. Rather, to Butler, ontological claims are produced through a primary relation to the outside/alterity. Thus, the outside or the other is not contingent but essential to being as such. Being, in this sense, is not a self-sufficient, self-referential domain of pure presence but always already exceeds itself and assumes its being in and through this act of excess. Thus, Butler unfolds how the various manifestations of being (the body, the subject, and other notions of being-as-presence) is always already dispossessed. The idea of being as being outside itself displaces the idea of atomistic, metaphysical, self-referential ontological framework. Being is devoid of ontological claim in this general sense.

Butler's interest in ontological questions can be traced back to their earliest works (Butler, 1995, 2012a). Even though their engagement with ontology was never explicit as such, a close reading of their work can showcase how Butler's work always worked within the ambit of ontological inquiry. And this thread continues and becomes even more prominent in their later works (Butler). The aim of the present work is to explore this ontological thread in Butler's work and understand how the question of being figures in their oeuvre.

As this treatise aspire to argue, Butler's work radically alters the traditional essentialist ontology and reinvents it as ek-static, where being is understood to be emerging in and through originary relation with the other, with the outside. These relations do not figure within the scene of being but constitute being as such to the extent that there can be no being prior to this relation. Thus, relation precedes being. In this sense, following a certain new materialist reading, it can be conceded that the relationality Butler's work espouses is a type of *intra-relation* where the relates do not precede the relation but emerge within the phenomenon of the relation itself.³ Thus, being

³ See Barad, 2007.

cannot be said to have a proper, fully present, topos; rather, this proper it is produced in and through its relation with the what exceeds it. Therefore, any mention of being prior to this needs to be considered a pure figuration without any ontological claim.

Butler's work over the years has engaged with various manifestations of being, such as sex, gender, matter, psyche, life, and the human. However, Butler's inquiry shows that these categories does not have an essentialist ontological claim. For instance, interrogating sex, gender, and the material body, Butler shows how instead of being irreducible, these categories are anything but self-referential and are produced, within a discursive regime, through iterative interpellations. On the question of the human subject, Butler's work unfolds how the mechanism of subjectivation to hegemonic norms and constitutive relation to the other inaugurates the subject into being, hollowing out any claim of sovereignty or essentialism. The current work focuses on this particular aspect of Butler's work. By interrogating their reading of various philosophers and critical thinkers on the question of sex, gender, psyche, and the human, it would explore how these categories were theorized within the classical ontological framework determined in terms of presence, and how Butler's work enacts an ontological transvaluation of these categories which render them – these manifestations of being as presence – ek-static.

To achieve this goal, this dissertation would proceed in an organized manner. Even though a separate section will provide a synopsis of the chapters, here I am giving a brief outline of the trajectory of this work. The first chapter deals with two concepts – namely, ontology and ek-stasis. First, it shows how ontology in the Western philosophical tradition has been determined in terms of self-referential pure presence. From there, it goes on to chart a trajectory of the concept of ecstasy/ek-stasis and speculates on the possibility of theorizing being as ontologically ek-static, operating and beyond the determination of presence. To understand the recent resurgence of ontology and situate Butler's work broadly within this space, the second chapter addresses the recent material turn/ontological turn in continental theory. This becomes crucial for understanding Butler's work because certain proponents of new materialism have often advanced the claim that Butler's expositions dwell on the epistemic domain at the cost of the ontological, and subscribes to a dualist, classical ontology (Kirby, 2011). Thus, to understand the ontological frame of Butler's work, it is imperative that we understand the theoretical premise of one of their most vocal set of interlocutors, and this is what the third chapter attempts to do. The third chapter

engages in a polemic with Vicky Kirby's criticism of Judith Butler's theory of materiality in order to show how a misinterpretation of Butler's work leads them to situate Butler within the traditional schema of constructionism, and consequently, how it fails to understand the ontological import of Butler's reformulation of the concept of matter. The fourth and fifth chapters closely follow Butler's reading of Freud, Lacan, Levinas, and Hegel to elaborate how their reading of these philosophers understands being in an ek-static manner and produces an ontology beyond the determination of presence.

Two methodological disclaimers before we proceed to the next section. First, Butler's latest publication titled *What is This World* (2022) reached my hands after finishing the final draft of my dissertation. Considering that at this stage any meaningful engagement with this work would be impossible, I had to make the decision to postpone my engagement with this work for some later stage of my association with Butler's thought. Second, over the years, Butler's work has invoked both critical engagement and fierce criticism. Hence, the body of work on Butler is definitely vast. But as I establish in the next section, almost none of these works explore Butler's ontology the way this work aspires to. Considering this, the main chapters of my reading of Butler's text, barring their new materialist interlocutors, do not directly refer to these works that Butler's oeuvre has inspired in the last four decades. But to account for this absence and to show how this work differs in tone and spirit from them, the next section provides a brief account of their limitation in the context of reading Butler in ontological terms.

Literature Review

Judith Butler's oeuvre is immensely rich in terms of its theoretical ambition and its seamless transgression of disciplinary divides. Their body of work spans gender and sexuality studies, ethical and moral philosophy, critical theory, and literature. Given their rich engagement with a plethora of philosophers and their prolific theoretical contribution, their work has exercised immense influence in various academic fields and produced a huge body of literature. These works are diverse in terms

of their field of emergence and theoretical ambition.⁴ However, among them, only a few engage with the question of ontology in Butler's work, and we will focus on them in this section.

Birgit Schippers' engagement with Judith Butler, while aware of the multidisciplinary of their work, comes from the impetus to understand whether it is possible to approach Butler as a thinker of political philosophy (Schippers, 2014, p.3). Schippers centers her attention primarily on the politico-philosophical facets of Butler's work. Therefore, as expected, Schippers' reading spans Butler's oeuvre⁵ in a focused manner to bring out its political implication, and Butler's figurations of the subject as ek-static and relational hold the primary focus here. The ontological implications of Butler's theorization figure recurrently throughout Schippers' exposition. However, the question of ontology is not central to her argument but emerges as constitutive of and resulting from Schippers' attempt to build a political theory from Butler's work. As mentioned above, given the current treatise is interested in understanding Butler's ontological framework, we will only focus on Schipper's engagement with Butler's ontology.

As Schippers correctly notes, while Butler's earlier works focused mostly on the theme of sex, gender, and the body and operated primarily on the register of the subject, their later works mark a distinct "terminological and semantic shift" in tone. They address global politics, the register of the subject is substituted by the human (Schippers, 2014, p.39), and the structure of its being is approached through relationality, ek-stasis, and dispossession. Thus, their later writings showcase an explicit turn towards ontology (Schippers, 2014, p.3), toward the question of being, toward building an understanding of what it means to *be*.

Being, Schippers correctly observes, is an "unruly" category for Butler, for it is anything but stable and static. Rather, it is "always comported towards the future and thus towards new possibilities of being" (Schippers, 2014, p.18), and its presence becomes possible through its connection to alterity. It is here that the concept of ek-stasis becomes functional. Ek-stasis is

⁴ Nayak & Kehiley (2006), Segal (2008) McNay (1999), Vileghe (2010), Mills (2000), Duggan (1998), Braunmühl (2012), Shams (2020), Barnett (2017), Loizidou (2007, 2008) Johnston (2001), Joy et al. (2015), Rae (2020), Stoetzler (2005), Chadderton (2013), Feola (2014), Samuels (2002), White (1999, 2000), Kirby (2006, 2017), Frost (2014), Jagger (2008), Schippers (2014), Lloyd (2007, 2015), Chambers & Carver (2008a, 2008b), Vasterling (1999), Allen (2006), Brady & Schirato (2011), Charpentier (2019), Cavarero & Tordi (2011), Zaharijević (2019), Diprose (2013)

⁵ While it is true that Schippers draws mainly from Butler's post 9/11 writings, her reading exceeds these strict temporal limits as the construal of her theoretical project often refers to Butler's early writings as well. In this sense, despite Schippers' explicit claim, I maintain that Schippers' monograph (2014) takes into account Butler's entire body of work.

implicated in and implicates two other concepts - relationality and dispossession. Ek-stasis signifies that being is always related to an other, and as this relationality is constitutive of being. These three interlinked concepts thus become the primary concepts in Butler's ontological inquiry.

Like many other interlocutors, Schippers connects Butler introduction of ek-stasis to the existential tradition and the works of Hegel. However, despite these links, Schippers notes, ek-stasis in Butler's work is in a certain way related to Spinoza's notion of conatus. Butler's ek-static ontology is premised on the understanding that the will to live and persist in its own being is always constitutively connected to alterity. Butler derives this from Spinoza's notion of conatus. In their essay *The Desire to Live: Spinoza's Ethics under Pressure* (Butler, 2015c), Butler, following Spinoza, claims that the desire to sustain oneself in its own being is the foundation of all desire. However, instead of remaining within a liberal political notion of being that a superficial reading of Spinoza espouses, Butler pushes desire into a domain that allows for thinking about "possibilities for social ethics" (Butler, as cited in Schippers, 2014, p.20). And within this sociality, being signifies responsibility – understood in the Levinasian manner - toward the other, emerging from the recognition that without the other, being cannot be. Thus, within such an understanding, being figures as relational and dispossessed of autonomy from the inceptual moment, ushering us into thinking ontology in terms of ek-stasis. Schippers presents a succinct elaboration of the concept of ek-stasis -

As Butler argues, although desire presupposes an 'I', this 'I' is dependent upon others who facilitate the 'I's' desire in the first place. Thus, if desire, and with it, life, depend upon sociality, then desire can only ever occur under conditions of sociality and plurality, producing a 'deconstitution of singularity' (126) that comports the 'I' beyond itself...I am comported towards the other, possibly against my wishes. In fact, such comportment constitutes the 'I', it deconstitutes singularity and disorientates the subject. (Schippers, 2014, pp.20-21)

Since the subject, the human is always constitutively dispossessed in its comportment toward the other, this ontology of ek-stasis proves consequential for ethics. Ethics here figures not

as a predefined set of moral codes but as responsibility toward the other.⁶ Considering this aspect, Schippers observes that Butler's ontology is thoroughly social in that it figures being within a constitutive relational matrix. Reading Butler's formulation and deployment of the concepts like livability, grievability, recognition, recognizability, precarity, and vulnerability through the lens of primary sociality, Schippers argues that for Butler, ontology is inseparable from the social and the political. Or, to be more precise, ontology emerges within the socio-political, a fact that lends ethical imperatives to Butler's ontology.

Reading Butler in this manner, Schippers is aware that to Butler, the I, or being, never figures as a foundational term in Butler's work. Positing herself against interpretations such as those advanced by Julian Reid (2011) or Janell Watson (2012) which tend to situate Butler within the plane of liberal philosophy, Schippers articulates how, contra Reid and Watson, the notion of ek-stasis, primary vulnerability, and precarity does not emerge from or imply a Hobbesian political framework. Rather, Butler's exposition of the subject as constitutively dispossessed and ek-static stands in sharp opposition to the concept of "atomistic individuality" that comes from a liberal philosophical position.

Thus, in a nutshell, Butler's ontology, as Schippers investigates it, is defined through relation to what lies outside of one's self. Building on this, Schippers moves towards arguing how the questions concerning the ethical emerge from Butler's ontology. But as our interrogation is focused on ontology, we will refrain from analyzing Schippers' further engagement with Butler's ethical frame.

Moya Lloyd's monograph on Judith Butler (Lloyd, 2007) primarily focuses on three aspects – first, it considers Butler's own arguments on various issues such as sex and gender, psychoanalysis and gendered/sexuated subjectivity, livability and recognition etc., that their body of work tackled over the years; second, it deals with the responses that Butler's theory has invoked within various quarters of feminist theory; third, and this aspect resonates with Schippers' intention, it interrogates the political implications of Butler's theorization. Given that Lloyd's

⁶ As Schippers writes – "Ontology, in other words, is social; what's more, it is implicated in a structure of ethical relationality that comprises both obligation and dependency. Thus, Butler's increasing explicit emphasis on questions of being is mirrored in her concern for questions of being responsible, and it is captured in her turn towards ethics." (Schippers, 2014, p.30)

focus is on these three aspects, it is self-evident that her monograph would not interrogate the ontological implications of Butler's work as such. But given that ontology is intricately linked to all the aspects that Lloyd intended to explore, it also finds some articulation in Lloyd's monograph.

What is Ontology? In a generalized manner, Lloyd maintains that ontology "refers to the study of being" (Lloyd, 2007, p.69). Addressing what ontology has been about in the history of Western philosophical tradition, Lloyd writes – "Traditionally, therefore, it has addressed itself to questions about the nature of reality – whether, for instance, an objective world exists" (Lloyd, 2007, p.69). But what does the interrogation of the nature of reality consist of? What is real? What is reality? What does it mean to engage with reality? What is the "objective world" that Lloyd talks about? How does the Western philosophical tradition understand objectivity and objective reality? Lloyd does not delve into inquiring these questions. Rather, ontology appears in her work to be about the general acceptance of a positive reality. Following her arguments, Lloyd states that in recent times, the political has seeped into the question of the ontological (Lloyd, 2007, p.69). Following Stephen White, Lloyd further concedes that despite the claims made within the domain of classical philosophy, ontology needs to be "historicized" (Lloyd, 2007, p. 69). Thus, Lloyd writes that according to Butler's formulation, ontology needs to be conceived of as "political, locked into power relations that order 'reality'", and when approached thus, it becomes "inherently contestable" (Lloyd, 2007, p. 69). In alignment with White, Lloyd contends that one of the categories that has been subjected to ontological inquiry in this manner in Butler's work is the subject, and places Butler's configuration of the subject within this ambit. As Lloyd notes referring to Butler's interrogation of gendered subjectivity, the gendered subject in Butler's work can be understood to be functioning in this manner. Much like Schippers, Lloyd notes that following Foucault, Butler understands ontology to be political. However, she maintains that the figuration of language in Butler's oeuvre doesn't translate into linguistic idealism which translates into the claim that the "body is linguistically constructed" (Lloyd, 2007, p.70). Rather, as Lloyd observes, Butler's emphasis on the social-political character of ontology actually makes an ontological claim "about how we know the world" (Lloyd, 2007, p.70). But this ontological claim, nonetheless, has ontological value. Butler, as Lloyd understands, argues that it is never really possible to understand being as such since our understanding of it is always already mediated by language. This, however, implies an operative dualism in Butler's works where on the one hand

there is the material being, and on the other hand, there is the domain of language/culture that represents this objectively real material being in a certain manner. In this sense, as I understand it, for Lloyd, the ontological figures *through* the epistemological in Butler's work. As Lloyd puts it – "She is making an epistemological claim (about how we know the world) but one that, nonetheless, has bearing on her understanding of ontology." (Lloyd, 2007, p. 74).

In a gesture similar to both Lloyd and Schippers, Samuel Chambers and Terrell Carver in their monograph on Butler, associate Butler's ontology with ethics. They argue that Butler's ontology is derived from their ethical paradigm that understands the ontological structure of human existence as a relation to the other, an argument which to Chambers and Carver appear to be analogous to Heidegger's concept of being as being-in-the-world. However, it needs to be noted that even though they refer to Butler's post-9/11 works to chart out Butler's ontological framework, they also argue that the onto-ethical turn in Butler is, in reality, not a turn as such since both the ontological and ethical explicitly figured in their pre "ethical turn" writings as well (Chamber & Carver, 2008a, p.94-95).

Chambers and Carver observe that Butler's theorization always posits itself beyond the traditional approaches to ethics premised on atomistic individuality.

Traditional ethical philosophy, as Butler claims, always implied a general ontological scheme which based itself on a "unified subject". Therefore, within this tradition, subject becomes a metaphysical, ontological place, functioning as a precondition for moral contemplation or action. This ontological presupposition is repeatedly challenged in Butler's work as it attempts to theorize being as a constitutive, primordial relationality to the other. Thus, the subject is forever placed outside itself, and its primary relationality becomes the axis on which moral contemplation or action can take place. In this sense, Butler's "political ontology" proffers an active critique of "sovereign agency" (Chambers & Carver, 2008, p.94), and it is in this that the ontological charge of Butler's work lies.

Chamber and Carver begin by focusing on Butler's emphasis on the impossibility of giving an account of oneself. Giving an account entails the prior presence of an addressee, the necessity of taking a subject position governed by a discursive regime, and the subscription to a set of norms and linguistic devices. Any act of giving a comprehensive account must take these into account, but this is a task whose ultimate completion remains beyond the subject of locution, and by

engaging with Foucault, Laplanche, and Levinas Butler shows that one can never exhaustively fathom one's relation to alterity that is formative of the self. Also, if one is to give an account of oneself within language, then that would function as another axis of forfeiting one's mastery over oneself (Chambers & Carver, 2008, p.100). As the language through which one articulates oneself precedes the self, giving an account of oneself implies stepping outside of and depending on something other than oneself. Thus, notes Chambers and Carver, Butler's formulation situates a primary dependency at the heart of the human condition, and it is here that the "language of ontology" starts to emerge explicitly. Emphasizing on one of Butler's later works (Butler, 2005), they write –

The argument of the book finally gets underway when Butler turns to a reading of Foucault's own 'turn' to ethics. Butler concludes her reading with a maxim in Greek and French: there is no poesis without assujettissement'. Butler translates for us: 'there is no making oneself outside of a mode of subjectivation' (butler 2005: 17). This contention implies an ontological account, since it suggests a fundamental relation between the possibility of human agency, on the one hand, and a certain understanding of the human condition, on the other. (Chambers & Carver, 2008, p.103)

Thus, the relation with the other, which is constitutive of the human, becomes the building block of Butler's ontology. Since this relationality is prior to both the I and the other, the rhetoric of dependency proves insufficient. Because, strictly speaking, the I or the other does not depend on each other such, because such a notion would grant these terms a prior existence. This, as Chambers and Carver argue, both the 'I' and the other depend on their primary relationality within which they emerge as ontological existents (Chambers and Carver, 2008, p.108). Such a constitution of the subject clearly refutes the metaphysical conception of being determined by a structure of self-referentiality. Thus, Butler's ontological framework, premised on the constitutive role of relationality, moves beyond what Chambers and Carver call "individualised ontology" (Chamber & Carver, 2008, p.107).

Two features emerge from Schipper, Lloyd, and Chamber and Carver's engagement with Butler. First, while it is true that the level of engagement with Butler in terms of ontology varies in

these works, in all of them the question of ontology always figures as a correlate of the ethical and the political. It goes without saying that these authors had different interests in reading Butler. But nonetheless, their engagement with Butler's ontology doesn't delve deeper into exploring their intervention in the field of ontology itself. Some of these works refer to Butler's notion of ek-stasis while the others draw upon their relational framework. But how does a framework of ek-stasis relate to the classical conception of being? How does ek-stasis relate to ontology in Butler's work? Does Butler's emphasis on relationality draw upon the metaphysical notion of relation that presupposes the relates? Does ek-stasis function in an originary manner in Butler's work? How does Butler's ontological framework displace the classical notion of being? Does Butler's engagement with various notions of being keep their ontological claim intact? Or does it subject them to a radical transvaluation? Schippers, Lloyd, Terrel & Carver's engagement with Butler, while immensely rich, does not pursue these avenues of investigation.

In a volume edited by Moya Lloyd (2015), a number of critical theorists engage with various aspects of Butler's work. However, the question of ontology does not figure in this volume in explicit manner. Despite the possibility of exploration into Butler's ontological framework as a number of contributors to this volume engage the question of being without naming it explicitly (of the subject, the body, of the social), a direct discussion on ontology remains generally absent in this volume. For instance, Nathan Gies broaches the social character of ontology in Butler's work (Gies, 2015). Citing Butler, Gies argues that social ontology for Butler signifies the absence of self-sufficiency of existents. Referring to Butler's theorization of how bodies indicate a domain beyond themselves, Gies claims that the material existence of the body depends on its subscription to various norms and structures of intelligibility that exist beyond itself (Gies, 2015, p.21). This dependency, however, is not limited to the domain of the anthropos but extends to inanimate and non-human forms of life (Gies, 2015, p.21). But Gies doesn't pursue this argument further.

In Catherine Mills' piece (2015), the question of ontology emerges in relation to ethics, a path well-trodden by a number of Butler's interlocutors.⁷ Following Butler's argument of how precarity and vulnerability is constitutive of the subject and how one's primary relationality is "epiphenomenal" upon the self itself, Mills concedes the ontological framework provided by

⁷ We have already discussed them in this chapter.

Butler forces us to understand being in terms of sociality – i.e. a constitutive bond with the other that spans from one's moment of inception to their death (Mills, 2015, p.58). Mills also notes the importance of understanding ontology as a normative production that does not entail a field of pre-given entities. However, what these formulations imply for being as such and how they problematize the hegemonic understanding of being as presence is a question that does not find articulation in Mills' essay.

In the same volume, Fiona Jenkins's theorization (Jenkins, 2015) of sensate democracy also broaches the question of ontology in Butler's work which, following Butler, understands it in terms of the socio-political formation of what counts as a living or a grievable life. While Jenkins succeeds to build her argument following Butler, a close interrogation of ontology remains absent here as well.

The modest aim of Anita Brady and Tony Schirato in *Understanding Judith Butler* (2011) is to present the central arguments advanced by Butler over the years. Brady and Schirato divide their monograph into five sections, each addressing particular issues that Butler investigated in their works such as subjectivity, gender, queerness, ethics, and symbolic violence. On the one hand, it carefully presents Butler's arguments on these topics, and simultaneously traces the genealogy of their formulations by situating their exegesis within a critical tradition enriched by the works of Hegel, Nietzsche, Freud, and Lacan among others.

In their discussion, there are multiple points of entry into the discussion of the ontological framework in Butler's oeuvre. As they tackle some of the recurrent central themes in Butler's work, they provide plenty of theoretical space to address the ontological concerns manifest in Butler's work. For Instance, while interrogating how in Butler's work the materiality of the body is placed within the regulatory schemes and how the existence of the material body in its materiality is intricately embedded in those regulatory structures of discourse (Brady & Schirato, 2011, p.10), Brady and Schirato could have proceeded to investigate how such an exposition leads the conception of the body away from the ontological contours of immediacy and self-sufficiency, concepts that govern the classical ontology governed by presence. In another chapter focused on ethics, Brady and Schirato invoke Derrida to understand the operation of language in Butler (Brady & Schirato, 2011, pp.121-122). Language becomes vital in giving an account of oneself, as there can be no account in the first place without language. However, the entry into language in a

way constitutively displaces the account of oneself since language is a domain of alterity that dispossesses the subject of its autonomy. However, a number of questions remain unanswered in this account. What is this mode of this dispossession? How does it relate itself to a structure governed by presence? What is the trajectory and temporality of this dispossession that Butler talks about? Brady and Schirato's account does not enter the domain where addressing these questions could have become possible. Thus, despite various openings, their exposition proves infertile regarding Butler's ontological concerns.

Diana Coole's essay on Judith Butler (Coole, 2008) advances an interesting take. She claims that the break with phenomenology and existentialism that Butler claims to have effectuated in their work was not as final or complete as Butler believed, and that the residue of existential-phenomenological thought can still be witnessed in Butler's early works such as *Gender Trouble* (Butler, 2014). Coole even argues that Butler's notion of ek-stasis derives from an existential framework. The theme on which the question of ek-stasis becomes prominent in Butler's oeuvre consists of two elements that Coole identifies with existential thought – first, the understanding of lived experience as an experience within a “historical and intersubjective lifeworld”; and second, emphasis on a non-dualist ontology where matter and meaning are irreducibly intertwined (Coole, 2008, p.13). Despite Butler's proclaimed indebtedness to poststructuralist thought, Coole argues that these two themes resonate with Butler's postulation that the subject of locution, the “I”, does not preexist language. Focusing on Butler's early essay on phenomenology, Coole shows that Butler was aware that the idea of a prelinguistic subject was already refuted by existentialist thinkers in favour of a social agent who was considered an “object rather than the subject of constitutive acts” (Coole, 2008, p.14).

Coole also refers to Butler's another early work – *The Subject of Desire* (Butler, 2012a) and cites a statement from Butler's reading of Sartre in this work that since “human beings strive after possibilities not yet realized, human beings are to that extent “beyond” themselves in an “ek-static” condition that is itself a corporeal experience” (Butler, as cited in Coole 2008, p.14) to show that the notion of ek-stasis drew largely upon the existential premises. Coole also argues that this notion of ek-stasis and its embodied character is repeated in Butler's later works as well. Thus, the trajectory of the concept of ek-stasis remains unaltered in Butler's body of work. Coole further engages with other aspects of Butler's work such as their notion of performativity, their critique of

existentialists and phenomenologists for their implicit Cartesianism, and their critique of the older generation of feminist theory for their reliance on an uncritical nostalgia toward presence.

While Coole makes some powerful arguments, it fails to regard certain features of Butler's ontological framework of ek-stasis. Her arguments posit ek-stasis as a move by Butler beyond the dualist ontology. But what does it mean to occupy a non-dualist position? What is the ontological schema of a dualist position? Does Butler's notion of ek-stasis remain within the ambit of existentialist theorization? Does the existentialist tradition take the concept of ek-stasis to its limit? Or does it operate within the classical ontological framework governed by presence? Does Butler's invocation of ek-stasis follow the existentialist path? Or does it refurbish the concept by altering its foundational principles? A thorough engagement with Butler's ontology of ek-stasis must respond to these questions.

Also, reading Coole, one gets the sense that Butler's approach to ek-stasis is instrumental in nature. That is, Coole's essay often implies that the Butler's theorization merely borrows concepts from the existentialist tradition in an unaltered manner. Following such an interpretation which does not interrogate the history of ek-stasis itself and does not look at the existential configuration of it, would mean granting a self-presence to this concept where it becomes something like a transcendental signified, an epitome of presence. But the question remains, does Butler's notion of ek-stasis mirror how existentialists configure it? Moreover, does Butler merely borrow the existentialist concept of ek-stasis and turn it into one of their theoretical instruments? Or does this concept take a different shape in their work? Coole's exposition does not attempt to respond to these vital questions.

Contrary to many of the works discussed in this section, Arto Charpentier takes up the ontological questions in Judith Butler's works head-on (2019). In his essay, Charpentier attempts to trace a certain hesitation and contradiction in Butler's work regarding ontology, considering them as the result of an incoherence in Butler's encounter with ontology. Because, even though starting from *Frames of War* (Butler, 2009) Butler explicitly advances a relational social ontology, it sits uneasily with their critique of ontology earlier (Charpentier, 2019, p.43). Charpentier provides a simple definition of ontology and social ontology. Whereas ontology concerns engaging with the description of what there *is* by elucidating how a reality is composed by various entities, social ontology "describes the main constituents of social reality and account for their origin and

specific mode of existence” (Charpentier, 2019, p.44). According to Charpentier, Butler is critical of the former but endorses the latter. But what does Charpentier understand by critique of ontology? How does he understand critique? And in what sense does he claim it to be opposed to a relation ontology? Let’s find out.

Charpentier begins by providing a brief account of Butler’s early works where they argue how the ontologies of sex and gender are produced within a frame of recognizability governed by hegemonic norms and regulatory schemes. Charpentier takes up Butler’s critique of the naturalist schema of sex and gender to elaborate her argument. For instance, within the domain of Western thought, sexual difference was based on a naturalistic ontology that regarded sex as an irreducible given, and gender was considered the natural expression of this natural sex. Since becoming an embodied subject within this hegemonic discourse entails acquiring a stable sexuated and gendered position, subjectivation always implies that one subscribes to this naturalized ontology, and the bodies that either fail to or do not subscribe to such an ontological framework, are rendered abject. Based on this reading of Butler, Charpentier argues that this exemplifies Butler’s critique of ontology, which sums up to a simple position – since sexual/gendered subjectivities are produced within a discursive regime, they cannot be said to have a claim to being (Charpentier, 2019, p.45). To put it more simply, ontology is about taking a naturalist position on entities where they are considered given and uncontaminated by the socio-political, and since subjectivities are produced within the matrices of the hegemonic discursive regime, they cannot be regarded as ontological categories. Charpentier cites Butler to show why their work distances itself from the ontological frameworks produced within Western philosophy –

I would like to ask a different kind of question, namely, how is it that the domain of ontology is itself circumscribed by power? That is, how is it that certain kinds of subjects lay claim to ontology, how is it that they count or qualify as real? In that case, we are talking about the distribution of ontological effects, which is an instrument of power, instrumentalized for purposes of hierarchy and subordination and also for purposes of exclusion and for producing domains of unthinkability. This whole domain of ontology that the good, the conceptually pure, philosopher takes for granted, is profoundly tainted from the start. (Butler, as cited in Charpentier, 2019, pp.45-46)

Even though Charpentier showcases this claim to argue that Butler is rejecting ontology, this quotation might perhaps lead us to approach it from another perspective. There are two points that Butler seems to be making here. First, within Western philosophy ontology is taken to be concerned with what qualifies as real. And second, what qualifies as real is produced within a network of power-knowledge. Thus, ontology, contrary to how Western philosophy considered it, is not about the structure of a pure being as such.

However, Charpentier fails to reflect on the fact that claiming something to be discursively produced does not render it unreal, but only destabilizes its naturalist premise. Thus, by reconfiguring ontological claims in terms of how they are produced in a network of relation, Butler's work effectively moves the question of ontology to a different plane where instead of being considered in naturalist terms, they emerge as relational constitutions. But being relational does not refute their empirical reality. In this sense, it cannot be said that Butler's critique of ontology was an attempt to refute ontology as such. But that is where Charpentier misreads Butler since he does not consider that perhaps Butler's critique of ontology itself emerged as an ontological interrogation that refuted the naturalized premise and established how categories/entities are constituted within a set of relations. Charpentier thus appears to have taken *critique* in its narrow sense instead of looking at it in the more radical sense where it implies inquiring into the conditions of possibility of some existent, as Butler does (Butler, 2001). Thus, Charpentier's claim that Butler's espousal of a relational ontology stand in opposition to their early critique of ontology cannot be sustained. To go back once again to the same interview that Charpentier quotes from –

Indeed, in a strictly philosophical sense, at once to say that “there are” abject bodies and that they do not have claim to ontology appears to be what the Habermassians would call a performative contradiction. [...] Even if I say, “there are abject bodies that do not enjoy a certain kind of ontological status”, I perform that contradiction on purpose. I am doing that precisely to fly in the face of those who would say, “but aren't you presupposing ...?” No! My speech does not necessarily have to presuppose ... Or, if it does, fine! Perhaps it's producing the effect of presupposition through its performance, OK? And that's fine! Get

used to it! But *it is to roundly inaugurate an ontological domain, it is not to presuppose an already given one* [emphasis added]. It is discursively to institute one. (Butler, as cited in Charpentier, 2019, p.46)

As this statement clearly expresses, ontological claims need to be understood as discursive and not given.

Ontology, as we will discuss later in this work, is the study of being. But as Butler argues, if being itself is not given, if it is not self-referential and self-grounded owing to its constitutive relationality, then how does that effect the domain of ontology in general? How does Butler's invocation and reformulation of ontology relate to classical ontology? Charpentier's work does not address these questions, but operates on the basis of a real/discursive dualism which fails to understand how Butler's work radically refurbishes the question of being and what implications it bear for ontology.

Adriana Cavarero and Anne Tordi's engagement with the question of subjectivity and subject formation in *Judith Butler and the Belligerent Subject* (Cavarero & Tordi, 2011) touches upon Butler's ontological framework in the context of violence and vulnerability. As Cavarero and Tordi note, violence and vulnerability figure in Butler's later works within the frame of a "human question" emanating from their ontological exposition (Cavarero & Tordi, 2011, p.163). Cavarero and Tordi place the emergence of these concepts in Butler's later works as a continuation of their earlier explorations on gender, sex, and the body. As gendered/sexuated ontology is formed within a paradigm of recognizability governed by norms produced in alignment with hegemonic discourses and since without subscribing to this frame of recognizability subjectivation itself remains impossible, these norms and the frame of recognizability imply a form of inaugural violence that initiates the subject into being. Thus, Butler's insistence on the role of violence of norms in subject constitution, as Cavarero and Tordi correctly note, already anticipates their later exposition on the functionality of violence and vulnerability in the formation of the framework that determines who gets to lay ontological claim to life (Cavarero and Tordi, 2011, p.164). Thus ontology, as Cavarero and Tordi's reading implies, is a domain beyond self-referentiality, and is produced through the operations of the social and political -

the term "ontology" does not denote or describe "fundamental structures of being that are distinct from any and all social and political organizations" that produce them, that is, from the different cultural and ethical framework whose normative/productive effect, precisely because it seeks to establish norms, is violent, according to Butler...(Cavarero and Tordi, 2011, p.165).

Thus, being, and the claim to *be*, is inherently beyond structures of self-referentiality. However, even though Cavarero and Tordi's reading pushes one to explore this ontological aspect, their text itself does not explore this question adequately. Butler's ontology therefore remains a point of reference for Cavarero and Tordi, but does not find itself subjected to critical interrogation.

Stephen White provides one of the few sustained engagements with the ontological implications of Judith Butler's exegesis (1999, 2000). White places Butler's work within the tradition of what he calls "weak ontology" which characterizes some of the later engagements with ontology in the last decades of the 20th century (White, 2000, p.3). This resurgence of ontology manifesting itself in a "weak" manner is counterposed to the tradition of "ontological essentialism" or "strong ontology" which operates on the basis of transcendent foundations such as god or human nature (White, 1999, p.156; White, 2000, p.6). While functioning as the foundation of various political-philosophical-ethical postulates, these foundations themselves remain unfounded and ungrounded, and exist as their ahistoric origin, as the point of ultimate stasis. Critical of this ontological essentialism, the weak ontology comprises two propositions. First, that all fundamental grounds, or foundations concerning the self, the other, or the world is contestable. And second, despite the absence of their claim to truth, these foundations are nonetheless "unavoidable" and "necessary" (White 1999, p.156; White, 2000, p.8). As White explains –

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, what they offer are 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."
(White, 2000, p.9)

Even as these existential realities play a key role in weak ontology, they do not function in any categorical sense. That is, they do not function as universals with definite essence. Rather, while working with these non-categories, weak ontologies attempt to understand their figuration within a certain thesis or set of questions because despite their ontological hollowness they cannot be avoided as such (White, 2000, p.9).

White places the ontological implications of Butler's work within this framework of weak ontology.⁸ A distinguishing point of White's reading of Butler is that it focuses primarily on Butler's pre 9/11 works and notes the strong presence of an ontological commitment in their oeuvre starting from their early works. For instance, citing two of their early essays (Butler 1988, 1995), white showcases how Butler's take on foundations was always in alignment with one of the primary traits of weak ontology. That is, in alignment with the weak ontological position, Butler's work from its earliest period put emphasis on both the contestability and indispensability of foundations (White, 2000, p.76).

Delving deeper, White locates three constitutive components in Butler's weak ontology. Or rather, it is judging by these three aspects that White locates Butler within the tradition of weak ontology. These three components are – first, Butler's insistence on interpellation; second, insistence on the process of materialization; third, insistence on the desire to desire (White, 1999, 2000). What are these three insistences that White locates in Butler?

The insistence on interpellation signifies Butler's account of subjectivation. White provides a careful reading of how Butler always regards the inauguration of the subject as a process that begins with the other, and to elaborate, he introduces Butler's reference to the Althusserian scene of interpellation. He notes that how in Butler, this interpellation is not a one-time process but functions in a reiterative manner that "dissolves" the idea of a sovereign subject and installs instead an "image of a subjectivity produced or constituted by the insistent, interpellating "demand" of "discursive power"" (White, 1999, p.160). Building on this, White appreciates how in Butler the discursive power is denied a subjective position as Butler maintains that power does not exist beyond or before this subject (White, 1999, p.161). This forms the first aspect of Butler's weak

⁸ White also differentiates between thin ontology and weak ontology. For discussion on this, see White (1999,2000)

ontology. The second aspect concerns Butler's claim that despite its various figurations within language, materiality cannot be fully reduced to language. Rather, it exercises a force within language. Thus, in Butler, materiality is something that exceeds language, something that language cannot fully capture, and it is this failure that invokes the iterative interpellatory acts onto the material body and the embodied subject (White, 1999, p.162). And just to mention briefly, the third aspect of Butler's weak ontology consists of the "detachability of desire", which frames desire as more "resourceful" than the passionate attachments constitutive of being (Butler, as cited in White 1999, p.164).

Following this argument presented by White, it becomes evident that White's engagement clearly identifies some of the ontological movement of Butler's work, and it is absolutely aware of how Butler's drawing on concepts of materialization, discourse, and attachment hollows the foundationalist premise of ontology. It also notes that despite advancing a critique of the ontological tradition, Butler's work itself does not intend to move out of the domain of ontology. Given these insights, this dissertation, in a very limited sense, bears the possibility of coming close to white's position on Butler's ontology.

However, despite providing certain crucial openings, White's account does not provide a comprehensive and critical account of Butler's ontological operations. It posits Butler's ontology against the foundationalist framework, but leaves a set of questions relevant to establishing Butler's ontological framework unaddressed. How does a foundationalist ontology operate? How does it place the question of being? And how does Butler's engagement provide an alternative path to thinking ontology? Does the qualifier "weak" operate in an additive sense? Or, in the case of Butler, does it have the potential to destabilize ontology? And should that be the case, what would destabilizing ontology entail? White's engagement with Butler in terms of ontology does not pursue these avenues. On the contrary, it often appears that instead of providing an immanent reading, White emphasizes more on deliberating whether Butler's account fits smoothly within the framework of weak ontology.

This brief survey of literature surrounding Butler's ontology reveals two particular trends. First, in some of these works, even though the question of ontology is raised, it generally occupies a tangential role with respect to the work. Of course, it is possible to show how these interlocutors understand Butler's ontology by delving deeper into their readings, but these works themselves do

not enter into an ontological inquiry as such. And, those works that take Butler's ontology as their primary object of interrogation often do not take into account the ontological operations in Butler's exegesis. They showcase different aspects of their work such as their emphasis on materialization, interpellation, relationality. But do these concepts operate in a metaphysical manner in Butler? What implication do they have for thinking about the question of being? How do the ontological implication of Butler's exegesis relate to the classical conception of being? These questions often remain unanswered in these works.

Chapter Summary

This dissertation is divided into five chapters, each addressing separate but interconnected questions. The first chapter establishes the conceptual scheme and lays out the theoretical ground through which this treatise reads Butler. It deals with two particular concepts – ontology and ecstasy or ek-stasis. By reading the works of Aristotle and a number of his commentators, this chapter shows how in Western philosophy being was determined in terms of constant present. But is such an understanding of being self-evident? Or, does an interrogation into being unfold a different structure altogether? Speculating on this possibility, this chapter then explores the concept of ecstasy or ek-stasis, and proceeding further establishes that this concept of ek-stasis operates within the classical ontological framework where being is tethered to presence. In order to rethink the concept of ek-stasis beyond presence, this chapter then introduces the modern concept of ecstasy where it figures in terms of an originary displacement, and to understand this, it engages with Heidegger's concept of ek-static temporality. However, a close reading of Heidegger through Derrida, we establish that despite opening a horizon of possibility for conceiving being beyond the determination of presence, Heidegger's formulation still operates within the metaphysical closure of being. Proceeding ahead, the last two sections of this chapter then critically interrogate Derrida's notion of *language in general sense* and argue that this concept (i.e., language in general sense) provides a strong framework for understanding ek-stasis in an originary sense. Thus, in contravention to classical ontology, this chapter establishes the possibility of theorizing being as ek-static, beyond the determination of presence. The subsequent chapters of this dissertation engage

with Butler's work and its criticism posed by their interlocutors in terms of this concept of originary ek-stasis.

There has been a shift in continental theory and feminist philosophy in the last two decades, referred to as the material turn/realist turn. It asserts that various constructionist notions including poststructuralism have reduced matter/real to language and discourse. New materialism, one of the key constituents of this material turn, often takes Judith Butler's work as emblematic of constructionism to argue that despite their claim to address matter and materiality, Butler remains trapped within epistemic questions of language, culture, and representation and fails to interrogate matter ontologically. Since the current work intends to unfold the ontological implications of Butler's work, it becomes imperative that we engage with their new materialist critiques, and a clear comprehension of the theoretical premise of new materialism is a prerequisite for that. This is the task that the second chapter undertakes. It engages critically with new materialism to understand its theoretical premise and unravels how the new materialist claim of return to ontology remains anchored to classical ontology. It establishes how new materialism's claims to retrieve matter suffer from a nostalgia for origin, and how their quest for addressing matter/real beyond the pieties of representation proceeds from a metaphysical understanding of matter/real. That is, it shows how their positions understand matter/real in terms of classical ontology where these categories figure as manifestations of pure presence. This chapter begins by considering the general philosophical position of new materialism, explores its theoretical prepositions, and then proceeds to interrogate the work of two noted new materialists – Manuel DeLanda and Jane Bennett – in order to establish how a flawed interpretation of language/discourse and a metaphysical notion of being lead new materialism toward an offhand rejection of theoretical positions that engage with the questions of language and discourse.

Even though a number of new materialists have referred to Butler's work, Vicki Kirby's engagement with Butler occupies a distinguished position among them in terms of its nuances and depth of engagement. Taking Kirby as one of the finest representatives of new materialism, the third chapter critically interrogates Kirby's reading of Butler's theorization of matter and materiality to show how a misreading of Butler leads new materialism to situate Butler's work within the constructionist premise. Instead of addressing Butler's work directly, this chapter primarily focuses on Kirby's reading of Butler and advances two propositions through this. First, that Butler's

exegesis does not deploy the category of matter in terms of its traditional, metaphysical conceptualization that regards it as an irreducible foundation manifesting pure and immediate presence. And second, that Butler's reconceptualization of matter – hitherto defined as a metonym for presence – renders it ek-static in ontological sense. That is, it shows that in Butler, the concept of matter, which within the Western philosophy functioned as a stand-in for pure presence, remains ontologically at some distance from itself, and that it comes onto being in and through the enactment of its distance from itself. In this sense, matter, the category determined in terms of presence within the framework of classical ontology, proves ek-static in Butler's work.

The fourth chapter interrogates Butler's analysis of the Freudian and Lacanian framework. Gender functions as an irreducible category manifesting presence in Freud's work which becomes especially prominent in his theorization of primary bisexuality. Freud's theory of primary bisexuality stands in tension with his theorization of how the gendered characteristic of the ego is produced through certain psychosexual procedures. By interrogating Butler's investigation into Freud's theory of gender identity, the first half of this chapter elaborates how instead of operating in an essentialist manner espoused by the theory of primary bisexuality, the gendered constitution of the ego, in terms of its being, is produced and sustained in and through melancholia, signifying an originary displacement where both ego and a stable gendered identity is formed through their primary relation to what lies outside their immediate topos. In other words, it shows how the topos of gendered ego (and the space of the psyche in general) is produced within the framework of a melancholic displacement. Second half of this chapter reads Butler's engagement with Lacan. In Lacan's framework, the symbolic and its governing signifier phallus is placed at the origin of sexuality and kinship. However, Butler's intervention in the Lacanian paradigm elaborates how instead of being the origin grounding sexual economies containing the play of signification, the symbolic and its components are produced performatively through the textual strategies of Lacan's narrative. Thus, the self-referential structure that Lacan grants to the origin cannot be sustained as their ontology proves to be ek-static.

The fifth and the last chapter focuses on Butler's engagement with Levinas and Hegel. The first half of this chapter looks at the concept of relationality and dispossession that Butler develops through their reading of Levinas. However, as this work contends, relationality and dispossession, in Butler's reading, figures in an originary manner. That is, relationality in Butler does not figure as

a relation between two self-referential beings, and dispossession does not signify the displacement of a previously stable and static being. Rather, as Butler reads Levinas, relationality figures as the phenomenon within which being emerges as such, and displacement proves originary in the sense that being emerges through the act of displacement, prior to which being cannot as such. This section explicates how Butler, by instituting the unwilled and unchosen address from the other at the heart of the self, displaces the self-referentiality of being. In a similar manner, the second half of this chapter reads Butler's interrogation of Hegel and argues how Butler's reading establishes alterity at the heart of ontology, thereby rendering ontology ek-static. Butler's interpretation of the Hegelian concept of recognition becomes particularly important in this respect.

Methodology

The dissertation attempts to understand the ontological import of Judith Butler's work and intends to argue that Butler provides an ek-static framework for thinking the question of being. As we have already discussed, this thesis begins by establishing the primary concepts – i.e. ek-stasis and ontology – guiding this work. Second, it engages with new materialism and its polemical engagement with Judith Butler's ontological apparatus. Third, it interrogates Butler's reading of Freud, Lacan, Levinas, and Hegel. These three sets of goals require intensely working through a number of texts and their narrative and textual strategies in order to build the concept of originary ek-stasis and understand how Butler provides an avenue for thinking ontology ek-statically beyond the determination of presence. To this end, the current work uses textual analysis as its preferred methodology. It closely engages with the texts it refers to and subjects them to incisive critical reading in order to extricate the ontological operations, whether latent or explicit – in these texts.

As has been elaborated in the preceding sections, the current project has three axes. First, it engages with the question of being as it has figures in classical ontology, and from this, it develops a concept of ontology beyond presence that we are referring to as ek-static ontology. Second, it investigates the new materialist polemic with Judith Butler. Third, it closely interrogates Butler's reading of a number of philosophers in order to explore the ontological framework of Judith

Butler's work. The choice of texts depends on these three axes. To address the question of being and ek-stasis, I chose Aristotle's metaphysics as one of the primary texts, and to understand and build on certain aspects of Aristotle's formulations on being, I looked at a number of secondary sources. To understand the concept of ecstasy/ek-stasis, I looked at various ancient philosophical texts, along with some contemporary commentary on them. Finally, to build the concept of originary ek-stasis, I depended on the works of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida.

To understand new materialism's engagement with Judith Butler, I took a two-pronged approach. First, I interrogated the general ontological framework of a number of new materialist positions. Apart from providing a general overview, I engaged with two noted new materialists – namely, Manuel DeLanda and Jane Bennett to corroborate my argument on new materialist ontology. And second, I analyzed Vicki Kirby's commentary on Butler's work. The reason I decided to singularly focus on Kirby's critique of Butler is that Kirby's work provides the most sustained and nuanced criticism of Judith Butler's theoretical paradigm. Hence, engaging with her work provided me with the opportunity to showcase the inadequacy of new materialist reading of Judith Butler's ontological framework.

Judith Butler's work, even though pregnant with ontological concerns, never posits a formal ontological framework as such. In other words, even though Butler's theorization on the body, gender, being makes ontological gestures all along, it never builds a formal ontology as such. And it is precisely this task that the current work aims to achieve. In order to do that, I focused on Butler's reading of Freud, Lacan, Hegel, and Levinas. One can develop these aspects, albeit in a different manner, by focusing on their engagement with other philosophers as well. But as building my argument depended on close textual analysis, extending the current project in order to include Butler's engagement with other philosophers had to be postponed for future endeavours due to space and time constraints.

Also, in order to develop my argument as to in what sense Butler's ontological framework can be called ek-static, and to understand Butler's ontological intervention, it was imperative to situate their work in the context of the texts their philosophical paradigm is built upon. To do this, I included elaborate discussion on Freud, Lacan, Hegel, and Levinas by focusing on a number of their works that I found relevant for this project.

Chapter 1

From Being-As-Presence to Being-As-Ekstatic: Towards a Radical Ontology of Ecstasy

There are two concepts at the heart of our current project - ontology and ecstasy or ek-stasis. These two concepts operate on the basis of two elements – being and presence. Before proceeding to what we would be calling ek-static ontology and elaborating in later chapters how such an ontological framework governs the theoretical paradigm of Judith Butler's work, it is imperative that we have a clear understanding of these concepts, and this will be our primary task in this chapter. To do this, we would begin with a discussion of Aristotle's magnum opus, *Metaphysics* (Aristotle, 2016), which would provide a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of being determined as presence. This critical engagement would allow us to ascertain how classical ontology - or the ontological tradition which, if one follows Levinas, has been definitive of philosophy in the West - at its core, remains indissociable from the temporal spatio-temporal structure of presence such that ontological inquiry, by definition, cannot be conceived without this framework. But is another framework of ontology possible where being can be conceived of beyond presence?

In order to formulate the notion of being beyond presence, we would delve into the concept of ecstasy. First, we would look at how the concept of ecstasy first developed during the inceptual phase of Greek philosophy, and how its various manifestations prevailed in philosophical-theological literature during the next two millennia. By charting out the conceptual contours of ecstasy, it would be established how its formulation and later manifestations conceived it within the horizon of classical ontology which defined it in terms of presence.

But despite its origin in classical ontology, when pushed to its limit, the concept of ecstasy can be shown to harbour the possibility of operating beyond the metaphysics of presence. To showcase this, we would shift to one of the most exemplary formulations of this concept by looking at the works of Heidegger. As Heidegger remains one of the key proponents of Western philosophy to have advanced toward such a conceptualization of ecstasy beyond presence, it would be

imperative for us to closely follow Heidegger's formulation of this concept through his elaboration on ek-static temporality, and this will be our aim in the third section of this chapter. This engagement with Heidegger would also point out the problems inherent in the ontological tradition of Western philosophy and establish how it functioned within a problematic conception of being.

Though Heidegger's critique of the metaphysical tradition remains vital to theorizing ecstasy beyond the determination of presence, our engagement with Heidegger's texts will show that despite his criticism and his project of *destruktion* of metaphysics, Heidegger's critique of ontology and his concept of ecstasy ultimately proves reducible to manifestations of presence. Hence, a Heideggerian model fails to move the question of being beyond presence. Therefore, to conceptualize being of being beyond presence, the last two sections of this chapter would engage with the work of Derrida, following his exegesis on speech and writing in the context of Western philosophy. Through this engagement, we would attempt to establish a concept of ecstasy irreducible to presence. This transvaluated concept of ecstasy would be our guiding thread in our reading of Judith butler's work.

Ontology: Being as Presence

As is evident from the heading, the subject matter of this section will be ontology, which, as we claim along with a host of thinkers, is formulated in the broadest sense as being determined as presence. However, before delving into addressing in what sense ontology is identified with the formulation of being as presence, it is required that we have a working understanding of the three conceptual terms - ontology, being, and presence. Although these terms come together to form a thetic statement where each necessarily presupposes the others, we will try to briefly delineate the predications and valuations that these terms depend on. First, we provide a brief outline of ontology, which would involve a descriptive invocation of being, and then move on to the substantive discussion of being, which is the subject of ontology. Through this discussion, we would attempt to understand how being has been theorized in terms of presence.

So, what is ontology? To begin with an etymological perspective, the word ontology is derived from two Greek words - first, ὄν, ὄντος (on,ontos); and second, logos. Tracing the conceptual terrain of these two words, Stanley Rosen defines logos as an account that human intellect can gather of things, entities, and events presented to them. As Rosen puts it, relating it to the concomitant term or the primary term ‘on’ or ‘onta’ -

The *logos* is accessible to the reflective consideration of our everyday experience of a thing, event, psychic modification, or relation. The term *on* or *onta*, ‘being’ or ‘beings,’ stands for any and all of these items of experience. Every attempt to view the beings directly leads to a consideration of something else: the properties of the being, its formal structure, an abstract concept, and so on. This ‘something else’ is the *logos*. (Stanley Rosen, as cited in Haynes, 2012, p.28).

Logos, in this sense, is the result of intellection on beings, i.e., things (entities, events, experience) that *are*. We will come to the question of “onta” later, but to provide a more generalized statement about logos, it can be said that it is the intelligible aspect of beings and that it is attained through various modes of engagement with the particular being, i.e., entity, in question.

To probe a little further, we have at hand two domains - first, that of things that there are, and second - the knowledge or intellectual account of those things. This implies that, and Rosen highlights this while providing a detailed account of Plato’s ontological universe, what there *is* and the knowledge we have of what there *is*, are not same. Rosen notes that whenever we put any object under scrutiny, what emerges is not the thing itself, but rather an account of that thing comprising a number of elements involving its properties, formal structure, or the abstract concept in which the empirical thing under consideration partakes in. So, a consideration of being reveals to us something that is different from the thing itself. This something else is logos.

Hence, we have two different types of entities whose status in terms of their being are not identical to each other. But, Rosen claims, despite being different from each other in terms of their essence, the thingness of the thing is revealed in the knowledge of the thing. That is, the “on” or “onta” is revealed in the logos. Therefore, despite their ontological distinction, they are formally identical. To quote Rosen -

As present within or apprehended by the intellect, the *logos* is clearly different from the *on*, since otherwise the being and the intellect would be identical. On the other hand, as exhibiting the ratio of intelligibility of the being in question, the *logos* is the same as that being in the sense that both have the same look or Idea...Perhaps I can convey my general conclusion as follows: the *logos* is ontologically distinct from the being (*on*), but formally it is the same...Stated in a preliminary manner, the *logos* is the community of being and thinking.” (Stanley Rosen, as cited in Haynes, 2012, pp.33-34).

Ontology, the “doctrine of being” (Heidegger, 1999, p.1), has another crucial theoretical aspect - it is generally understood to be on the side of reality. According to the general perception, it concerns “what there really is” (Gabriel, 2015, p.1), and its task is to excavate the essence and true nature of being, of what there *is*. There can be different perceptions of that which is. It can be interpreted in numerous ways, attributed with different significations, and analysed in modalities more than one. Nevertheless, all these interpretations, significations, and analyses imply that from a temporal perspective, they come *after* the thing whose being is under scrutiny. That which *is*, has already been there before the semiotic and semantic regime subjected it to their critical apparatus. Therefore, that which *is*, is more primordial and preexists its significations and interpretations. Ontology does not concern itself with what comes after being, but is interested in understanding the true nature of being itself.

In his exegesis, Nicolai Hartmann, one of the most influential philosophers of 20th century Germany to have effectuated a “return to ontology” (Schnädelbach, 1984, p. 210), undertook the task of re-establishing the ontological framework of inquiry, and presented one of the most perspicuous expressions of enframing ontology within the binary temporal framework of before and after. Commenting on “antagonism to ontology” in late 20th-century philosophy, Hartmann claims that the emphasis on *thinking* at the expense of *being* has effectively undermined ontology. At one point in time, questions were posed in terms of being *qua* being. But such questions of understanding the nature of being have now been replaced by concerns about how knowledge of being is meaningful to human subjects (Hartmann, 1965, p.12). By introducing the knower into the ontological scene as the axis on which knowledge depends, the focus of inquiry shifted to what

has been posited to and for us. Since positing is predicated upon its difference from the origin, knowledge of the posited cannot claim to be knowledge of the thing itself. That is, since the entity-as-posited is different from the entity itself, and as the focus remains on the entity-as-posited, the will to inquire into the being of the entity itself has been compromised, leading to the undermining of ontology - the study of being *qua* being.

Laying out the preliminary ground of his inquiry into ontology, Hartmann takes Aristotle's rendition of πρώτη φιλοσοφία or first philosophy as the study of being qua being to be justified. For Hartman, the differentiation of being from phenomenon is essential. By distinguishing ὄν or being from φαινόμενον or phenomenon, writes Hartmann, Greek philosophers separated being from its myriad appearances. Interpreting being this way, the risk of understanding the being of being through its appearance is also obviated because being, in this formulation, is not identical to its appearance. Being, in this sense, stands for nothing but "what is, insofar as it is" (Hartman, 1965, p.54). Interpreting the importance that such a formulation of being holds for contemporary philosophy, Hartmann writes -

We can use the formula just as profitably against contemporary interpretations: "what is insofar as it is" is evidently not what is as posited, intended, or represented; it is not what is as referred to a subject, not what is as object. This means, however, that "being" itself does not consist in being-posited, being-intended, or being-represented; and likewise, is not reducible to a relation to the subject, and thus not to being-an-object for a subject either. (Hartmann, 1965, p.54)

Ontology, as elaborated by Hartmann, is a domain of purity. It does grant that objects/entities can be represented, posited, or intended in myriad ways, but their true nature remains unaffected despite the variety of appearances. The study of being concerns only "what is insofar as it is".

Such an understanding of ontology has dual ramifications. First, it installs a temporal relation between being and knowing (phenomenon, representation, appearance, being-as-posited) where being is primary, pre-given, and considered to pre-exist everything. Any form of abstraction or representation of it is derivative, secondary, and comes after it. In this sense, being in itself is a

pure domain uncontaminated by what comes after. What it *is* to the extent that it *is*, stands apart from the derivatives that affect it. That is, it might be represented in a manner that is not in accordance with its true nature, i.e., it could be a false representation. Or it could be posited in a manner that does not fit seamlessly with what defines it to the extent that it is. But all such portrayals do not belong to the being of the object which precedes all of them and remains unaffected by them.

And second, which is evident is Hartmann's postulation, ontology is accorded a truth value, and by being opposed to it, various semiotic and semantic registers that attribute it with meaning are de facto equated with untruth, or at best, superficial to the truth of being. Coming after being, they (might) alter and modify it, but a careful analysis could undo all those alterations and find the truth of being beneath it.⁹

From this analysis, it emerges that ontology is placed in a binary relation with what Hartmann calls representations and positings - in short, the domain of epistemology (Hartmann, 1965). In this formulation, the value of ontology is predicated upon the devaluation of the epistemic domain that concerns being in terms of how it is portrayed and signified within a semantic grid. Epistemology is rendered insignificant to the truth of being, the *is-ness* of the thing that it is insofar as it is.

The truth of being, which is revealed in logos, is therefore fully present in being itself. It is neither predicated on something which comes after it (i.e., signification, representation), nor does its exploration refer to something other than itself. Its truth does not lie somewhere temporally different (such as the representation of being) from itself. It is in this sense that being is self-referential. It can only refer to itself. All knowledge of being can only be achieved through the unveiling of being, which is nothing but itself. Therefore, it can be said that ontology is riveted to self-referentiality and self-presence. With this preliminary understanding of ontology, we would now move on to the discussion of being which has already been broached descriptively in the preceding discussion.

⁹ In chapter 2, we will see how the new materialist understanding of ontology and its conceptualization of matter functions in a similar manner where matter (a manifestation of being as presence) is posited as a pure presence unaffected by language, culture, and discourse.

In Western philosophy, the question of being began to be raised during the inceptual phase of Western philosophy (Backman, 2015, p.19), and among Greek philosophers, Aristotle took up the question of being *qua* being in a manner that is still relevant today and resonates with various segments of contemporary ontological turn in continental philosophy.¹⁰ That is why our discussion on being would revolve around the Aristotelian formation of and response to the question of being.

Though Aristotle addresses various correlates of being in many of his works, the question of being found its most systematized response in his magnum opus, *Metaphysics* (Aristotle, 2016). Even though many of his works address various questions pertaining to the inquiry into the nature of being, it is only in *Metaphysics* that we find the most systematized and adequate response to the question of being (Haynes, 2012, p.150). Therefore, the following discussion will be confined to *Metaphysics* (Aristotle, 2016), or to be precise, certain sections of *Metaphysics* that address the question of being.

Aristotle and the Question of Being

Aristotle broaches the science of being in book gamma¹¹ of *Metaphysics* (Aristotle, 2016). The claim that Aristotle makes at the very beginning of this section has come to define ontology that there is a particular science that aims to achieve a theoretical knowledge of being *qua* being (Aristotle, 2016, p.48). While transcribing *to on he[i] on* - the Greek phrase for “being *qua* being” - in English, the translator CDC Reeves notes that even though *he(i)* is generally translated as ‘insofar as’, Reeves has used the word “qua” because “qua” implies the knowledge of being by way of nothing but being.¹² Thus, ontology, the science of being, addresses the *beingness* of being only to the extent of what constitutes this *beingness*. Being in its purity is what is supposed to emerge from this study.

¹⁰ The later section of this chapter will elaborate on this.

¹¹ i.e., book IV or book Γ

¹² Reeves writes - There is a science that gets a theoretical grasp on being qua being (to on h.[i] on): H.[i] is usually translated “insofar as,” but here the translation “qua” seems too entrenched to alter. The science gets a grip on being itself, albeit in a unique but universal way—namely, qua being” (Aristotle, 2016, p.333)

Aristotle's conception of being is rooted in the then contemporary dialogues on the question of being, which started from the presocratic tradition of Thales, Heraclitus, and Anaximander and continued to manifest itself in Plato. While maintaining the principle of unity as espoused in Plato's works, Aristotle's notion of being also differs from his predecessor in that it does not comprehend being as some transcendent entity located above its distorted manifestations in the real world. Being is not a supreme entity to which everything subscribes. Being is not the fundamental and formative element of everything. Being is not that from which other things come into being. Rather, for Aristotle, being - first and foremost - is that of individual beings, without which there cannot be any question of being. As Backman notes, being is found only in particular instances of "to be", and hence –

has no other meaning than "to be something" which always implies unity in the sense of "to be some one thing," i.e., in general, to be indivisible'...Being and unity are not general kinds, classes, or categories of beings; beings qua beings are not unified by a general kind called "being."¹³ (Backman, 2015, p. 45)

Being is not a universal category, but still functions like a common reference point to which everything refers. Though the things that refer to it might be different in terms of their nature and the domain they belong in, and though they might espouse different meanings given the difference in context, all these references make sense only in the context of the primary meaning of being, i.e., that, which being primarily refers to. And that which it refers to remains unaltered and unmodified despite its diverse usage in different contexts. The science that Aristotle speaks of, studies being - that which everything refers to – in its primary semantic context. Let us elaborate.

In Aristotle's classification, "being" or "to be" does not mean the same thing everywhere. But also, it doesn't imply that their semantic value is radically different in all these expressions. Instead, they function through a common structure of referentiality despite the absence of semantic homogeneity. As Aristotle puts it – "Something is said to be in many ways, however, but

¹³ As Aristotle writes in *Metaphysics* – "the substance belongs to nothing but itself and what has it, of which it is the substance. Further, what is one cannot be in many places at the same time, but what is common does belong in many places at once. And so it is clear that no universal exists separately, beyond the particulars." (Aristotle, 2016, p.131)

with reference to one thing and one nature—that is, not homonymously” (Aristotle, 2016, p.48). To illustrate, Aristotle uses the example of how the various meanings of the word “health” and its usages in multiple contexts are connected to “health” as their common point of reference. There are many ways of *to-be*, but all of them refer to a singular point of reference (Aristotle, 2016, p.48).¹⁴ For instance, if health is taken as a common reference point, then reference to health will be made in terms of whether a thing is more healthy or less healthy. A particular thing might be claimed to be healthier and another not as healthy. But by virtue of their referential structure, both relate to the common factor of health, and it is with regard to this, that one thing contains more of what it means to be healthy while another contains less of it. It is concerning this common point of reference that these two things are related, and that common point is health which involves a particular state of the physical body.

However, it needs to be kept in mind that the things that refer to a particular entity through the analogy of proportion do not contain within themselves the primary meaning of that to which they refer. For example, the statement that “right to free speech is one of the key markers of a healthy democracy” lacks the primary meaning context of health that concerns a particular condition of the biological body. Instead, this statement references the concept of health, which means that in this specific instance, the primary meaning of health is instantiated. Thus, the science of health will not consider these multifarious instantiations of healthiness. Instead, it would focus on health in the context where it is approached or understood in the most immediate and primal sense, and this would involve inquiry into different states of the biological body. Thus, healthiness is something which is said of other things, but other things cannot be said of healthiness.¹⁵ In a similar manner, being is referred to or instantiated in various entities, but the study of being should concern only its primary semantic context -

¹⁴ As Backman notes, this is what gave rise to the doctrine of the analogy of being which has been interpreted as an analogy of proportionality by a group of thinkers where the analogical relation between two things functions in terms of how much one thing participates in the other (Backman, 2015, p.46).

¹⁵ To clarify further, a reference to healthiness can be made about the state of democracy, but the concept of democracy is not essential to the concept of healthiness. Surely one can refer to the concept of democracy while talking about healthiness, but it needs to be reiterated that a discussion of healthiness does not call for a mandatory reference to democracy. Rather, what it requires is to refer to health itself in its primary meaning context and explore its contours. Inquiry into the question of being proceeds along a similar path.

For not only in the case of things that are said to be in accord with one thing does it belong to one science to get a theoretical grasp on them, but also in the case of things that are said to be with reference to one nature, since even these are in a way said to be in accord with one thing. So it is clear, in the case of beings too, that it belongs to one science to get a theoretical grasp on them qua beings. In every case, however, a science in the fullest sense is of what is primary, and of what the other things are based on, and because of which they are said to be. (Aristotle, 2016, pp.48-49)

Ontology concerns exploring the being of something in terms of its materiality within its primary semantic context, to which other instantiations of the concept refer. Now, as being signifies various things (Aristotle, 2016, p.104), a formal inquiry into it would be required to focus on the primary sense of being. But what does the primary sense of being reside in? Aristotle responds – “while things are said to be in this many ways, it is evident that primary among these is the what-it-is, which is just what signifies the substance” (Aristotle, 2016, p.104). That is, what constitutes this being as being is the primary meaning of being. While it can be said in many ways and the discussion of various entities entails being in a certain way, its primary meaning lies with none of them. Instead, it consists of *that* which makes it what it is to the extent that it *is*. Therefore, Aristotle’s response does not involve how different beings *are*. Rather, of the myriad ways in which being is said, the primary sense of being concerns what Aristotle calls *substance*.¹⁶ It needs to be noted that in the translation we are using, the original Greek word that this translation has replaced with the word “substance” is *ousia* (οὐσία). Since *ousia* holds immense importance for Aristotle’s ontological framework, we would take a brief detour through its conceptual meaning. A cursory look at various translations of *Metaphysics* reveals that the two most common translations of *ousia* are “substance” and “entity”. Such a variety of translations is due to more than just a mere difference of opinion in choosing equivalent words to translate *ousia*. Instead, the difficulty emerges from the fact that to some extent, the meaning of *ousia* tends to go beyond the limitation posed by propriety that a single proper noun entails. And understanding the

¹⁶ “Now things are said to be primary in many ways. Nonetheless, substance is primary in all of them—in account, in knowledge, and in time. For of the various things that are predicated none is separable, but only this. And in account too it is primary, since in the account of each thing its account is necessarily present as a component.” (Aristotle, 2016, p.104)

concept of *ousia* properly is crucial if one has to understand the structure of being in Aristotle's work.

Aristotelian scholar Joseph Owens clearly states (Owens, 1951) that even though *ousia* is the cause of being of things and holds the answer to one of the most fundamental questions in philosophy, its meaning is far from unequivocal. Given this, understanding the term and its concomitant translations is required to do justice to the multivalence that *ousia* has come to acquire in Aristotle's paradigm (Owens, 1951, p.138). Let us stick to the problem of understanding *Ousia* by following Owens.

Ousia comes from the Greek verb εἶναι, which means "to be". "To be" manifests an infinite form, and since process of the morphological formation of *ousia* follows from this, Owens claims that *Ousia* in the noun form can mean something like what he calls "beingness". But understanding *Ousia* as beingness poses a certain problem because even if it reflects the more abstract aspect of the Greek proper noun, it fails to address its concrete aspects which is crucial to the Aristotelian notion of *Ousia*. In Owens's words -

An 'animal' or 'plant' or any simple body is an *Ousia*. The obsolete English word 'Beingness' would not lend itself to this usage. We cannot say 'Beingness' in the same sense that he is *Ousia* in Greek. Moreover, even where the term does not denote a concrete thing, it invariably refers in the primary philosophy to something highly individual. Where it designates the *form* only of a thing, and not the composite or concrete, it means the form as a 'this'... The English 'Beingness' rather denotes that which is shared in, not the subject which partakes of it. Nothing common or universal can be *Ousia*. (Owens, 1951, pp.139-140)

Substance and *Essence* are two of the terms commonly used in the English translations of *Metaphysics*.¹⁷ However, the history of these terms and their Latin origin provide a better perspective on the meaning of *Ousia*. The earliest Latin translation of the term consisted of two proper nouns - *Essentia* and *Queentia* (Owens, 1951, p.151). *Queentia*, a term coined by Plautus,

¹⁷ See Owens (1951, pp.137-154).

means function and/or capacity, and it comes from the participle form *Queo* which means “to be able to” (Glare, 1968, p.1546). However, this term was not in use for long. Rather, it was *essentia* that was accepted as the standard translation of *Ousia*, because many ancient philosophers believed that the term properly conveyed the original sense of the word as deployed by Aristotle's *ousia*. For instance, according to the ancient Western philosopher Marcus Fabius Quintilianus, the word *essentia* properly carries the sense of being-ness of a thing to the extent that the thing “is”. And Seneca, another ancient philosopher, found the word *essentia* to be properly carrying the sense of *Ousia* because, for him this word was impregnated with the sense of the “natural foundation of a thing” (Owens, 1951, p.141).

In theological literature produced in this period, an equivalent word for *essentia* was *substantia*. *Substantia* signifies that which lies beneath the superficial or accidental characteristics of the thing in question. To put this into a modern perspective, if we approach the concept of *essentia* through the modern semantic classification of essence/appearance duality, then *Substantia* would be very close to what we understand by essence. St Augustine, a medieval thinker from the scholastic tradition, also uses the words *essentia* and *substantia* as equivalents (Owens, 1951, pp.142-43). But the problem with the term *substantia* lies in its failure to convey the primary sense of *essentia* which meant “being in its pure and unchangeable state” (Owens, 1951, p.143). And for St. Augustine, no objects other than god could signify this primary beingness. Therefore, *essentia*, although equivalent to *ousia*, was reserved only for referring to the supreme being.

The term *substantia* came to be popularized by Anicius Manlius Severinus Boethius whose logical commentaries on Aristotle functioned as formative of the philosophical development in the middle ages, and these works used the term *substantia* in place of Greek *ousia*. Through this route, *substantia* passed into the modern philosophical vocabulary (Owens, 1951, p.143). The Common English translation of *ousia* as substance followed this route. But *substance* proves inadequate because, first, it fails to convey the sense of primary being that *ousia* entails; and second, in modern philosophical development, its etymological meaning leads to misinterpretations (Owens, 1951, pp.145-146).¹⁸

¹⁸ Similarly, another common translation of *ousia* as essence is also questioned by Owens, because one of the key problems of understanding *ousia* in this manner lies in the signification essence has come to acquire in the history of philosophy where it figured as the binary opposite of “existence” (or appearance). The paleonymic valuation of the

For us, the importance of this discussion concerning *ousia* does not lie in the will to decide what could be the best possible English equivalent of this conceptual term. Rather, it is important to us because it helps us to understand the field of sense that *ousia* deploys. The search for a suitable equivalent for *ousia* is not just a search for a proper noun, but is an interrogation into the nature of *ousia* itself. What is at stake is not finding the best suitable word for *ousia*, but being able to produce a concept that would carry the sense of beingness in the primary sense that both essence and substance fail to perform (Backman, 2015, p.47).

So, what is *ousia*? To go back to Aristotle, *ousia* is said in many ways, but one of them is *ousia* in the most primary sense. As Aristotle puts it -

someone might indeed be puzzled about whether walking and being healthy and sitting are each of them a being or not a being, and similarly too in the case of any other thing of this sort. For none of these is either by its nature intrinsically a being or capable of being separated from substance but, if anything, it is the walking thing that is a being, and the sitting thing, and the one being healthy. These things are evidently beings to a higher degree, because there is some definite underlying subject for them (and this is the substance and the particular), which is just what is made apparent in this sort of predication. For good and sitting are not so said without this. It is clear, then, that it is because of this that each of these other things is as well, so that what primarily is—not is something [else] but is unconditionally— will be substance.¹⁹ (Aristotle, 2016, p.104)

Here we have arrived at the precise understanding of *ousia* in the Aristotelian sense. Although it is said to be many things - such as, as mentioned in the third section of book seven that it said the essence, the universal, the genus, and the underlying subject - it is the underlying subject or *hypokeimenon* that is *ousia* or being in the most primary sense. Therefore, asking what *ousia* is

word “essence” always carries the conceptual weight it has accrued through its opposition to appearance. In this dualism, the existence of a thing would also include those attributes which are contingent; whereas essence would signify *that* which makes the thing that it *is*. But in Aristotle’s paradigm, *ousia* is not predicated upon the dualist register of essence and appearance. Hence, the term essence is misplaced here (Owens, 1951, pp. 146-148).

¹⁹ Since the Reeves translation (Aristotle, 2016) uses the word substance and since it is the Reeve translation that we are using, we are keeping the word “substance” in our citations as the stand in for *ousia* because of the mandates of citational requirements

signifies actually inquiring into *hypokeimenon* (Aristotle, 2016, p.104). And connecting it with the previous qualification of being which requires it to have a certain *thisness*, it emerges that to be *ousia* signifies -

something that ultimately underlies all predicates and is no longer itself predicated of anything else, and to be something separate, something that is a determinate thing when individuated into particular this-something (*tode ti*), i.e., this shape (*morphe*) or form (*eidos*) insofar as it determines a particular thing. Being an entity, a determinate something thus always has two main aspects: (1) the very *thisness* of a *this*-something, i.e., its concrete, immediate *presence here-and-now*, and (2) the very somethingness of a *this*-something, i.e., its conceptual and discursive identity, determinacy and unity, in other words, the constancy that the "this-here" requires in order to be articulate and identifiable. (Backman, 2015, p.48).

These two aspects of *ousia* - the *thisness* of the thing which is concrete and *present-at-hand*, and the very thingness of the thing that makes it what it is - are definitive of its conceptual contour. For something to be *ousia*, both these aspects, namely *constancy* and *presence*, must be present. Presence means the presence of the thing as a *this particular* thing and not some abstract generality; and constancy is the constant presence of *that* which renders the thing as that particular thing to the extent it is *that* very thing. These two aspects are the absolute criterion for something to be considered *ousia*.

From this dual criterion, as Backman rightly notes, it becomes evident that *ousia* is defined in terms of constant, absolute presence (Backman, 2015, p.48).

If we try to define *ousia* only through the first aspect, i.e., in terms of the here-and-now-ness, then the un(in)formed matter (*hyle*) would be the ultimate instance of *ousia*. But Aristotle categorically rejects such a possibility since *ousia* is not only a thing existing in the *here-and-now*, but also a particular *this* thing. However, the state of *only* being a pure identity defining a *thatness* of the thing to the extent it is *that* thing won't qualify it to be *ousia*, because a *thatness* in itself would be far too abstract. Such an understanding of *ousia* would closely resemble the platonic paradigm of forms. Thus, Aristotle's *ousia* must function along the dual axis of constancy and

presence (Backman, 2015, p.48). Understood in this perspective, *ousia* is defined through constant presence, and this is what lies at the core of the Aristotelian notion of being.

Presence here functions in a dual sense. To be recognized as *ousia*, first, it needs to be present at the moment of inquiry so that it can be defined by its state of existence as a thing. A reference to its being would concern nothing but what is contained by its physical contour. Furthermore, this existence needs to figure itself as an individuated entity that can be identified as *that* which it is. Even if the thing that it *is* undergoes quantitative changes, it would still be required to keep its identity as *that something* intact. Therefore, the element that makes the thing which it is to the extent that it *is*, needs to be always present. If this element fails to remain identical on a temporal scale, it would not be considered *ousia*. Therefore, the constancy of being present and being present as what it is to the extent that it is - if these two aspects are fundamental to *ousia*, then *ousia* or being is *nothing but absolute, self-referential, self-identical presence as such*. Heidegger's statement in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (Heidegger, 2014) succinctly captures the identity of being and presence -

What stands-there-in-itself becomes what puts itself forth, what offers itself in how it looks... It rests in appearing, that is, in the coming forth of its essence. What grounds and holds together all the determinations of Being...is what the greeks experienced without question as the meaning of Being, which they called Ousia, or more fully parousia. In German, we have an appropriate expression for *parousia* in our word *Anwesen* (coming-to-presence). We use *Anwesen* as a name for a self-contained farm or homestead. In Aristotle's times, too, Ousia was still used in this sense *as well as* in its meaning as a basic philosophical word. Something comes to presence. It stands in itself and thus puts itself forth. It is. For the Greek, "Being" fundamentally means presence. (Heidegger, 2014, pp.63-64)

This discussion allows us to consider how the question of being has historically been considered in terms of presence. In the previous decades as well as in the more recent developments in continental thought, philosophy has often veered towards understanding the question of being

in this vein.²⁰ While the importance of presence at the foundation of the history of philosophy is beyond doubt (Derrida, 1998), two pertinent questions must be raised concerning the fundamentals of ontology. The questions we have are interconnected and have crucial ramifications for each other.

The premise of our first concern is this - it has been established that being stands for *parousia* or constant presence, and being-as-*parousia* implies that it is always self-referential because it does not refer to anything but itself. But if it is observed that this self-referentiality is the production of a philosophical system instead of it being a law unto itself, then it would appear that the presence-orientated understanding of being requires further examination. And this forms the ground of our first question - is being indeed self-referential? Does itself? Does it exceed the contours that *parousia* or constant presence entails? Is what makes it what *it* is, exist outside it? And therefore, is the self-referentiality of being or the valuation of being as constant presence contestable? In other words, does being entail traces of prehistory, traces which the classical ontology attempts to erase?

And our second question - premised on the first question - if being cannot be thought of in terms of presence and exceeds itself, if what makes it possible is not coterminous with it, then how do we conceive and address the question of being? Can ontology be thought beyond the boundaries of self-presence? Can it be thought in terms of ecstasy or ek-stasis? Before proceeding to develop on whether ontology can be ek-static, we need to have a conceptual understanding of ecstasy itself. The next section would therefore look into the concept of ecstasy from a historical and philosophical perspective. We would begin with what the concept of ecstasy held for the ancient philosophers and theological discourses, and then move onto the discussion of the modern concept of ecstasy through Heidegger's formulation ek-static temporality.

The Concept of Ecstasy

According to the Oxford Etymology Dictionary (Hoad, 1996), the word ecstasy appears to have emerged from various sources. In old French, the word *estaise* meant rupture, a breaking into; in

²⁰ More on this in Chapter 2 & 3.

Latin, the word *extasis* was used to convey a similar meaning. Both these words come from the ancient Greek word ἔκστασις or *Ekstasis*. The Greek word *ekstasis* comes from another Greek expression - *existanai* which means “displace” or “put out of place” (Hoad, 1996). For example, the phrase “*existanai phrenon*” means to drive out of one’s wits (Hoad, 1996). Therefore, the word *existanai* carries within it a sense of displacement. *Existanai* stems from two different words - the prefix *ek*, and *histanai*. *Ek* means “out” and conveys the sense of being out of something. Something which is not inside, something which is not static, something that spills over. *Histanai* is derived from the proto-Indo-European root “sta”, which means “to stand, make, or be firm” (Online Etymology dictionary, n.d.). The Greek word *ekstasis*, derived from *existanai*, means “any displacement or removal from the proper place”. *Ekstasis*, therefore, connotes a movement beyond oneself, a kind of shift that removes something from its proper place.

The English word *ecstasy*, pregnant with the history of its Greek origin, conveys this sense of displacement. On the one hand, it means the state of being beside oneself or being thrown into a fit of emotion characterized by anxiety, stupor, bewilderment, or passion. Also, early writers used this word to denote any state of mind where consciousness was compromised. Description of states of trance, frenzy, or catalepsy often invoked the word *ecstasy* in this sense. *Ecstasy*, deployed thus, becomes somewhat pathological, signifying a deviation from the normal functioning of the mind and the body. This word was also deployed by mystical writers who marked it as a technical term for the state in which the body is rendered unable to sense anything while the mind engages in divine contemplation. The engagement of the mind in a higher level of contemplation while the bodily activity is withdrawn can be observed in Platonic narratives, especially in *Symposium* (Plato, 1980), where, on his way to Agathon’s place, Socrates seems to suddenly enter into a trance-like state in which he becomes so deeply absorbed in thought that he falls behind and at one point stops moving altogether.²¹

Even though the direct English variant of *ecstasy* is absent in this platonic dialogue, it can hardly be contradicted that the trance-like state of Socrates echoes the sense that the word *ecstasy* conveys. As is known to the readers, all of Plato’s dialogues involve engaging in discourses about

²¹ Agathon, upon hearing that his Socrates didn’t pay heed to the servant’s call to step inside the house, says – “This is one of his habits. Sometimes he turns aside and stands still wherever he happens to be”. (Plato, 1980, p.4)

profound philosophical and ethical concerns, and such discourse often exalts one into a state of sublimity, and elicits deeper feelings of amazement, fear, and awe. Engaged in such discussions, the mind is exalted to another realm such that it loses control over itself. If consciousness forms a primary metonymic relation with will, control, and autonomy then we might say that entering such states of mind is akin to losing one's consciousness. In such a state, one becomes unhinged from his or her consciousness, and if consciousness is where one belongs in absolute proximity to oneself, then such an altered state would denote a displacement from/of the self.²²

The concept of ecstasy appears in the Neoplatonist tradition as well. But here, its function and mode of operation differed from Plato's work. Plotinus, one of the chief representatives of Neoplatonism, presented a four-tier paradigm to enframe existence where the first strata was the absolute or the ultimate and the others were derivatives removed from this primal stage. The first strata was that of the One, also called God. It is indivisible, is present in everything but is never fully in those things. It exists past the realm of existence, and in a sense, it is unthinkable (Stearns, 1920). The tier beneath the one and emanated from the one is that of intelligence; after that comes the soul which is produced from intelligence; and the lowest level signifies the strata of the body, which is farthest removed from the god or the one (Stearns, 1920, p.359).

Now, the Neoplatonist paradigm had a conception that they termed illumination. In contrast to the Christian idea of revelation, where wisdom of divinity comes down to man, illumination signifies the elevation of the human to the level of divinity where the soul becomes one with the supreme being (Hoopes, 1962, p.46). This unity does not result from intellectually conceiving the god. Rather, the soul becomes one with the divine by contemplating in a manner where the self would forget itself in light of the divine. This is how Plotinus describes this unity – "Soul must see in its own way; this is by coalescence, unification; but in seeking thus to know the Unity it is prevented by that very unification from recognizing that it has found; it cannot distinguish itself from the object of this intuition" (Plotinus, 2009, p.210). And in this state of

²² In Platonic narratives, a common metaphor used to designate such an altered state of mind is that of inebriation (Anagnostou-Laoutides, 2021, p.1).

absolute unity the self dissolves into the supreme.²³ This is what ecstasy is for Plotinus - forgetting and then immersing the self into the supreme in the divine pursuit of illumination.

If Plato and Plotinus present two instances where we witness the invoking of the concept of ecstasy philosophically, the word, in its more commonly accepted meaning, has also found its place in various literary works starting from the renaissance where it was used to designate a state of altered consciousness, unrest, displacement through various situation of joy, sorrow, or fear.²⁴ Here, the word ecstasy is understood as an exalted state of mind where a human being is occupied such that he/she ceases to think normally (Oxford English dictionary, n.d.).

The concept of ecstasy, as a sort of displacement, has also been used in theological discourses in contrast with *enstasis* - another conceptual term that has its etymological origin in the Greek word *enteinei* and has the same proto-Indo-European root “Sta”. The word means “to stretch or strain” (Friesen, 2011, p.2). Mircea Eliade made the distinction between *enstasis* and *ecstasis* (Eliade, as cited in Hof, 1982, p.247). For Eliade, *enstasis* is an inward movement that is different from *ecstasis*, which stands for a displacement oriented towards the outside.

Even though the oppositional conceptualization of *enstasis* and *ecstasis* is attributed to Mircea Eliade, it has been established that such usages which define these terms through oppositional rhetoric goes back to a famous 18th-century German theologian H.E.G. Paulus (Friesen, 2011, p.3). Paulus, in his writing, analogically compares *enstasis* with dream, where there is a movement inside one’s mind, and contrasts it to ecstasy that signifies displacement outside the self.²⁵

²³ “The man is changed, no longer himself nor self-belonging; he is merged with the Supreme, sunken into it, one with it: center coincides with center, for centers of circles, even here below, are one when they unite” (Plotinus, 2009, p. 217).

²⁴ Also, at times the philosophical concept of ecstasy too was used in literature. For example, John Donne’s poetry explicitly invokes the Plotinian concept of ecstasy (Thomason, 1982). And even when ecstasy is invoked in the everyday sense of the word, it can still be argued that its everyday usage does not escape the philosophical charge that the concept has come to accrue within the western intellectual tradition.

²⁵ “By analogy (the reader need only bring to mind his strange inner capacity for psychological experiences made in dreams!), one may also conceive of a state of mind, where after a certain tension and consequent exhaustion of the gross body, there can in the state of wakefulness be a similar drawing back of the spirit from external reality, and a deep directedness to one’s inner sensory system. This is a state of mind which is often called ‘ecstasy’ [Ekstase], a displacement outside of oneself, but which should rather be called ‘enstasy’ [Enstase], a displacement within oneself.” (Paulus in Friesen, 2011, p.7)

While in theological literature the concept of ecstasy plays quite a significant role, our aim here is not to explore these various usages in all their detail or to provide an incisive account of the what role such usage play in various theological treatises. Neither is the brief conceptual history aimed at finding the true authentic representation of the concept of ecstasy in theology. Rather, this brief discussion provides us with a limited genealogy of the concept of ecstasy and the conceptual horizon framed by the Western theological tradition within which it developed. From this discussion, what proves relevant for our project is that despite its divergent manifestations, ecstasy has always denoted a fundamental notion of displacement. In all its expression, ecstasy maintained a sense of a movement of the concerned subject/object from its position, a movement toward something, or a shift from stasis. Though the regular meaning of the word does not hint at the kind of transfiguration of self that the concept denotes in philosophical-theological literature, it still, in a metaphorical manner, alludes to the movement that disrupts stasis. For example, deploying the word ecstasy in expressions of joy and sorrow denotes an extremity of the concerned emotion, such that one ceases to function normally. The excess of emotion overwhelms rational and cognitive faculties to the extent that their regular functioning is disrupted. As already hinted at, if consciousness means the absolute proximity of being with itself, then the ecstatic state would put that proximity into a temporary suspension. The moment of ecstasy is the moment of insanity, madness, blindness, unreason - being removed from oneself, not *one* self anymore, rather a splitting of the self. It is a moment of loss, a moment of losing *one* self.

If we carefully scrutinize the various deployments of ecstasy referred to in this essay in terms of its metaphorical and philosophical content, it appears that the kind of displacement this concept signifies has two definitive features. The first feature concerns the temporal status of the movement of displacement. In the previous discussion, it can be seen that the ecstatic state occurs *to* a subject/object, implying the preexistence of a fully formed self prior to being displaced. This self is static in nature and it is the origin of the ecstatic movement. In this state, consciousness and being are in absolute proximity. This static subject/self then loses itself, achieves a different state, and transcends its own contours. The absolute proximity of the self to itself is lost, the subject as *one* self is lost. This moment of loss, of the absence of proximity, the disappearance of reason is the moment of the ecstatic - a *self-outside-of-it(s)self*. But this status of the self as *outside-of-it(s) self* is attained or achieved through various means, and it is not the original state of the self/subject, and

at the beginning there exists the fully formed, self-referential self/subject. At the beginning, therefore, the self/subject remains in stasis. In this sense, ecstasy is ontologically derivative, while stasis is the original status of self/subject in terms temporality. This is the first aspect of ecstasy.

The second feature concerns the direction of displacement which has crucial implications for the ontological status of the self/subject/being. As we have already established, ecstasy is derivative because it is an achieved state. In the initial phase, the subject/self/being is identical to itself, it is self-referential. Therefore, the primary ontological structure of the self/subject/being is stasis, proximity to itself. It is fully present to itself. That is, an inspection into the structure of its being will not refer to something other than what it is in its immediacy. Furthermore, the achievement of ecstasy, the *becoming-ecstatic* of the self is a condition or situation that this wholly present, unified self/subject/being undergoes later. Ecstasy befalls this fully present, unified self. Hence, being present to oneself as *one* self prior to its splitting or losing itself in the ecstatic stage functions as the primary ontological condition for a self/subject/being. So, the movement of displacement is one from the domain of presence to the domain of the ecstatic. Therefore, the self in its unaltered, original state of stasis characterizes the ontology of the self/being/subject, whereas ecstasy is a contingent factor. In such a formulation, ecstasy does not figure as the foundational principle of the self/subject/being. And the possibility of retracing the state of stasis, the state of self-referentiality is always on the horizon. Thus, the ancient philosophical and theological concept of ecstasy presupposes a notion of presence.

But the modern concept of ecstasy, in a certain sense, stands distinctively apart from the valuation of the concept elaborated above. With the emergence of existentialism - according to the dominant history of philosophy²⁶ - the concept of ecstasy became more radicalized. In this phase - and we are still dwelling in this phase as will be argued later - ecstasy is not only limited to its theological formulation. It is not a contingent factor anymore, it has crucial ontological implications. As Alphonso Lingis notes in *Foreign Bodies* (1994) -

Existential philosophy defined the new concepts of ecstasy or of transcendence to fix a distinct kind of being that is by casting itself out of its own given place and time, without

²⁶ Here we are using the both the words “history” and “philosophy” in metaphysical sense.

dissipating, because at each moment it projects itself-or, more exactly, a variant of itself-into another place and time. Such a being is not ideality, defined as intuitable or reconstitutable anywhere and at any moment. Ex-istence, understood etymologically, is not so much a state or a stance as a movement, which is by conceiving a divergence from itself or a potentiality of itself and casting itself into that divergence with all that it is. This bizarre concept of an ecstatic or self-transcending existence was formulated so as to define the inner constitution of subjectivity and to distinguish it decisively from the way objective reality, the facts, are-which have to be located where and when they are because for them being is being at a point *p* and a time *t*." (Lingis, 1994, p.6)

In its more modern conception, ecstasy explicitly defines the ontological status of being. It can no longer be located in a given here-now or there-then. Unlike the ancient philosophical-theological understanding, the displacement that ecstasy here entails does not originate from a static spatio-temporal coordinate. The two features we saw maintained in the classical notion of ecstasy - its status as derivative and its trajectory from stasis to movement - do not apply to the modern conceptualization of ecstasy. Rather, the ecstatic being comes to be by virtue of its failure to be located in a definite spatio-temporal locus. It is always already in duration (Lingis, 1994, p.6), exceeding the limitations imposed by the original proximity of the self to itself, and this is what defines its ontological status. The state of being in duration, of forever exceeding itself, always being at some remove from absolute proximity with oneself structures the ontological status of this being. Here, ecstasy is the condition of possibility for the being to be, it is foundational to the structure of being. Lingis's insertion of a hyphen in the word "existence" to describe ecstasy as what is proper to being points precisely towards this fact. Existence is always already ex-sistence. Since ecstasy - meaning literally (being) put out of itself or standing outside itself - is what defines the being of beings, displacement is not something derivative that befalls a being which was originally *wholly-present-to-itself-in-the-here-and-now-and-there-and-then*. Rather, displacement is fundamental to the constitution of the being. Borrowing from Jean-Luc Nancy, it can be said that being ecstatic is the being of being itself (Nancy, 1994, p.6). Therefore, this notion of ecstasy which we formally witness to have emerged with the advent of existentialism is ontologically at variance with its ancient philosophical-theological notions. Following Nancy's cue that a rigorous

understanding of ecstasy must require that we follow the route of a particular theoretical avenue passing through Heidegger, we would now look into the work of Heidegger, especially his notion of ek-static temporality in order to have a deeper understanding of the notion of ecstasy.

Heidegger's Ek-static Temporality

Heidegger's notion of ecstasy primarily revolves around the concept of human beings as *Dasein*, because the ontological ground of being is temporality. As David Farrell Krell notes, the ontological exploration of *Dasein*, apart from enlightening us on its meaning, would also provide an understanding of being in general (Krell, 2015, p. 19). That is, an exploration of the structure of its temporality - given that temporality is the authentic meaning of care and care is the structure of *Dasein* - would deliver a general understanding of the ontological structure of being in general. As Krell notes, being, in the light of an understanding of being which will emerge out of the investigation into the temporality of *Dasein*, would be -

something like a horizon, a backdrop, ground, or upon-which (*Woraufhin*) onto which we project beings of all kinds, handy items in our everyday world or even scientifically investigated entities, discloses to us the being of beings (*das Sein des Seienden*). If the ontological meaning of care and concern lies in temporality, then the upon-which of all projection may well be time as such. (Krell, 2015, p. 19)

As Derrida notes reading Heidegger, temporalization is the very movement of ek-sistence (Derrida, 2016, p.155). As already mentioned, the insertion of the hyphen points towards the standing-outness of human beings. Human beings are ek-sistent not in the sense that they stand apart from others (Arola, 2008, p. 44). Standing-apartness in such a sense would secure human beings, as subject and self, in terms of presence and locate them firmly within the *definitive here-and-now-and-there-and-then*. Rather, as Lingis notes, this standing-outness places them in duration where it exceeds itself by spilling itself over the immediacy that presence stands for (Lingis, 1994,

p.6). And it is this notion of being that emerges from Heidegger's understanding of temporality as ecstatic. So, what is ecstasy in terms of temporality? Moreover, what is temporality?

Temporality is the meaning of the being of *Dasein*, and the analysis of temporality provides access to the prelapsarian foundations of the structure of being (Dastur, 1999, p. 34). Therefore, by tautology, inquiring into the being of *Dasein* would thus be exploring temporality itself. For Heidegger, the “meaning” or “sense” of a phenomenon stands for what makes that particular phenomenon an “articulated, differentiated unity” (Backman, 2015, p.84). And for Heidegger, the meaning of a phenomenon is nothing but its context of temporality. For *Dasein* in particular, it is temporality that forms this context; it is temporality which is the authentic meaning of being, i.e., temporality is what makes being articulable as a differentiated unity (Backman, 2015, p. 84).

Temporality constitutes the factual existence of the being of *Dasein*. Now, what is the structure of this temporality?

Before responding to this question, it must be emphasized that situating being in terms of temporality is not unique to Heidegger alone. Instead, as Heidegger notes, the question of temporality has always been fundamental to ontological concerns, starting from ancient Greek philosophy and spanning to our present philosophical scenario. The early formulations on temporality that came into being with Plato and Aristotle have been sustained in the later philosophical development from Descartes to Bergson via Kant (Heidegger, 2010, p.17). But Heidegger contends that the complexity of temporal structures escaped the Greeks because they conceived it as one being among others (Heidegger, 2010, p. 25). To them, time remained as just another entity. And by being just another entity, it did not necessitate the kind of analysis to which Heidegger would subject it in his treatise. Therefore, without a rigorous understanding of time, Greek philosophers and philosophy trod a path that could justly be called paradoxical for the following reason.

Time is fundamental to the constitution of being, but Greek philosophy tried to understand the being of time within the horizon of a general pre-understanding of being. In other words, whereas the horizon of being itself should have been premised on the basis of an analysis of temporality since without adequately understanding of temporality no proper understanding of being is possible, Greek philosophy proceeded to address the being of time which de facto presupposed an implicit understanding of being. Therefore, it can be said that in a way, ancient

Greek philosophy was trying to address being by following a circular argument. By assuming time to be just another being like any other, it already presupposed a notion of being whereas the question of being - irrespective of its individuality - had to be broached first.²⁷ And following this path, Greek philosophers concluded the understanding of being by conceiving it in terms *parousia* or *ousia*. As Heidegger puts it- “Beings are grasped in their being as “presence”; that is to say, they are understood with regard to a definite mode of time, the “present”” (Heidegger, 2010, p.24).

We have already discussed in detail how being, in Greek philosophy, was conceived of as *parousia* - constant presence. But why is presence accorded so much privilege? According to Heidegger, the privilege accorded to the present flows from the Greek definition of human beings as *zōon logon echon* (ζῷον λόγος ἔχων) (Heidegger, 2010, p.24). *zōon logon echon* signifies a creature defined by its access to speech.²⁸ The Greeks, in their pre-philosophical and philosophical understanding, defined man as the being who speaks (Heidegger, 2010, p.159). It is in language that being can be accessed. That is why, maintains Heidegger, philosophy for Plato is essentially dialectical.

Aristotle, however, rejects this concept of philosophy as essentially dialectical, for he placed philosophy on a more radical foundation of νοεῖν or *noein* which means – “the simple apprehension of something objectively present in the sheer objective presence (vorhandenheit)” (Heidegger, 2010, p.24). To access being, νοεῖν functions as the best avenue. Hence, in Aristotle, dialectics is rejected in favour of νοεῖν. But, in terms of its ontological structure, νοεῖν or *noein* is not fundamentally different from logos; rather, they have the same temporal constitution which is “that of a pure “presentation” of something that reveals itself through them” (Dastur, 1999, p. 14). In this revelation, there is no gap between being and knowing, the relation between the two is one of absolute proximity. Thus being as being able to have access to speech is what constitutes within the Greek philosophical tradition the absolute privilege granted to presence, and this philosophical orientation, as especially discussed throughout Derrida's entire oeuvre, prevailed in Western philosophy for the next two millennia (Derrida, 1998).

²⁷ “The attempt is made to grasp time itself in the structure of its being within the horizon of an understanding of being which is oriented toward time in an inexplicit and naive way”(Heidegger, 2010, p.25)

²⁸ ἔχων (*echon*) has been translated as “discourse or talk” in Macquarrie & Robinson’s translation. (Heidegger, 1962, p.47)

The structure of temporality that privileges the present understands time through calculability in terms of an earlier and later where both rotate around the centrality of the now, i.e., the centrality of the present as present. Such a conception adheres to the common sense understanding of time which conceives it as a straight line stretching uninterruptedly from past via present towards the future. Comprehending time this way would mean that we exist in the now that it is at this very moment. However, this present which is present at this very moment will be removed from its status as present because this moment, which *was* (present) a moment ago, does not exist in the present anymore, it has slipped into the past. And instead of this now that *was* present a moment earlier, I head towards that which was not there before. This is the domain of the future towards which my present is driven. So, to put it schematically, the linear understanding of time would be simply like this - I exist in the now, which in a moment will become past, and that which is not there at present would become present. Time, therefore, is a succession of now-s, or a modification of presence. This, according to Aristotle, is the essence of time- “this, namely, is time: that which is counted in the motion encountered in the horizon of the earlier and the later” (Aristotle, as cited in Heidegger, 2010, p.400). Earlier and later, or earlier now and later now - this is how time functions in this understanding of temporality which has, for the greater period, dominated the history of knowledge production, both within and outside the disciplinary boundary of philosophy (Rovelli, 2018)

Being, when understood within the presence oriented temporal structure, appears to have a relation of exteriority with time. Exploring this theme by reading Heidegger's *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (Heidegger, 1975), Large argues that Aristotle - as Heidegger reads him - understands time in terms of motion, but this motion itself does not belong to time, and neither does time belong to motion. For example, at a particular moment in time, T1, something is in a particular state. Later, at moment T2, this thing becomes something else by changing its physical state. So, from T1 to T2, the thing itself has undergone a motion, but time itself, the movement of T1 to T2, does not form an aspect of this change. Rather, concerning this change, its position is that of an *along-with* (Large, 2008, p. 86). Time is merely this counting, but the counting itself does not belong to change. Rather it resides in the experience of the human being who does the counting (Large, 2008, p. 86). This is what Aristotle conveys when he considers time as the horizon of earlier and later.

However, the “now” is not just a mode of time based on succession, there is more to it. Earlier or later, before or after, are temporal terms with which we count and place the “now” in a definite coordinate of past, present, or future. But in themselves, they are not integral to time as such, but are modes of how we experience it. Therefore, time reveals itself not as a countable entity but as experience of a transition stretching into what has been and what will be (Large, 2008, p.87). Without these two modes, the present or the now would be impossible. As Large puts it -

This appears to give the 'now' more thickness than is initially implied by the limited image of the time line. Every now point both refers to a 'no longer' and a 'not yet'... I think of each significant assignment of time as a particular 'then' and it is this 'then' which becomes reified into an infinite series of nows. The pragmatic origin of the metaphysical view of time is only visible through the 'before' and 'after' and 'earlier' and 'later'. Being 'now' is not a property of a thing, but a 'making present' or 'enpresenting' (Gegewärtigen) in relation to Dasein.. Making present is significant only in relation to the past and the future as it is experienced by Dasein. So the reason that 'before' and 'after', 'earlier' and 'later' are implicit to time, and every now point is stretched between a 'no longer' and the 'not yet', is not because of a strange property of time as some kind of mysterious substance which things are in, but because the Being of Dasein is temporal. (Large, 2008, pp. 87 - 89)

Time, which structures being, or rather, which *is* the structure of being, is not a linear succession of several nows, and this “thick” now is what ek-static temporality is about. But making this claim does not elaborate the radicalism of Heidegger’s notion of ek-static temporality, because the absence of succession of *nows* might simply mean that the moment that now *is* is not fixed in a definite location but spills over onto both past and future. Though such a formulation looks at time as spanning across its dimensionality into past and future, it does not destabilise the now-centric notion of time. Rather, keeping the fundamental ontological structure of the now intact, it merely extends it instead of keeping it fixed to a well-defined locus. Such formulation of time remains analogous to the concept of ecstasy observed in ancient Greek philosophical-theological tradition. Because, similar to their notion of ecstasy, the spilling over or extension here still passes through the present, and the future and the past function as modifications of present. It does not

deny that presence *is* and never relinquishes its rootedness in this presence. Even though this spilling over here is of ontological significance and not a contingent factor, it still does not grant ecstasy an originary status and does not question the presuppositions of presence as such.

But Heidegger's understanding of temporality as ek-static goes much beyond a simple extension of now into what has been and what is not yet. Lest it fails to capture the intricacy of one of Heidegger's central arguments concerning *Dasein*, I feel it would be just to quote Heidegger at length here to present in its fullness his conceptualization of temporality which posits ek-stasis as the fundamental ontological condition of the present -

What makes possible the being of *Dasein*, and thus its factual existence? What is projected in the primordial existential project of existence revealed itself as anticipatory resoluteness. What makes possible this authentic being-whole of *Dasein* with regard to the unity of its articulated structural whole? Expressed formally and existentially, without constantly naming the complete structural content, anticipatory resoluteness is the being toward one's ownmost, eminent potentiality-of-being. Something like this is possible only in that *Dasein* can come toward itself at all in its ownmost possibility and hold itself in this possibility as possibility in this letting-itself-come-toward-itself; in other words, in that it exists. This letting-come-toward-itself of the eminent possibility that it endures is the primordial phenomenon of the future. If authentic or inauthentic being-toward-death belongs to the being of *Dasein*, this is possible only as futural in the sense indicated now and to be more closely defined later. Here "future" does not mean a now that has not yet become "actual" and that sometime will be for the first time, but the coming in which *Dasein* comes toward itself in its ownmost potentiality-of-being. Anticipation makes *Dasein* authentically futural in such a way that anticipation itself is possible only in that *Dasein*, as existing, always already comes toward itself, that is, is futural in its being in general.

Anticipatory resoluteness understands *Dasein* in its essential being-guilty. This understanding means: taking over being-guilty in existing, to be the thrown ground of nullity. But to take over thrown-ness means to authentically be *Dasein* in the way that it always already was. Taking over thrownness, however, is possible only in such a way that futural *Dasein* can be its ownmost "how it always already was," that is, its "having-been."

Only because Dasein in general is as I am having-been, can it come futurally toward itself in such a way that it comes back. Authentically futural, Dasein is authentically having-been. Anticipation of the most extreme and ownmost possibility comes back understandingly to one's ownmost having-been. Dasein can be authentically having-been only because it is futural. In a certain sense, having been arises from the future...Coming back to itself, from the future [zukiinftig], resoluteness brings itself to the situation in making it present. Having-been arises from the future in such a way that the future that has-been (or better, is in the process of having-been) releases the present from itself. This unified phenomenon of the future that makes present in the process of having-been is what we call temporality. (Heidegger, 2010, pp.310-311)

What makes itself immediately visible in the excerpt quoted above is the loss of self-referentiality of the present. It is not merely a present that extends into the past and the future, but it is the ekstasis of present into the past and future that enpresents the presence of the present. As Arola notes in his work, *Dasein's* existence in the present becomes possible only through its ekstasis into what has been and what is yet to be (Arola, 2008, p. 54). The present that Dasein *is*, *is* forged by the absence of self-referentiality caused by the threefold process of ekstasis.

First of them is anticipatory resoluteness which is, as Heidegger notes – “the *being towards* one's ownmost potentiality-of-being” (Heidegger, 2010, p.185). What does this *being-towardsness* consist of? It consists of *Dasein's* coming toward itself in its “ownmost potentiality”, i.e., becoming what it is about to be in terms of being itself. Thus, *Dasein* is always running ahead of itself, which constitutes its futural nature (Heidegger, 2010, p. 311). However, what separates this futurity from its vulgar understanding that a presence orientated conceptualization of time entails is that here, the relation between present and future is not a simple one based on presence/absence of the now. Here, future is not subordinate to the present; it is not a present to come, it is not an absent present which would attain fullness in its actualization.²⁹ Rather, it is that towards which *Dasein* is projected, it keeps *Dasein* always ahead of itself. It functions through its non-presence. That is, its

²⁹ It is this aspect of Heidegger's argument on the futural nature of Dasein that William Blattner calls the “unattainability thesis” (Blattner in Backman, 2015, 85).

very unattainability and non-presence constitute *Dasein* in its meaningful present (Backman, 2105, p.85). Futurity, understood in this sense, is *Dasein*'s "coming towards itself in its ownmost potentiality of being" and it is the anticipation of this "letting-itself-come-toward-itself" that makes *Dasein* futural. This futurity is the existential character *Dasein* (Backman, 2015, p.82).

But what is it that comes to *Dasein* in its letting-itself-come-toward-itself? What comes out of the future is nothing but *Dasein* in its having been. As Heidegger emphatically mentions, since *Dasein* exists as its "having-been", its coming towards itself futurally can become possible only to the extent that *Dasein* always already *has been*. *Dasein*, as Vallega-Neu notes, "can come toward itself only insofar it *is* a having-been. Da-sein can come toward itself only in coming back toward itself" (Vallega-Neu, as cited in Arola, 2008, p.54).

Thus, if futurity forms the first movement of ekstasis, then here, in trying to respond to this question along the lines of Heidegger's exegesis, we have already hit upon its second movement - that is, the temporal dimension of the past where *Dasein* comes towards its "having-been" by way of being projected towards future. It is in this precise sense, that Heidegger claims that *Dasein* can authentically *be* as its having-been only because it is futural. Its past arises from its future.

The third aspect of *Dasein*'s temporality consists of its fallenness into its surroundings with which it interacts, it is a movement through which *Dasein* gets absorbed into the present. But for Heidegger, this being-in-the-present as being-absorbed-in-its-present is disclosed in and through *Dasein*'s futurity. Thus, Heidegger writes – "Anticipatory resoluteness discloses the actual situation of the there in such a way that existence circumspectly takes care of the factual things at hand in the surrounding world in action." (Heidegger, 2010, p. 311). And we have already observed, in anticipatory resoluteness *Dasein* comes to its *having been*. Thus, in being futural, it finds its already *having-been*.

Now, thinking these three modes together - being ahead of itself (future), being always already having been (past), and being alongside (present) - it can be said that *Dasein* comes towards itself futurally in anticipation, but it is also a coming- towards-itself where it comes back to what it always has been. The having been that comes out of the future is what constitutes the present (Critchley, 2020). Present, therefore, does not function like a proper noun. Rather, present is in

actuality a *presencing*, a doing.³⁰ This is what Heidegger calls the temporality of *Dasein*, where the present itself is always already dispersed. The present is not self-referential anymore, neither does its implication into past and future signify a movement that starts from a static presence of an original, fully present now. Rather, without its ekstasis into future and past, without its being originally displaced into its having been and moving ahead of itself, the present becomes impossible.³¹ As Dastur rightly observes -

In calling the future, then having been, and the present, "ecstases of temporality," it was an issue of emphasizing *temporalization* as a pure movement or event and not the stepping outside of oneself of a "subject" that would first be "in itself." The traditional representations of time all tend to conceive temporalization in reference to an entity that would function as its substrate or principle, thus giving time itself "subsistence", comprised of successive "nows." Far from presupposing the intratemporality of a "subjectivity" or a "self," this "ecstatic" temporality, on the contrary, makes self-constancy, *selbstständigkeit*, possible (BT 369-370/323), insofar as this "autonomy" of *Dasein* is not what escapes time but, rather, that which constitutes itself "temporally" and "authentically" as such. (Dastur, 1999, p. 37)

The importance of Heidegger's conceptualization of ek-stasis in dismantling the hegemony of the present cannot be doubted as it reformulates the present as a doing, and displaces it from the self-referential structure characteristic of the metaphysical gesture that dominated Western

³⁰Heidegger writes – "Is time at all and does it have a place? Obviously, time is not nothing. Accordingly, we maintain caution and say: there is time, We become still more cautious, and look carefully at that which shows itself to us as time, by looking ahead to Being in the sense of presence, the present. However, the present in the sense of presence differs so vastly from the present in the sense of the now that the present as presence can in no way be determined in terms of the present as the now...Presence determines Being in a unified way - as presencing and allowing-to-presence, that is, as unconcealing." (Heidegger, 1972, pp.11-12)

³¹ If we understand presence in terms of a stasis where something is in immediate proximity to itself, or where the distance between being and thinking shrinks to the extent that one comes to define the other and where being is immediately present to itself and securely fixed in its spatiotemporal contour, then such an understanding of the present is precisely what Heidegger's postulations contest. Here, stasis does not constitute the origin point of temporality. That is, the movement in terms of temporality does not begin from an atemporal now which then spills over into past and future. But it is by being-ahead of itself in which being comes towards itself in its having been that the present becomes articulable.

philosophy since the early Greeks. But the formulation on temporality presented in Heidegger's work brings with it a host of issues that it claimed to have severed itself from, and being fundamental to Heidegger's notion of ek-static temporality, these issues in a way undo the ramifications that his theorization could have had. The problem we are referring to here is precisely what we discussed with reference to Heidegger's *Being and Time* - that is, privileging of the presence. The very privileging of presence comes back to haunt Heidegger's postulation on ek-stasis in a roundabout manner, and this particular problem seems to seep in through the latent humanism in Heidegger's work.

Heidegger's humanism does not follow straightforwardly from the European metaphysical tradition, for even though the *Dasein* is nothing other than human, it differs significantly from the enlightenment figure of the unified human subject. Not only Heidegger but also various other philosophers working within the continental philosophical tradition announced in their work a certain break with the humanist notion of the human and replaced it with a more neutral horizon somewhat synonymous with Sartre's notion of human-reality (Derrida, 1982a, p.115). Nonetheless, these works, while critical of a particular spirit of humanism, did not question the concept of the human, but maintained affinity with the presuppositions that follow from the post-enlightenment metaphysical notion of the human. Heidegger's conceptualization of *Dasein* is located within this horizon (Derrida, 1982, p. 116).

But in what sense can it be said that Heidegger's philosophy bears the mark of humanism? How is it that Heidegger's philosophy ended up reproducing the same tenets it was supposed to have been critical of? And what role does it play with regard to the conceptualization of the ek-statism of being? And despite Heidegger's understanding of being in terms of ek-stasis instead of *parousia*, in what sense does this put presence in a position of privilege? Response to these questions have already been touched upon, albeit tangentially, in our foregoing discussion. It concerns the privileging of man in the analytic of being. Following Derrida, let us take up the formal question of being in Heidegger's *Being and Time* once again.³²

³² Since I will be following Derrida's reading here, and as Derrida uses the Macquarrie and Robinson translation of the text, in this particular segment, sections from Heidegger's text which will be cited here in our discussion of Derrida's reading of Heidegger will also use the same translation as the one used by Derrida.

Resurgence of Presence in Heidegger's Notion of Being

Any inquiry into being must start from the position of non-knowledge of being, because if I already know what being is, then the investigation would be redundant. Therefore, an investigation into being must have as its prerequisite the absence of knowledge of being. However, as Heidegger mentions, even when we are posing the question of being, we are already within the orbit of a certain understanding of being. To elaborate, if verbalized concisely, the investigation into the structure and nature of being would be nothing but “what is (the meaning of) being?” Since being remains the object of investigation in this question, we might presuppose that this question emerges from our absolute non-knowledge of being. However, according to Heidegger, this question reveals that a certain understanding of being is already present within the questioning apparatus. The question “what *is* being?” already presupposes some pre-understanding of “is”, i.e., being. Without this pre-understanding, it would be impossible to pose this question. Therefore, even in inquiring about being, we operate within a “vague” understanding of being. As Heidegger puts it -

Inquiry (Suchen), as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way. As we have intimated, *we always already* conduct our activities in an understanding of Being. Out of this understanding arise both the explicit question of the meaning of Being and the tendency that leads us toward its conception. We do not know what 'Being' means. But even if we ask, 'What is "Being"?', *we* keep within an understanding of the 'is,' though we are unable to fix conceptually what that 'is' signifies. We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed. But this vague average understanding of Being is still a *fact*. (Heidegger, as cited in Derrida, 1982a, p.124)

Derrida highlights that in the absence of any presuppositions, the figure of “we” - the ones who are raising the question of being - is that which de facto becomes privy to the response that an inquiry into being might yield. It is a “we” - we as human beings that ask the question of being, and

it is this “we” that remains the privileged site for understanding the structure of being. We have already touched upon the fact that for Heidegger, the ontological exploration of *Dasein* opens onto the question of being in general. That is, if one understands *Dasein* which we humans already are, then we will have found the adequate response to the question of the formal structure of being in general. As Heidegger formulates it -

If the question about Being is to be explicitly formulated...it requires us to prepare the way for choosing the right entity for our example, and to work out the genuine way of access to it. Looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing access to it—all these ways of behaving are constitutive of our inquiry, and therefore are modes of Being for those particular entities which we, the inquirers, are ourselves (eines Seienden, des Seienden, das wir, die Fragenden, je selbst sind). Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question (das Fragen dieser Frage) is an entity's mode of Being; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about (gefragt)—namely, Being. This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term 'Dasein' (fassen wir terminologisch als Dasein) (Heidegger, 1962, pp.26-17, as cited in Derrida, 1982a, p.126)

As Derrida observes, what appears from this passage is the theme of proximity. Understanding being means having an explanation of how being is looked at, how its meaning is grasped, finding out which object would be best for proceeding with these questions, and charting out a course for attaining knowledge of it. Since all these activities already structure the way that we - the being that we are - are, we are transparent to ourselves. We already are, or we already have immediate access to, the things that are required to understand being. In this sense, we are transparent to/in our own being. If we were to take up the question of being with regard to the being that we each are, then it would not require us to make a detour through some foreign entity outside us. Hence, the notion of transparency which an inquiry into being must presuppose, is nothing but the absolute proximity of the self to itself. That is, the being that we are, is assumed to be immediately present to itself. Even though this is an ontic fact and not an ontological one, a

certain proximity of self to itself is still maintained within this ontic horizon. And this privileging of proximity, proximity as presence, and presence as self-presence, remain foundational to the metaphysically grounded phenomenological tendency that Heidegger also reproduces in his critique of presence. Derrida's analysis of this privileging of proximity in Heidegger aptly captures its implication for the hegemonization of presence in terms of proximity of the self to itself -

The value of proximity, that is, of presence in general, therefore decides the essential orientation of this analytic of *Dasein*. The motif of proximity surely finds itself caught in an opposition which henceforth will unceasingly regulate Heidegger's discourse... Heidegger's thought will be guided by the motif of Being as presence—understood in a more originary sense than it is in the metaphysical and ontic determinations of presence or of presence as the present—and by the motif of the proximity of Being to the essence of man. (Derrida, 1982a, pp. 127-28)

If, in the bid to comprehend the structure of being, *Dasein* is taken up as the object of investigation because of its transparency in its own being, then it would imply that the question of being, even in Heidegger, much like the metaphysical tradition, is founded on the basis of privileging of presence by way of emphasis on the value of proximity. Since it is through its quality of remaining in the state of absolute proximity to itself that *Dasein* becomes the privileged site of understanding the structure of being, it cannot be denied that being in Heidegger's work is conceptualized in terms of presence. Modifying one of Derrida's statements on Heidegger's *Dasein*, it can be said that the question of being, though not immediately theorized in terms of presence, is nevertheless nothing other than synonymous with presence.³³ Therefore, the theme of proximity reinstalls presence at the centre of Heidegger's framework.

We must approach Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein* along these lines. Even though *Dasein* is not identical to subjective consciousness and is mostly devoid of the presupposition that the category of human entails, the mode of investigating into the structure of being functions as a manner of inquiry that makes explicit the true nature of being. The task is to bring into proximity

³³ Derrida's statement was – “*Dasein*, though not man, is nevertheless *nothing other* than man”. (Derrida, 1982a, p127).

what is distant at this moment. The understanding of being eludes us at this moment because philosophy has flourished on the basis of a certain forgetting of being. The task that Heidegger's phenomenological exercise sets for itself is to bring to light, to *unconceal*, what being has always-already been in its ontological structure. As Derrida notes, such an investigative method is, in the last instance, aimed at nothing but a technique that “makes explicit, practices a continual bringing to light, something which resembles, at least, a coming into consciousness, without break, displacement, or change of terrain.” (Derrida, 1982, p. 126). It is this impetus of making present, making proximate that finds manifestation in Heidegger's recourse to various metaphors that operates within a binary framework of near/far, concealment/unconcealment, proper/improper etc, binaries which function within the metaphysical dualism of absence/presence. In each of the pairs above, it is the first term that draws on the presuppositions that presence entails, and it is toward these terms that Heidegger's philosophy is skewed.

To briefly go back to our discussion of Heidegger's formulations of ek-stasis in terms of the themes elaborated above, we can say that even though Heideggerian notion of ek-stasis, as aptly pointed out by Critchley and Dastur, does not start from the static position of the present, and even though the present itself is conceived through temporal ek-stasis, we can see that the Heidegger does not dismantle the notion of presence *as such*. Rather, his notion of ekstasis tends to complicate presence. Let us elaborate..

In our everyday engagement with the world, we are oriented toward a metaphysical understanding of the present. In such a conceptualization, as Backman also notes, the future does not allow itself to be conceived as the domain of “open possibilities” (Backman, 2015, p.91), but signifies a derivative present. This is what, for Heidegger, signifies *improper* temporalization. By contrast, in ek-stasis, past and present are not mere derivatives of present; here, what has been and what is to come are not just forms of presence in the mode of absence. Instead, the ek-static temporal structure of *Dasein* is such that futurity and factual backgrounds are perceived to be actively constituting the present by situating it in terms of its orientedness towards the future and its groundedness in factual past. This is what constitutes the *proper* temporality of *Dasein* which is placed in contrast by Heidegger with the presence-centric *improper* temporality. Heidegger's theoretical thrust lies in pushing *Dasein* towards understanding itself in light of the temporality proper to it. Thus, in this sense, his formulations of ekstastic temporality can be considered a move

away from *improper* to the *proper* understanding of presence, a movement from untruth to truth, unreal to reality, appearance to essence, from distance (from truth) to proximity (to truth).

Therefore, it can be surmised that Heidegger's project is not to dismantle presence as such, but to situate it within its *proper*, true horizon. Backman, although hinting at a different attribute, aptly captures this aspect of Heidegger's ontological formulation in her brief essay titled *The Postmetaphysical Complications of Presence* (Backman, 2019)-

Heidegger's fundamental project consists in placing pure presence (ousia, the beingness or presence common to determinate beings) into a multidimensional, referential background that does not itself become immediately present as a determinate being (and is accordingly referred to by Heidegger as "nothing"), but simply backgrounds and contextualizes presence. In the most comprehensive perspective, it is precisely the dynamic interaction between these two aspects – their differentiation, on the one hand, and their referential intertwining, on the other – that "grants" and "gives" presence as meaningful... (Backman, 2019, pp. 148-49)

Heidegger's formulation of ek-static temporality is thus aimed not so much as a critique of the hegemony of presence as it is about understanding presence more authentically. Understanding present in terms of ekstasis is considered the authentic, original mode of understanding temporality, and the ordinary understanding of time as a modality of pseudo presence is considered a fall away from this authentic structure of temporality. And such expressions in Heidegger, as noted by Derrida, is typical of the gestures arising out of classical metaphysics founded on the basis of being as presence, where the modality of presence is proximity (Krell, 2015, p. 12). Thus, even as it advances a formidable challenge to the metaphysics of presence, Heidegger's postulations on ekstatic temporality ends up privileging presence, a trait it shares with the ontological tradition.

The discussion on Heidegger helped us conceptualize the theme of ecstasy or ek-stasis in a preliminary manner. It allowed us to understand, albeit provisionally, what an ontological structure that does not fit within the self-referential framework rooted in presence, proximity, and static origin might look like. But engaging critically with Heidegger's explication revealed that instead of questioning the concept of presence itself, Heidegger's elaboration focused more on

moving toward a proper, grounded understanding of presence as ek-static. The temporality based on ekstasis is what is proper, or original to *Dasein*, compared to which the metaphysical notion of temporality is considered a fallen understanding, a derivative, a moving away from how *Dasein* originally is. That is, even though Heidegger theorized ek-stasis as constitutive of being, it operated within the broader horizon of presence. Hence, Heidegger's analytic of being is a movement toward finding and restoring being to its origin, to its original, primary, primordial, prelapsarian mode of temporality. In this regard, Heidegger's analytic of being, his formulations on ekstasis, remains engulfed within the same metaphysical tradition he had set out to destroy.

In this section, we tried to develop a concept of ecstasy that would enable us to arrive at a position critical of the metaphysics of presence and allow us to conceive being without taking recourse to presence. As we noticed, Heidegger's analytic of *Dasein* remained anchored to presence by thematically invoking conceptual dualisms of origin/derivative, proper/improper, proximate/distance, pure/fallen etc. The concept of ekstasis, too, was no exception to such dualist machinations. Therefore, to conceptualize being beyond presence we must chart out a course that would allow us to arrive at a notion of ek-stasis without recourse to proximity, propriety and other such metaphoric and paleonymic concepts embedded within the horizon of presence. To do this, we would explore the work of Jacques Derrida in the following section.

But before discussing Derrida, we need to begin with the disclaimer that given the vast expanse of Derrida's corpus, it would be impossible to contain or summarize his philosophy into a subsection of this essay. Also, such a work is beyond the scope of our current project. We are interested in reading Derrida's work from an interested position, hence our exploration will be limited to only those sections which we believe to be relevant to our task. Therefore, even though we will be discussing Derrida's philosophical intervention popularly known as deconstruction, our aim here is not to present what deconstruction is as such³⁴ but our interest lies in understanding whether and how being can be conceived in a manner that would be irreducible to any determinations of presence, and this is what we would call originary ek-stasis that would provide a frame for reconceiving ontology, the question of being. Therefore, what we intend to elaborate in

³⁴ As Derrida and Bennington's enterprise makes evident, such a task is doomed from the very beginning (Bennington & Derrida, 1993)

the next section is not an account of deconstruction itself. Instead, it aims to understand and question through Derrida's deconstructive reading the problematic of presence, which has immense implication for rethinking ontology itself.

Reading Jacques Derrida: Rethinking Presence

In this section, we would try to understand ecstasy in an originary sense much different from Heidegger's exegesis. This originary ecstasy or originary ek-stasis will be our ariadne's thread in charting out the ontological framework of Judith Butler's works on sex, gender, body, and subjectivity in the later chapters. It needs to be noted that Derrida, in his work, never developed a concept of ek-stasis as such. Or, to put it more generally, one cannot locate any master concept as such in Derrida's entire corpus. But as I intend to show here briefly, concepts developed by Derrida allow us to envision ecstasy or ek-stasis in a non-metaphysical, originary manner. Hence, our task here in this brief space would be to provide by closely engaging some of Derrida's work a brief outline of this thematic, of what a notion of ecstasy beyond the horizon of the metaphysics of presence might look like, and how being can be thought in an ek-static manner.

In the history of ontology, presence manifests itself through the notion of *parousia*, which signifies being as constant presence. As Derrida puts it, the matrix of presence -

is the determination of being as presence in all the senses of this word . It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the center have always designated the constant of a presence-eidos, arche, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth. (Derrida, 2001, p.353)

That is, the philosophemes rooted in the metaphysics of presence are founded on the prior assumption of a constant presence of its central element. For instance, drawing from our elaborations on Heidegger, we observed how his entire project ran based on an understanding of an original, pre-fall, undifferentiated being underlying/prior to its vulgar

representations/manifestations, and how his project is at times geared at unconcealing this original, fully present presence. The movement of unconcealment implies that this pure being which had been forgotten in the history of Western philosophy has always already been there beneath its vulgar, everyday, improper, and vague understanding. Hence the task of destruction of metaphysics that Heidegger envisaged lies in rendering present the subterranean, constantly present structure of being that remains intact despite its fallenness.³⁵ Bennington's remark succinctly captures the dominance of the theme of presence and its myriad manifestations in the history of Western thought -

The metaphysics of presence thinks in two (logical and often historical) moments: presence first, of the world to a gaze, of a consciousness to its own inspection, of a meaning to a mind, of life to itself, of a breast to a mouth; absence next – the world veiled, consciousness astray, nonsense, death, debauchery, language, weaning. By thinking the second moment as derived with respect to the first, one returns, if only in thought, the complex to the simple, the secondary to the primary, the contingent to the necessary. This is the very order of reason and meaning, of the logos... (Bennington & Derrida, 1993, pp. 16-18)

In the history of Western philosophy, the privileging of being as presence manifests itself in various ways, and the dualism of speech/writing functions as one of the primary sites of this operation. To explore the conceptualization of being as presence, Derrida takes as his axis the metaphysical conceptualization of speech and writing as they figured in Western philosophy. To understand this, the following section would closely follow Derrida's interrogation of the speech/writing dualism.

³⁵ Or, if we recall Frost's critique of Butler (2014), we see that matter was granted, even if theoretically, a prediscursive, prelinguistic pre-interpellated existence resting beneath its representation. Her critical manoeuvre rested on the assumption of a certain form of materiality prior to all that comes after or happens to it. Her arguments presupposed a subterranean materiality prior to its interpellation in language, culture, and discourse. To some extent, the critical charge of a considerable number of new materialists lies in their shared will to find this constantly present prelapsarian, primordial materiality beyond the linguistic-discursive matrices of representation, and it is this same critical thrust that drives her reading of Butler's works.

Speech, Writing, and the Classical Ontological Framework of Presence

Derrida locates the history of writing in the horizon of Western thought within the matrix of presence. As its chronicle since antiquity bears testimony, writing has historically been considered as a debasement of presence. So, what is writing, and what caused its debasement? What is its relation to speech? And, what is Speech? Why is it valued at the cost of writing?

Speech or *phoné*, in general, means the system of speaking through phonic substances within a given linguistic system. Since speech implies hearing oneself speak through the phonetic elements (Derrida, 1998, p.7), it signifies the absolute proximity of voice and meaning, of voice and being. That is, in speaking to someone I hear myself speak immediately without the intrusion of any extraneous elements. The words I speak come from within myself, and its meaning is immediately present to my being. Speaking thus requires nothing external as it is pregnant with meaning in its immediacy. Thus, speech has the general figure of radical interiority and emblemizes the absence of all forms of exteriority.

Traversing the history of Western philosophy, Derrida notes that voice has been granted a relationship of essential and absolute proximity to mind, to thought. Within this paradigm, thought is immediately proximate to what the voice articulates. The relation between voice and meaning is considered natural and uncontaminated by exteriority. Among the various philosophers that Derrida cites, Aristotle's statement provides a succinct presentation of, as Gaston and Maclachlan notes, the framework of logocentrism -

Words are symbols or signs of affections or impressions of the soul; written words [graphómena], are the signs of words spoken [phoné]. As writing, so also is speech not the same for all races of men. But the mental affections...themselves, of which these words are primarily signs, are the same for the whole of mankind, as are also the objects of which

these affections are representations or likenesses, images, copies. (Aristotle, as cited in Gaston and Maclachlan, 2011, p.xvi)

As the statement above shows, words are the primary signs of mental experiences. There are various linguistic systems, so the manner of vocalizing experiences and thoughts would vary accordingly. However, despite these variations, thoughts remain unaltered. It's universal, same for everyone despite the variety of expression. Also, as Derrida notes reading Aubenque (Derrida, 1998, p.11, 324), expressing the feelings of the mind and thought is a "stage of transparency" (Derrida, 1998, p.11). It is a stage where the voice renders itself invisible, resulting in the materialization of mental substances in their immediacy. As if mind, the interiority of the being itself is articulated without the clothing of anything external. It is in this sense, that Derrida understands phonocentrism to be synonymous with logocentrism.³⁶ This absolute proximity of being and thought is the framework that determines the meaning of being in general as presence -

phonocentrism merges with the historical determination of the meaning of being in general as presence, with all the subdeterminations which depend on this general form and which organize within it their system and their historical sequence (presence of the thing to the sight as eidos, presence as substance/ essence/ existence [ousia], temporal presence as point [stigma] of the now or of the moment [nun] , the self-presence of the cogito, consciousness, subjectivity, the co-presence of the other and of the self, intersubjectivity as the intentional phenomenon of the ego, and so forth). (Derrida, 1998, p.12)

Thus, it is through the sense of absolute proximity that speech manifests one of the earliest expressions of being-as-presence. Let us elaborate.

³⁶ Derrida's citation of Hegel is crucial here - "This ideal motion, in which through the sound what is as it were the simple subjectivity [Subjektivität] , the soul of the material thing expresses itself, the ear receives also in a theoretical [theoretisch] way, just as the eye shape and colour, thus allowing the interiority of the object to become interiority itself...The ear, on the contrary, perceives [vernimmt] the result of that interior vibration of material substance without placing itself in a practical relation toward the objects, a result by means of which it is no longer the material form [Gestalt] in its repose, but the first, more ideal activity of the soul itself which is manifested" (Hegel, as cited in Derrida, 1998, p. 12).

In the form of a proposition, the act of delivering a speech would look like this – “a person is speaking/ about something” or “a person is putting her thought into words.” These propositions imply both the separation and connection between two elements that constitute speech - voice and thought. The speaker is thinking of something, and her faculty of thought contains certain elements which are ontologically separate from the act of speaking. These elements thus belong first to the horizon of thought, to the interiority of the being of the speaking subject. Irrespective of whether it is vocalized or not, it has a distinct ontological existence with regard to the forms of their externalization, and exists prior to and regardless of its articulation.³⁷

To deliberate in terms of the above propositions, the person speaking - either to himself or someone else - articulates her thoughts, experiences, or whatever she intends to communicate through phonetic substances. In this sense, voice comes *after* thought. But despite coming *after* thought, voice nonetheless tends to maintain an immediate relation with thought, because in the mode of being spoken, meaning/though is immediately present in the speech. To think through Derrida's citation of Aristotle, this is the stage of transparency where the word erases itself to make the meaning manifest at the moment of being uttered. In hearing oneself speak, there is no transportation of thought content as such, because thought is never separated from the speaking subject. The function of speech is thus to come into being in order to make itself non-present at the very moment of its presence. Its role is to render itself absent through its presence so that thought can present itself in an unmediated manner. It is a mode of pure auto affection within which the phenomenon of hearing-oneself-speak occurs. This auto affection finds a brilliant articulation in Husserl's deliberation on monologue³⁸ –

One of course speaks, in a certain sense, even in soliloquy, and it is certainly possible to think of oneself as speaking, and even as speaking to oneself, as, e.g., when someone says to himself: 'You have gone wrong, you can't go on like that.' But in the genuine sense of communication, there is no speech in such cases, nor does one tell oneself anything: one

³⁷ To recall Aristotle's statement, the activity of the mind is by right the same for everyone. If our point of reference is mind/thought, then the pain experienced by the mind would be the same for everyone, irrespective of how they are expressed.

³⁸ My reference to Husserl is deeply informed and influenced by Derrida's Reading of him in *Voice and Phenomenon* (Derrida, 2011)

merely conceives of oneself as speaking and communicating. In a monologue words can perform no function of indicating the existence of mental acts, since such indication would there be quite purposeless. For the acts in question are themselves experienced by us at that very moment. (Husserl, 2001, p.108)

Thus, by allowing the speaking subject to hear himself speak in the mode of soliloquy which any speech always already is, speech manifests the ultimate reduction of space (Derrida, 2011, p.68). In hearing oneself speak, meaning does not traverse through space but is constantly present within the horizon of being without distortion or rupture. Derrida's commentary on Husserl's deliberations on soliloquy succinctly captures the theme of presence in speech, and in order to understand this essential structure of speech and its valuation with regard to writing, I would quote Derrida's statement here at some length:

In order to really understand that in which the power of the voice resides...it is necessary to think the objectivity of the object. The ideal object is the most objective of objects; it is independent of the *hic et nunc* of events and of the acts of the empirical subjectivity who intends it. The ideal object can be repeated, to infinity, while remaining the same... But its ideal-being is nothing outside of the world; it must be constituted, repeated, <85> and expressed in a medium that does not impair the presence and the self-presence of the acts that intend it: a medium that preserves at once the presence of the object in front of the intuition and the presence to oneself, the absolute proximity of the acts to themselves. Since the ideality of the object is only its being-for a non-empirical consciousness, it can be expressed only in an element whose phenomenality does not have the form of mundanity. The voice is the name of this element. The voice hears itself. Phonic signs ("acoustic images" in Saussure's sense, the phenomenological voice) are "heard" by the subject who utters them in the absolute proximity of their present. The subject does not have to pass outside of himself in order to be immediately affected by its activity of expression. My words are "alive" because they seem not to leave me, seem not to fall outside of me, outside of my breath, into a visible distance; they do not stop belonging to me, to be at my disposal, "without anything accessory."...unnameable. The "apparent transcendence" of the voice,

therefore, is based on the fact that the signified, which is always essentially ideal, the "expressed" Bedeutung, is immediately present to the act of expression. This immediate presence is based on the fact that the phenomenological "body" of the signifier seems to erase itself in the very moment it is produced... The signifier that is animated by my breath and by the intention of signification (in Husserlian language the expression animated by the Bedeutungsintention) is absolutely close to me. The living act, the act that gives life, the Lebendigkeit that animates the body of the signifier and transforms it into an expression that wants to say, the soul of language, seems not to separate itself from itself, from its presence to itself. (Derrida, 2011, p 65-67)

Concerning the second aspect of speech, i.e., the status of speech when addressed to an audience other than oneself, the structure of presence elaborated above remains intact. For example, the speech delivered by the speaking subject might result in various outcome, because being ex-pressed, speech renders itself vulnerable to other possibilities of distortion. However, the presence of the speaking subject in the scene of the address obliterates these possibilities, because the speaker can clarify the intended meaning by various means should the chance of miscommunication arise. So, even though thought is being communicated to the receiver and traverses a spatial distance absent in soliloquy, its meaning - at least in the structural sense - remains self-identically present at every point of the communication process.³⁹

Thus, speech is a mode of proximity that structurally harbours the possibility of absolute nearness of being to phone, thought to object, being to knowing. One does not need to decipher or decode speech as such because by erasing itself at the moments of its presentation, speech is always already decoded and ushers into the milieu of the immediacy of meaning. It is defined by presence in terms of absolute proximity and, by association, unqualified diaphaneity.⁴⁰ And as Derrida puts

³⁹ The scene of speech described above strongly resonates with Rousseau's and Levi-Strauss's idealization of natural community "immediately present to itself, without difference, a community of speech where all the members are within earshot" (Derrida, 1998, p.136).

⁴⁰ "Phone, in effect, is the signifying substance given to consciousness as that which is most intimately tied to the thought of the signified concept. From this point of view, the voice is consciousness itself. When I speak, not only am I conscious of being present for what I think, but I am conscious also of keeping as close as possible to my thought, or to the "concept," a signifier that does not fall into the world, a signifier that I hear as soon as I emit it, that seems to depend upon my pure and free spontaneity, requiring the use of no instrument, no accessory, no force taken from the world. Not only do the signifier and the signified seem to unite, but also, in this confusion, the signifier seems to erase itself or to become

it, this phonocentrism is strongly supportive of, and also constituted by, the determination of being (of the entity) as presence. The history of Western philosophy is full of such entities, from Plato's *eidos*, Aristotle's *parousia*, to Heidegger's being, and it is this particular determination of being as presence that defines this epoch of Western thought, which can justly be called ontological. The primacy and privilege of speech comes into being from this milieu dominated by the determination of being as presence, and it is this determination that leads to the debasement of writing. But what is writing? And how does the metaphysical tradition of philosophy end up debasing writing? How is writing situated within the economy of presence?

Before providing a generalized commentary on the status of writing, let's look at a few particular instances within Western thought of how writing has been perceived. As Derrida notes, whenever the question of writing was taken up, it took place through a historicist lens that traced it as a merely historical phenomenon. Such an approach confines history to a progressivist narrative where one passes from something old to something new, a development, a technique erstwhile nonexistent. Following Derrida's footsteps, let us look into a brief excerpt from Étienne Bonnot Condillac's *Essays on the Origin of Human Knowledge* (2001). On writing, Condillac states -

Men in a state of communicating their thoughts by means of sounds, felt the necessity of imagining new signs capable of perpetuating those thoughts and of making them known to persons who are absent...The most natural means was thus to depict [dessiner] images of things. To express the idea of a man or of a horse, one represented the form of the one or of the other, and the first attempt at writing was nothing but a simple painting...the general history of writing proceeds by simple gradation from the state of painting to that of the letter; for letters are the final steps... (Condillac, as cited in Derrida, 1998, pp. 4-5)

Even though one might argue that the statement above sums up one thinker's singular position, Derrida shows clearly that the sentiment witnessed in Condillac's statement is not confined to him alone, but rather the entire history of Western philosophy is symptomatic of the

transparent, in order to allow the concept to present itself as what it is, referring to nothing other than its presence. The exteriority of the signifier seems reduced." (Derrida, 1982b, p.22)

position shared by Condillac. In what sense should one read this statement is something that we will delve into, but first let us present from Derrida's work two more excerpts from the history of Western philosophy. Of course, the context of these two thinkers is diverse and the role that the concept of writing and the theme that it manifests in the respective thinker's oeuvre are conceivably different, but what remains invariably the same is the status of writing. The first two statements are from Rousseau, and the third one is from Plato's *Phaedrus*:

Languages are made to be spoken, *writing serves only as a supplement to speech*...Speech represents thought by conventional signs, and writing represents the same with regard to speech. Thus the art of writing is nothing but a *mediated representation* of thought.
(Rousseau, as cited in Derrida, 1998, p. 144)

Writing is nothing but the representation of speech; it is bizarre that one gives more care to the determining of the *image* than to the object. (Rousseau, as cited in Derrida, 1998, p. 27)

The story goes that Thamous⁴¹ expressed himself at length to Theuth about each of the branches of expertise, both for and against them. It would take a long time to go through all Thamous' views, but when it was the turn of writing, Theuth said, 'Your highness, this science will increase the intelligence of the people of Egypt and improve their memories. For this invention is a potion for memory and intelligence.' But Thamous replied, 'You are most ingenious, Theuth. But one person has the ability to bring branches of expertise into existence, another to assess the extent to which they will harm or benefit those who use them. The loyalty you feel to writing, as its originator, has just led you to tell me the opposite of its true effect. It will atrophy people's memories. Trust in writing will make them remember things by relying on marks made by others, from outside themselves, not on their own inner resources, and so writing will make the things they have learnt disappear

⁴¹ This brief account presented by Socrates in *Phaedrus* (Plato, 2002) involves two characters - Theuth and Thamous. Theuth was one of the ancient Egyptian deity and was the inventor of numbers, arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy, and writing. And Thamous was the king of Egypt around the same time period (Plato, 2002, p.68).

from their minds. Your invention is a potion for jogging the memory, not for remembering. You provide your students with the *appearance* of intelligence, not real intelligence. Because your students will be widely read, though without any contact with a teacher, they will seem to be men of wide knowledge, when they will usually be ignorant. (Plato, 2002, pp. 68-69)⁴²

From Plato, Rousseau, to Condillac, the statements above exhibit one common feature - that writing is a function of absence. It might be the absence of speech, absence of speech in the form of memory, absence of the master as the reservoir of logos, or absence of the addressee. In essence, writing, as representing/supplementing speech, comes into being whenever absence becomes manifest in a scene of utterance. It is in this sense that writing is considered to be the domain of secondarity with regard to speech. It has a mere instrumental function of standing in for speech when it is absent, and it enters the moment when the immediate conveyance of meaning through the phonic signifier becomes impossible. Thought, which is primary, is contained immediately in phonè, and phonè is represented by writing, which makes it a representation of representation, or in Derrida's word, "signifier of the signifier" (Derrida, 1998, p.7). It emerges in the absence of speech, meaning, thought.

What does absence, that Condillac speaks of and that Plato or Rousseau imply, signify when it comes to writing? This absence, as noted by Derrida, in its most classic expression, figures in terms of continuous modification and progressive extenuation of presence (Derrida, 1988, p.5) because writing does not negate presence but defers it. Speech/thought signifies absolute presence, and writing allows one to access this present when it has ceased to exist in time. It "supplants" presence, and for this reason, writing, in Condillac's formulations, is a "modification of presence" (Derrida, 1988, pp. 5-6).

The speech/writing binary thus functions within the general dualism of presence/absence where presence is a self-sufficient category that can be conceptually sustained in its own terms. In

⁴² This reference to Plato comes from Derrida's reading of him in *Dissemination* (Derrida, 1981). Derrida refers to this particular section in page 76 of his book, but he doesn't present the entire story at once, rather breaks it off in the middle to engage with it analytically. However, in order to present the story at once to facilitate an unbroken flow of reading, Instead of quitting from Derrida's book, I chose to use the original text of *Phaedrus* (Plato, 2002).

order to *be*, it does not require anything else other than itself, other than the absolute proximity and nondifferentiability with itself; whereas, in contrast, absence is derived from presence, its existence as a temporal mode of being is dependent on presence. In this sense, it is a deferred presence. Hence the goal, in philosophical discourses and other systems of thought in general, has always been to move towards this presence which is deferred in absence. Philosophical systems and arguments bear testimony to this movement oriented towards the retrieval of what was there before its distortion into modes of modifying the original presence (Culler, 1982, pp.91-92).⁴³ And within the ontological tradition which privileges presence, the notion of absence in the sense of moving away from the immediacy of being, absence as the absence of proximity to being, figure as reasons for the debasement of writing. Writing is considered to be the mere vehicle of thought, a technique that comes after thought, truth, *eidos*, *ousia*. Rorty epitomizes such a position when he states that -

Writing is an unfortunate necessity; what is really wanted is to show, to demonstrate, to point out, to exhibit, *to make one's interlocutor stand at gaze before the world* ((emphasis added)...In a mature science, the words in which the investigator 'writes up' his results should be as few and as *transparent* as possible. (Rorty in Culler, 1982, p. 90)

As Rorty clearly states - and to reiterate, it is not just Rorty alone, but his statement represents the major tradition in the history of Western thought - the goal of writing is to efface itself such that the thought it is pregnant with becomes as transparent as possible. Writing remains at some distance from thought which precedes and pre-exists writing. Writing something is not an end in itself, and within a system of thought, writing, in general, should not be the goal either. What is required of thinkers is to “make one's interlocutor stand at gaze before the world”, i.e. make the world transparent to the gaze of the seer. And, one way to do that, as Rorty suggests, is to write using as few words as possible so that the task of writing itself doesn't weigh on or affect the

⁴³ In chapter 2 & 3, our engagement with new materialist criticisms of Butler would reveal this same thematic within new materialism. The guiding thread of new materialism is to retrieve matter from its distorted representation in language and discourse. Be it Delanda, Frost, or Bennett - the emphasis has always been on finding the really real, true, undistorted matter/real in its pure presence.

original thought that is being written. It is to a similar end that in Western philosophy writing becomes problematic to philosophy's commitment to reason and truth.

With philosophy being the quest for truth, and writing being a species that distances oneself from truth by virtue of being a mediation/technique for representing truth (or thought), the question of writing in philosophy becomes a particularly difficult one. As Culler notes, if philosophy is to inquire after truth and reason, and if that inquiry already presupposes the danger that writing poses for such an endeavour, then there can be no philosophical writing as such (Culler, 1982, pp.91-92). Because if the question itself is the relation between writing and truth (thought), then how can one approach it via writing? But then again, is there another option but to write (in the narrow sense)? Writing thus stands as an embarrassment at the heart of philosophy. To resolve this embarrassment, the only avenue that philosophy seems to have been left with is to condemn writing and locate oneself on the side of the truth. This is achieved through structurally reiterating the danger of writing, expounding on the need to minimize its effect and orienting it towards truth such that reading philosophy - or any production of a knowledge system - becomes one of deciphering writing in order to attain the truth and to reach the level of pure thought. Condillac calls this step "retracing", which signifies the journey of decoding representations in order to understand the sensations and original perceptions of the speaking subject.⁴⁴ Writing is external, outside, a secondary form of representation parasitic on thought, and accessing thought is the ultimate task of both the philosopher and the reader/interpreter. This hierarchical setting is the legacy of metaphysics, of ontology, of philosophy as ontology. The two definitive factors of this metaphysical/ontological gesture are as follows. First,

The hierarchical axiology, the ethical ontological distinctions which do not merely set up value-oppositions clustered around an ideal and unfindable limit, but moreover subordinate these values to each other (normal/abnormal, standard/parasite, fulfilled/Void,

⁴⁴ "The philosophical operation that Condillac also calls "retracing" consists in reversing, by a process of analysis and continuous decomposition, the movement of genetic derivation that leads from simple sensation and present perception to the complex edifice of representation: from ordinary presence to the language of the most formal calculus [calcul]." (Derrida, 1988, p.6]

serious/nonserious, literal/nonliteral, briefly: positive/negative and idea/non-ideal); and in this...there is metaphysical pathos (infelicity, nonserious, etc. . . .). (Derrida, 1988, p. 93)

And second -

The enterprise of returning "strategically," ideally, to an origin or to a "priority" held to be simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to think in terms of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians, from Plato to Rousseau, Descartes to Husserl, have proceeded in this way, conceiving good to be before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. And this is not just one metaphysical gesture among others, it is the metaphysical exigency, that which has been the most constant, most profound and most potent. (Derrida, 1988, p.93)

The entire field of writing is governed by this priority of speech secured by the logocentric enclosure where the absolute proximity between voice and being/thought is maintained. If voice/speech is a natural entity that comes from the interior of the being and is thought never to have lost its proximity with being, if it is the domain of interiority, then the status of writing is that of a technique deployed in the absence of speech. Thus, another governing structure of speech/writing dualism is the binarity of *physis* and *techné*. It is within this epoch that the concept of sign with its integral differentiation of signifier/signified belongs.

Like writing, the signifier is the domain of exteriority and (secondary) representation whose function is to supplant the signified. The movement of the signifier depends on the existence of a stable signified, and a signifier representing a signified is always at some distance from what it signifies. Being the thought or the concept that systems of communication communicates, signified is situated within the order of voice, being, *eidos*. It is self-referential and self-present. Irrespective of whether this signified is represented adequately in the signifier, the status of the signified remains forever unaltered. The meaning of the signified is not something separate from it, rather it *is* its meaning which is forever present to itself. Signified is thus of the order of presence -

the order of the signified is never contemporary, is at best the subtly discrepant inverse or parallel-discrepant by the time of a breath-from the order of the signifier...The formal essence of the signified is presence, and the privilege of its proximity to the logos as phoné is the privilege of presence. (Derrida, 1998, p.18)

Now, if we look at the ontological implications of the structure of writing (and by association, the structure of signifier) from the perspective of our discussion on ek-stasis, one particular feature emerges. That is, the structure of writing implies that in terms of the question of being, writing can never be self-referential owing to its status of being a technique at the service of voice, speech, or signified. Due to this factor, writing appears to be ek-static in terms of its relation to presence.

However, the concept of ek-stasis that the ontological structure of writing espouses remains firmly riveted to presence, much like the ancient philosophical-theological conceptualization of ecstasy. We have already observed in the preceding discussion that the kind of absence writing manifests is in no sense originary; rather, as Derrida notes, it is a modification of presence that voice/speech signifies. Hence, even though on the surface it might appear that absence is fundamental to writing, in the last instance it remains forever attached to a present, a present that once *was* and can be recovered. Neither does it question this prior presence which it represents, nor does its movement begin through displacement. Instead, the movement of writing starts from the prelapsarian moment of the absolute proximity of being and thought, of being as presence. Hence, the ontology of writing operates within the metaphysical/ontological closure of presence. Such conceptualization of writing does not allow us to conceive of a radical notion of ek-stasis.

However, if a closer inspection of the concept of writing divulges its constitutive absence to be of originary in nature and irreducible to presence, and if writing appears to be constitutive of presence as such along with all its determinations (speech, signified etc), then it would allow us to conclude that such a notion of writing is radically ek-static, and such a framework would provide us with the possibility of conceiving an ontology beyond the dominion of presence. Along this vein, we would now subject - following Derrida - the question of writing to an intense probe, and to do that, we would primarily focus on Derrida's reading of Condillac and Saussure.

From Writing to General Writing: Towards Originary Ecstasy

To address the question of writing, we would need to briefly touch upon speech. The previous discussion elaborated on how thought was immediately present within speech and how the absolute proximity of the two gives the appearance of identity between them. However, despite this appearance of identity, it was observed that thought was ontologically prior to speech, and within the logocentric/phonocentric closure it appeared as the immediate manifestation of thought. But this appearance does not fundamentally change the persisting ontological distinction between the two, which can be maintained based on the assumption of a domain where thought is present as thought. This would be a domain of *in-itself* where it exists as nothing but itself. This is what Derrida calls “transcendental signified” which signifies “a concept [that is] simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language, that is of a relationship to a system of signifiers... which in and of itself, in its essence, would refer to no signifier, would exceed the chain of signs, and would no longer itself function as a signifier” (Derrida, 1982b, pp. 19-20). Read into the context of Saussurian paradigm, the thought-speech-writing constellation appears to be functioning on the basis of a tripartite structure. From outside to inside, the three tiers would be –

a) Signifier - or what Saussure calls the sound-image.⁴⁵ It is that which refers to something other than itself.

b) Signified - the conceptual part to which the signifier refers. When the addressee of a speech receives the sound image, it brings into mind the concept associated with this sound image. The linguistic sign is a unity of these two segments - signifier and signified – which are, within the sign, argued to be indivisible.

c) The transcendental signified. To elaborate, when a sound image is invoked, it materializes the associated concept or the signified. However, this movement is not so simple, because if we strictly follow Saussure's logic of arbitrariness and differentiability, then it appears that even the signified itself is also in the position of a signifier. No matter how much we strive, we cannot reach

⁴⁵ Given that to Saussure, the primary linguistic object or unit is the one in spoken form and not the written one (Saussure, as cited in Derrida, 1998, p.31), the phonetic element is what Saussure's discussion of sign is primarily centred on. The sound image is not the material sound as such, but the psychological imprint of it. It is the being-heard of the sound. Hence, this forms what Saussure calls the 'material aspect' of the sign (Saussure in Derrida, 1998, p.66).

the domain of the signified, because a signifier would form its referred concept only by referring to another signifier within the horizon built by numerous other signifiers. If we take note of Saussure's argument that despite writing being the signifier of the signifier the written sign too is governed by the same structure of signifier and signified, then Bennington's illustration of this framework of continuous referral which renders the existence of signified as such impossible helps us understand the problematic -

In the system of differences that language is, every signifier functions by referring to other signifiers, without one ever arriving at a signified. Look up the signified of an unknown signifier in the dictionary and you find more signifiers, never any signifieds. As we have already said, a signified is only a signifier placed in a certain position by other signifiers: there is no signified or meaning, but only "effects" of them... (Bennington & Derrida, 1993, pp.33-34)

Under the circumstances that Saussure's statements imply, the difference between the two (i.e., signifier/signified) can only be maintained if it presupposes a plane of pure concept, a concept signified in and of itself. This is what Derrida, reading Saussure, calls the "transcendental signified", a domain of pure presence. Reading the phrase while taking into account the Kantian notion of the transcendental, this particular phrase signifies that which, by rooting the constant traffic of inversion between signifiers and signifieds, grants stability to sign and makes sure that the difference between the two is secured at some level. However, as Derrida and Bennington clearly establish, there are no signifieds or transcendental signifieds as such. Rather, they are effects and functions. Thus, signified is nothing but a function, and the semiotic system is neither tripartite or bipartite in nature. And as the transcendental signified is a manifestation of pure presence, it can be concluded that there is no pure presence as such. Instead, what manifests *as* presence is an *effect*.

Now, if we place this discussion in the context of speech, then it emerges that despite its appearance of immediacy, speech too harbours absence within it. The unity that speech manifests is not a natural one, but is constituted (Derrida, 1998, p.31). Therefore, the unity of the spoken sign is an amalgamation of something which is not present and something that supplants that absent present. For example, when I am talking about something, I use the sign of that thing when it is not

immediately present. This holds for all non-phonetic forms of communication too, allowing Derrida to make the general statement that every sign, irrespective of its modality, presupposes a kind of absence (Derrida, 1988, p.7). Without this absence, there would be no sign to begin with. This derivative character defines sign as such. The metaphysical gesture that governs Western philosophy lies in its movement of making the sign into a derivative element proffering in the absence of an entity, and since philosophy is obsessed with origin and presence, it wills to move beyond this derivativeness. It is this dual movement - that sign comes into being as a philosophical need to supplant presence and that the same philosophy tries to reach the origin by erasing the sign - that characterizes sign as such.⁴⁶

Given the role of absence in sign, if writing is to be distinguished from speech, then the kind of absence that inheres within the written sign has to be fundamentally different from that of speech. It has already been established that the kind of absence that Condillac espouses in his discussion is not absence as such but a modification of presence. Therefore, as speech signifies presence, in order to obtain singularity, writing must entail absence in an absolute and radical sense. That is, to attribute singularity to writing, the absence characterizing it must defy the possibility of being reduced to presence.

There is another feature that defines writing. Within the dualist relation of speech/writing, writing stands for durability in the sense that a written mark does not erase itself but exists for posterity. It exists in time and does not limit itself to the immediacy of the act of receiving. Rather, it can be read, “repeated”, i.e., “iterated” by receivers at spatio-temporally distant locations (Derrida, 1988, p.8).

Thus, in order to be distinguished from speech, writing must bear two particular traits. First, the characteristics that define absence - such as, “distance, divergence, delay”, or to put it in a single word, “deferral” - need to be carried forward in an absolute sense to the extent that it cannot be dubbed as an ontological modification of presence (Derrida, 1988, p.7). And second, it needs to

⁴⁶ “...philosophy erases the sign by making it derivative; it cancels reproduction and representation by turning them into a modification that supervenes over a simple presence. But since such a philosophy— and in truth, it is the philosophy and history of the West—has in this way constituted and established the very concept of the sign, this concept, at the moment of its origin and in the heart of its sense, is marked by this will to derivation and erasure. Consequently, to restore the originality and the non-derivative character of the sign against classical metaphysics is also, by means of an apparent paradox, to erase the concept of the sign whose entire history and entire sense belong to the adventure of the metaphysics of presence.” (Derrida, 2011, p.44)

be iterable even in the absence of any receiving subject. That is, writing can only be writing as long as it remains iterable in the absolute sense.⁴⁷ A metaphysical analysis might find this impossible. But if we closely follow the logic of absence to a place not imagined by Condillac, Saussure and the philosophical systems that they represent, then writing emerges to be characterized precisely by this unimaginable.

To subject writing to an extreme example, let's imagine, following Derrida, that there exists a piece of writing which deploys a linguistic system which, apart from the writer, is known to only one other person. Therefore, in order for this to be classified as writing, we need at least one of these two people alive, otherwise, there would be no one able to read anything written within this writing system, and in the absence of iteration it would cease to be writing. Hence, it would be rational to assume that any mark produced by these two subjects would become unreadable in the aftermath of their death.

However, even in such a situation, the mark produced by them still remains iterable, because even in the absence of knowledge about this secret linguistic system, a third subject can use this secret, unknown articulation within their own work by giving it a new context. They can cite that inscription as an example of an archaic writing system, or as an example of how a language system harbours the possibility of being perished. A number of similar scenarios, imagined or real, do exist, and hence justify this characteristic of absolute iterability which is definitive of writing. And writing in this sense, i.e., writing as iterability, writing as its other, is not a simple modification of presence that metaphysical closure of speech/writing entices it to. Rather, it enacts a rupture with presence by virtue of being functional in the absence of voice, meaning, logos. Therefore, writing bears within it a force of rupture, rupture from its immediate context and all such other determinations of presence. As Derrida notes -

This breaking force [*force de rupture*] is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text. In the case of a so-called "real" context, what I have just asserted is all too

⁴⁷ "For a writing to be a writing it must continue to "act" and to be readable even when what is called the author of the writing no longer answers for what he has written, for what he seems to have signed, be it because of a temporary absence, because he is dead or, more generally, because he has not employed his absolutely actual and present intention or attention, the plenitude of his desire to say what he means, in order to sustain what seems to be written "in his name. "' (Derrida, 1988, p.8)

evident. This allegedly real context includes a certain "present" of the inscription, the presence of the writer to what he has written, the entire environment and the horizon of his experience, and above all the intention, the wanting-to-say-what-he-means, which animates his inscription at a given moment. But the sign possesses the characteristic of being readable even if the moment of its production is irrevocably lost and even if I do not know what its alleged author-scriptor consciously intended to say at the moment he wrote it, i.e. abandoned it to its essential drift...by virtue of its essential iterability, a written syntagma can always be detached from the chain in which it is inserted or given without causing it to lose all possibility of functioning, if not all possibility of "communicating," precisely. (Derrida, 1988, p.9)

This force of rupture that constitutes writing as such is possible because of a particular attribute of writing that Derrida calls *spacing*. Spacing is the structural separability at the heart of writing which disentangles it from all forms of referentiality and all determinations of presence such as *ousia*, *eidos*, *cogito*, transcendental signified (Derrida, 1988, pp.9-10), and it is through this that writing breaks with the determinations of presence as it appears not as the derivative form of or modification of presence ultimately reducible to a logos (speaker/intention/context/proximity/immediacy) but as wholly other to it. In this sense, the absence that is definitive of writing does not refer to presence but is originary.

So far, our discussion has revealed that the difference between speech and writing has been premised on the binary of presence/absence, with speech defined by presence and writing absence. Now, before moving ahead, two factors need to be on the horizon of our imminent discussion. First - if we remember our discussion on sign, being the bearer of intention and immediate manifestation of thought, speech or spoken signifier occupies the position of the signified within the speech/writing binary. Second - speech is marked by the presence of intention and consciousness, and if its direct link to intention/consciousness is broken, then it would be bereft of the definitive marker that secures its place within the speech/writing dualism. Under such a circumstance, it will not qualify as speech. Keeping this premise in mind, let us interrogate speech.

Despite its synonymy with thought/signified, speech too is a signifier, and since the ultimate marker of signifier is that it proffers in the absence of something (referent, signified),

spoken signifiers too carry within themselves a certain type of absence. But this absence is argued to be reducible to presence, because the structure of speech is such that the latent intention or the underlying thought beneath speech remains immediately decodable as its original connection with meaning/intention/consciousness was never lost. But does speech not bear the same structure as that of writing? If the three interconnected and definitive traits of writing are its sustainability, its absolute iterability, and the structurality of spacing, does speech not function on the basis of these same markers? If we probe speech more rigorously, then responses to these questions would have to be positive. Let's see why.

Introducing the conceptual achievement of Derrida's reading of Austin's theory of performative, we can say that a spoken signifier achieves its intended task only by virtue of a general iterability or citationality. This is a two-fold process. First, the words I am using to communicate something would be meaningful to someone only to the extent that what it signifies is comprehensible to the receiver. If I deploy a sign not known to the receiver, then how would he/she receive my message? Therefore, successful communication becomes possible only when the speaking subject deploys a sign which is already in use and shared by the receiver. However, deploying a sign already known and shared by others means nothing but a repetition, iteration, or citation of a preexisting sign already in use. Hence, the spoken sign is also governed by the principle of iterability, and by the same logic, it is marked by durability and spacing which, implying its horizon is not governed by determinations of presence such as context/consciousness/intention. As Derrida writes, in the context of performative utterance -

Could a performative utterance succeed if its formulation did not repeat a "coded" or iterable utterance, or in other words, if the formula I pronounce in order to open a meeting, launch a ship or a marriage were not identifiable as conforming with an iterable model, if it were not then identifiable in some way as a "citation"?...The first consequence of this will be the following: given that structure of iteration, the intention animating the utterance will never be through and through present to itself and to its content. The iteration structuring it a priori introduces into it a dehiscence and a cleft [brisure] which are essential. (Derrida, 1988, p.18)

The structure of iterability thus disentangles speech from the domain of intention, consciousness, and other determinations of presence. What forms speech lies not within its physio-temporal contours because meaning/thought is not immediately present to it. Rather, it depends on the successful repetition of existing conventions, decorum, and syntaxes in the absence of which no spoken communication would be possible.

We began our interrogation of speech and writing as they were formulated within the metaphysical/ontological tradition where speech signified immediate presence (of meaning) and writing implied a derivative form of presence. But following this metaphysical logic closely it emerged that the elements that define writing – iterability, spacing, absence – are definitive of speech too. Both written and spoken syntagma are premised on the possibility of a “citational doubling” whereby every singular utterance is an iteration of what came *before* it and what will come *after* it (Derrida, 1988, p.17). Even the distinction between what is *before* and *after*, what has been and what is yet to be, become unsustainable.⁴⁸ Not only does this interrupt the metaphysical distribution of speech/writing or phoné/graphé, but, as Bennington aptly observes, it also shows that all linguistic signs are “radically written”-

⁴⁸ There is another ontological aspect of the sign that needs to be elaborated in relation to the elements definitive of writing. We have already briefly discussed the bipartite structure of sign, that the difference between signifier and signified emerges to be contingent, and that the structure of sign stabilizes itself by presupposing a transcendental signified. Therefore, what is called signified is nothing but an *effect* of signified. A particular positionality of the signifier within the metaphysical framework of signifier/signified gives the effect of signified (Bennington, 2010, p. 90). An analysis of Saussure’s arbitrariness thesis, the reading of which by Derrida gives rise to this new conception, points to this as much. There is an inherent contradiction in Saussure’s claims of arbitrariness, for on the one hand he claims that the relation between any given signifier and signified is arbitrary, but on the other hand emphasizes on maintaining the primacy of signified owing to its natural relation to the phoné. That is, Saussure’s logic of arbitrariness claims that the relation between signifier and signified is unmotivated. But when it comes to the “*general* relation” between signifiers and signifieds, then phoné is claimed to bear a natural relation to the signified. And this privileging of phoné also results in Saussure’s identification of phoné as the primary linguistic object while dubbing writing to be an image of it.

However, as Attridge notes, if arbitrariness governs the general plane of linguistics, then the designation of having a natural superiority of any of the term becomes impossible (Attridge, 2011, p.61). That is, if one closely follows the logic of arbitrariness, then it results in the cancelling out of the privilege of signified, and by the same note, the privilege of phoné. Because if the relation between the two is arbitrary, then how can one of them be thought of as primary and the other a derivative, secondary? If the relation between the two is arbitrary, then how can one be said to have a natural relation with the signified? Therefore, there can be no relation of hierarchy based on origin/derivative between the signifier and the signified, speech and writing. As Derrida writes – “...from the moment that one considers the totality of determined signs, spoken, and a fortiori written, as unmotivated institutions, one must exclude any relationship of natural subordination, any natural hierarchy among signifiers or orders of signifiers. If ‘writing’ signifies inscription and especially the durable institution of a sign (and that is the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing), writing in general covers the entire field of linguistic signs. In that field a certain sort of instituted signifiers may then appear, ‘graphic’ in the narrow and derivative sense of the word, ordered by a certain relationship with other instituted – hence ‘written’, even if they are ‘phonic’ – signifiers.” (Derrida in Attridge, 2011, pp.60-61)

the metaphysical description of writing is that it is the (graphic) signifier of a (phonic) signified, which is the signifier of an (ideal) signified; but it can be shown that all signifiers refer for their meaning only to other signifiers (this part of the argument drawing on the Saussure of the linguistic 'system of differences' as against the more traditional Saussure of the sign); if metaphysics wants to call 'signifier of signifier' by the name 'writing', it had therefore better call all language writing if it wants to be consistent. My present, intended meaning is possible only because language as a system of differences allows its differential identification in terms of a system I inherit and do not dominate (I cannot simply choose the language I speak nor the concepts it provides me with); and its expression is possible only in the perspective of the necessary possibility of its repetition in the absence of my supposedly animating (or at least sub-scribing) intention. (Bennington, 2000, p.10)

That is, if signified is not considered to be singular presence and becomes a function of the signifier, if the signifier always leads to another signifier *ad infinitum*, and if we follow, through Derrida, Saussure's exegesis on differential and arbitrary structure of language that claims it to be a system of difference without positive terms, then it emerges that a signifier can retain its functionality of being *that* signifier by virtue of its structural differentiality. That is, a signifier can sustain its singularity (and thereby maintain its status of being a signifier) owing to its difference from all the other signifiers within that particular semiotic grid. Therefore, what it *is not*, constitutes what it *is*. And not just that, but these absent signifiers which bear on any particular signifier, are not present in any differed manner as well, because the structure of sign, as discussed before, is such that its being as such depends on reiteration. And since the structure of iteration obviates full presence, it can be said that these absent signifiers which are implicated in the moment of utterance of any particular signifier can never be captured or recovered in their full presence. They are never fully there, their being always exists in excess of themselves, outside themselves. Thus, the absence theorized here is not reducible to a distant present, but is what Derrida calls an "irreducible absence" (Derrida, 1998, p. 47).

Let's recapitulate these co-constitutive aspects by placing them in a provisional order –

- a) signifiers (written/spoken) cannot be perceived anymore to be secondary, leading to a stable, transcendental signified.

b) by virtue of the shared structure of iterability and irreducible absence which makes both writing and speech into “inscriptions” renders the presence/absence dualism ontologically unsustainable.

c) Since a signifier is constituted by what is not immediately present in it, what is other than and different to it, we can concede that an economy of all the other marks in that particular system makes possible the utterance and sustenance of any given signifier.⁴⁹

Based on these features, we can conclude that what appears to constitute presence and its multifarious determination such as signified, meaning, thought, concept, *eidos*, is a “formal play of difference” that Derrida calls trace (Derrida, 1982b, p.26).

Now, such a formulation might lead one to think that by advancing the concept of trace, Derrida once again anchors the entire problematic of presence/absence, writing/speech, signifier/signified to a new foundation where instead of meaning, thought, signified, or consciousness, trace comes to occupy the place of origin determined by self-referential, full presence. However, as the preceding discussion clearly established, trace does not function in the manner of an origin and cannot be reduced to presence. Rather, trace needs to be thought within a horizon where difference is retained within a structure of reference devoid of a centre, origin, transcendental signified etc., allowing it to appear *as* difference (Derrida, 1998, p. 47). This difference is originary because it is not merely a difference between preexisting terms, since such a scenario would assume a prior full presence of the involved terms. But the difference that trace implies is originary in that it is this difference that allows these terms - on the basis of which simple difference (i.e., difference between two purported identities) is conceived - to come into being. Hence, “The absence of another here-and-now, of another transcendental present, of another origin of the world appearing as such, presenting itself as irreducible absence within the presence of the trace, is not a metaphysical formula...” (Derrida, 1998, p. 47) This originary difference animates identities⁵⁰ and is never fully present in them but bears on them all the time.⁵¹ Trace is that within

⁴⁹ And this particular system too is constituted by its difference from all the other systems.

⁵⁰ As Deutscher observes, this originary difference that Derrida calls *différance* is “the passage of infinite, endless differentiation giving rise to apparent identities between which one might then argue there is difference” (Deutscher, 2005).

⁵¹ Bennington provides a somewhat simplistic, provisional, and schematic outline of the situation of trace - “‘Trace’ attempts to capture something about that account: namely that faced with a ‘given’ element of the language system (what we’ll still always feel like calling a word or a signifier), and wondering what it is that makes that element the element that

which this originary difference is announced, not as the mark of a distant present or bygone past, but as originary absence, as *différance*. “It is”, writes Derrida, “an experience of the temporal difference of a past without a present past or a to-come that is not a present future” (Derrida, 2005, p.144). And it is this particular (non) structure of trace which is formative of all significations, including speech, writing, signifier, signified that Derrida calls general writing, general textuality, or language in the general sense.

Since writing in this general sense, that Bennington called radical writing, is neither derived from nor reducible to any form of presence, its ontological structure is ek-static in an originary sense. In the metaphysical notion of ecstasy defined by presence, we observed that the movement of ecstasy began from a state of original stasis. It assumed ecstasy to be a stage of becoming. It implied that at its origin, the being/self/entity that becomes ecstatic, existed in a state of stasis implying self-referentiality and fully presence. Even when the conceptualization of ekstasis did not claim to have originated from an originally static state of absolute proximity to itself, we observed that it still assumed a notion of presence at its heart. That is, if one closely follows the logic of ek-stasis within such a framework, it ends up being reduced to a determination of presence. This is the precise movement that we witnessed in the Heideggerian notion of ek-static temporality as well which presupposed a domain of pure presence underlying its fallenness into inauthentic, improper understanding. Therefore, none of these conceptualizations of ek-stasis questions the thematic of presence in any fundamental sense. Instead, they merely place them in new contexts, and this is why the concept of ek-stasis emerging from these frameworks remains bound to the closure of classical ontology.

it is rather than something else (and this seems to mean wondering first, then, what makes it different from all the other elements that it is not), we are driven to the thought that any given element must in some sense bear the trace of all those other elements that it is not, so that (to take an almost trivially simple example) in the roman alphabetical system, what it is about the letter ‘b’, say, that renders it identifiable or recognisable as such (and thereby also repeatable as the same letter on another occasion) is the ‘presence’ in it of the ‘absence’ of all the other letters that it is not. On this view, ‘b’ is not simply present as itself (i.e. as a letter of the alphabet rather than just a line or set of lines), in that its ‘presence’ as ‘b’ emerges as the product, as it were, of the ‘absence’ of all those other letters. And those other letters are not simply absent (just because their absence is in some sense ‘present’ here and now in this ‘b’ that they define just by the trace of their absence). ‘Trace’ is the word Derrida proposes, then, to capture something of this set-up which defies simple description in terms of presence and absence, and which can, at the very least, be extended to the whole of what we typically call ‘language’.” (Bennington, 2010, p. 9)

But the notion of general writing or general textuality not only places into question the entire thematic of presence and shows that presence is fundamentally constituted by what it renders into derivativeness - absence, but through concepts such as trace and *différance* it also establish how the presence/absence dualism is unsustainable as both these concepts emerge within the formal play of difference. Hence, absence in such a formulation, cannot be reduced in any manner to presence. If by ek-static ontology we mean an understanding of being where it is conceived as a mode of (non)presence which is absolutely irreducible to any notions of presence, then the Derridian paradigm of general writing, I submit, becomes emblematic of such a framework. Within this conceptual horizon, ek-stasis eludes reduction into determinations of presence, and allows us to proceed towards forming a concept of being beyond presence where it can be thought of as originally displaced and dispossessed of itself. In chapters 4,& 5, we will interrogate Butler's work through this framework of ek-static ontology.

Chapter 2

New Materialism and the Return to Matter: Resurgence of Being as Presence

In⁵² the past two decades, there has been a significant shift within Continental philosophy regarding the question of matter, real, or nature. According to the architects and proponents of this turn, the previous decades in continental philosophy were marked by a focus on discourse, language, power which were thought to have constituted our reality, our perception of matter, and our representations of nature. Attempts to address the questions of matter/nature entailed analysis of modes of its representation and discursive formation, and this sole emphasis on cultural devices, they argue, pushed us away from the realm of what is real (Bryant et.al., 2011). Positions that centred their work primarily on concerns of language/power/discourse are various. Bringing them together under one umbrella term is almost impossible. However, according to the proponents of the shift mentioned above, the common thread that runs through these positions is their avowed emphasis on the epistemic question of culture and language. These positions are provisionally labelled by interchangeably used umbrella terms such as “linguistic turn” or “constructionism” against which the proponents of the material turn posited themselves (Bryant et al., 2011).

Much like the linguistic turn, this critical shift in continental theory is internally fractured regarding their philosophical genealogy, context of emergence, and philosophical ambitions. However, a common theme runs through these otherwise divergent works, allowing us to bring them together under a general category. This common thread is their commitment to retrieve ontological perspectives on matter/nature/real from its theorization in terms of culture, language, and discourse. In other words, their project attempts to retrieve being beyond thought. Theorizing being without reference to culture⁵³ is what sets the proponents of this shift apart from their

⁵² Certain sections from this chapter was published in *Sanglap: Journal of Literary and Cultural Inquiry* (Chatterjee, 2021)

⁵³ It is to be noted that by “mind independent reality” the authors do not mean to convey a sense of reality does not mean that it denies the existence of minds or human beings, rather it intends to argue that that entities have an autonomy beyond human representation. (Delanda, 2006, p.1). As Delanda and Harman puts it -“mind-independence entails independence from the content of our minds, not from the existence of our minds.” (Harman and Delanda, 2017, p.49)

predecessors (Delanda & Harman, 2017, p.49). These internally fractured positions constitute continental realism, or the material turn in continental philosophy. Though this shift has been referred to by other terms such as speculative realism (Melliassoux, 2008) object-oriented ontology (Harman, 2017), or the materialist turn/new materialism (Coole & Frost, 2010) owing to their respective theoretical formations, concerns, and objects of analysis, the focus on excavating a domain of “real” independent of consciousness, language, power, discourse, and other similar devices marks this shift (Bryant et al., 2011). The focus shifted to “properly ontological questions” instead of a reductive account of philosophy that understands it as a discipline tasked with “analysis of texts or of the structure of consciousness” (Bryant et al., 2011, p.4).

As mentioned, material turn or continental realism is a contested domain, harbouring various positions that are often critical of each other. One such position is new materialism, and Western feminist philosophy in particular has played a crucial role in forging the set of theoretical premises which has come to be labelled by the umbrella term “New materialism”.⁵⁴ As Thomas Lemke observes, the theoretical pull to redress the question of matter comes naturally to feminism since matter (translated in terms of the body) has been a persistent theme in Western feminist theory (Lemke, 2017). Following the general trend of the material turn, new materialist discourse is marked by its appreciation of matter beyond the epistemic domain of language and discourse which, it argues, has purportedly expelled the ontological questions from the purview of feminist theory (Alaimo, 2010). Thus, new materialism established itself as a counterpoint to the philosophies of representation in feminist theory which is argued to be best exemplified in the works of poststructuralist theorists (Hemmings, 2011), and the category of “matter” becomes the critical axis of new materialism. However, a critical evaluation of new materialism’s engagement with “proper ontological questions” (Bryant et al., 2011) of matter and materiality reveals that this return to matter is a return to the metaphysical notion of matter where it figures as a manifestation of pure presence.

By engaging with new materialism, one of the key constituents of the material turn, this chapter intends to show that despite their avowed claims of refurbishing ontology, new materialism

⁵⁴ Also called material feminism (see Hekman & Alaimo, 2008), feminist materialism & matter-realism (Braidotti, 2011), corporeal feminism (Grosz, 1994), transcorporeal feminism (Alaimo, 2008)

remains tethered to the classical ontology because in their bid to extricate matter from language and discourse, it ends up elevating matter to the position of a self-referential, irreducible domain of pure presence.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the political grammar of new materialism to show the rhetorical function that their call to “return to matter” enacts. From there, it proceeds to trace the dual trajectory of the emergence of new materialism. The first trajectory concerns new materialism’s criticism of constructionism, and the second trajectory concerns new materialism’s reliance on natural science. Through the discussion of the genealogy of new materialism, this chapter argues that new materialism’s clarion call to move beyond the hegemony of discourse and language effectively ends up conceptualizing matter as a self-referential, self-sufficient, self-present constant presence. That is, matter, within new materialism figures as a manifestation of being determined in terms of presence. The last two sections corroborate this argument by closely reading the works of Manuel DeLanda and Jane Bennett.

New Materialism and the Return to Matter

New materialism, a comparatively recent development in Western intellectual history, has broadened the horizon of humanities (Coole & Frost, 2010; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Dolphizn & van der Tuin, 2012; Pitts-Taylor, 2016; Ellen Zweig & Zammito, 2017). Any discussion of how new materialism emerged must look into the different trajectories of its productively discordant development. A strong influence of new scientific discoveries in the fields of evolutionary biology, neuroscience, climate science, and a fervent commitment to the question of materiality beyond language and discourse is what sets it apart from its philosophical predecessors and ascribe to it, if we are to follow the narrative that new materialism has produced about itself, a singularity that validates its claim of being “new” (Coole & Frost, 2010; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Dolphizn & van der Tuin, 2012; Pitts-Taylor, 2016; Ellen Zweig & Zammito, 2017). Fresh engagement with natural science, re-reading of earlier natural science texts coupled with endeavours to extricate the question of matter and materiality from the depths of language and discourse have become synonymous with this critical movement. While a comprehensive account of new materialist

scholarship would need to engage with all these aspects both individually, my humble aim in this section is to understand the ontological framework that new materialism generates by delving into the concept of matter and materiality. Hence, focusing on the question of matter and materiality, the following discussion will be aimed at interrogating new materialist ontology, and my analysis of new materialist texts will focus on bringing out this particular aspect.

“Return to matter”- this maxim contains within itself the general founding principles and interventionist implications of the new materialist paradigm (Lemke, 2017, p. 91). As just mentioned, the emergence of new materialism can be traced to two interconnected but distinctly separate intellectual currents (Alaimo & Hekman, 2008). On the one hand, works produced within the domains of natural science have been decisive in articulating matter in an extralinguistic manner. Numerous research in natural science helped to establish matter as poietic, plastic, and unstable, as opposed to the general perception dominant in the Western intellectual tradition that considered it passive and devoid of agential capacities (Coole & Frost, 2008; Ellenzweig & Zammito, 2017).⁵⁵ On the other hand, the development of new materialism is significantly indebted to a minor tradition in Western philosophy that strongly undermines dualist thought by proposing a radical, monist philosophy of immanence and arguing for univocity of being (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p.139). We will divide the discussion into two segments to understand these two primary constituents of new materialism. The first segment will focus on the philosophical aspect formed around the critique of constructionism and its dualist premises, and the subsequent section will investigate new materialism’s engagement with natural sciences premised on the conviction that natural science can provide an unmediated access to a self-present materiality.

⁵⁵ But contrary to the general new materialist claim that within the previous materialist settlements matter was conceived as passive, it has been argued that such a generalized picture of old materialist traditions might not be accurate (Mills, 2017, p.125).

The Political Grammar of New Materialism and Its Critique of Linguisticism/Culturalism

Before analysing a set of new materialist themes pertaining to our current purpose, let us first look at the narrative structure of new materialist articulations. Being the point of rupture that separates it from its theoretical predecessors, the axiomatic call to return to matter implies that there are certain limitations within the dominant critical paradigms, and the will to circumvent them marks the interventionist force of the new materialism. This narrative of return is two-fold. While signifying a turn from the current perspective, implicit to the concept of return is what it literally stands for, i.e. moving beyond where we are currently at in order to go back to where we once belonged. For new materialism, the call to return bears within itself this dual signification. It is a turning away from the discourses that dominated the humanities until recently to retrieve certain questions that were predominant at a particular spatiotemporal coordinate of the history of humanities. But recuperating these questions does not mean bringing them back as they were in that earlier period of time. The logic of this return narrative reads somewhat like this - the discourse that were until very recently in vogue ceased to hold its status because it proved inadequate to address the concerns of our present. As already mentioned, this discourse in question is that of linguistic/cultural turn, which has seemingly pushed us away from the domain of the real by keeping us confined within the realms of abstraction.

Claire Hemmings (2011) deploys the analysis of political rhetoric of philosophical narratives geared towards providing a divergent account of the development of feminist thought in the West. Since feminist philosophy was one of the chief contributors to forging the material turn and its various proponents, Hemming's discussion of the trajectories of feminist thought sheds light on the structural constitution of new materialism. The singularity of Hemmings' work lies in her attempt to trace the evolution of feminist theory over the past few decades through the lens of the various narrative schemas that different feminist positions deployed to provide a general account of their development and their relation to their intellectual past.

Hemmings divides the journey of feminist theory in terms of three narrative structures - progress narrative, loss narrative, and return narrative (Hemmings, 2011). The return narrative is

based on the belief that in the course of its evolution, feminist theory lost some of its essential achievements that had been gained at an earlier point in time, and because of its diversion from these achievements, the current feminist discourses are incapable of addressing pressing socio-political issues at hand. But what has been lost can be retrieved, and the mistake that diverted the course of feminist theory can be rectified. Thus, the return narrative creates a homogeneous history of how feminist theory evolved over time, and situates various divergent, often discordant, positions within that history by ironing out their particularity. Such claims are often made through rhetorical tools instead of intense analysis, where generalized propositions substitute the stark absence of references.

New materialism subscribes to the “political grammar” (Hemmings, 2011, p.2) of this return narrative whereby it posits itself as the radical force that has set out to retrieve materiality. And the absence of engagement with the various works that they criticise for their failure to address the question of materiality is characteristic of the narrative structure of new materialism. In seizing upon what Hemmings calls the “storytelling” practices, my aim is not to discredit new materialist ventures. Neither do I wish to read the absence of critical engagement with their predecessors as a reason to debunk the vast body of work that new materialist scholarship has produced. However, despite its critical import, it cannot be denied that the kind of rigour new materialist scholarship exhibits in forging new concepts is strangely lacking when it comes to providing a critical account of the discursive framework of the cultural/linguistic turn. Hemmings writes:

The otherwise striking lack of even general citation in return narratives is, I believe, a reflection of their need, and power, to unite the opposed progress and loss narratives of Western feminist theory. How much more, then, the danger of introducing reference to particular theorists, the meaning of whose work is most certainly not shared or whose representative status is contested? Circumventing the dangers of direct citation, then, common agreement is produced through the dulcet tones of pragmatism. Each side is appealed to and is required to concede some ground: yes, advances were made; yes, important things were lost. What is retained is the common historiography. In effect, then, the absence of direct citation in return narratives is precisely what allows a more elusive citation practice to permeate the glosses. What is cited is that common historiography, and

its citation—precise in its vagueness—both references and produces reflective agreement. (Hemmings, 2011, p.112).

Following this founding gesture, new materialism routinely deprecates cultural constructionism for its de facto removal of matter and materiality from the purview of its critical lens and its over-emphasis on the political economy of signification. It argues that foregrounding the processes of how epistemic grids shape matter has rendered matter into a passive and inert entity that is always already mediated through language and other cultural apparatuses which endow it with meaning (Coole & Frost, 2010; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012). New materialists do not claim that constructionism denies the singularity of matter, neither do they argue that constructionism renders matter ontologically dependent on language and culture. Within this framework, matter is not held as a linguistic construction, on the contrary, its existence is thought to be independent of linguistic-cultural devices; but in order to become intelligible, it must undergo the processes of signification without which the question of materiality cannot even be raised as such. Therefore, new materialists argue that within the constructionist positions, any query regarding materiality is structurally compelled to take cultural devices as its primary object of analysis. Thus, addressing the ontological domain of matter becomes impossible for constructionist positions.

If by political we understand “the dimension of antagonism constitutive of human societies” and politics signifies “the set of practices and institutions through which an order is created, organizing human coexistence in the context of conflictuality provided by the political” (Mouffe, 2005, p.9), then such an understanding of materiality has immense implications. Such a notion of the political posits wilful subjects as sole agential actors, and this introduces a set of problems. In a cartesian vein, this type of perception of materiality reinforces the dualist distinction between language and materiality and other associated dualist distinctions such as nature/culture, mind/body, etc. The structure of dualist logic is such that it prioritizes one category over the other and defines the other category as subordinate, parasitically dependent on and deriving sustenance from the first one. The language/matter binary in discussion attributes secondarity to matter because irrespective of its non-linguistic ontological status, its intelligibility is singularly dependent on language. Thus, for constructionist positions, the non-linguistic ontological structure of matter

remains forever inaccessible because it is impossible to attain a position outside language that could allow one to explore its constitution before its entry into language. Therefore, being inaccessible to all practical purposes, this prelinguistic, primordial materiality proves to be analogous to the Kantian notion of the thing-in-itself.

In Kant's conceptualization, the thing-in-itself functions as the cause of the world of appearance but remains forever inaccessible to the conceptual tools of the phenomenal world (Kant, 1998, p.381). There can be no appearance without this cause, but this does not mean that the faculty of understanding would allow us to approach this primordial domain. It can only be understood as a "transcendental object" which causes the phenomenal world to come into being but maintains an autonomous existence with respect to it. We are confined within this world of appearance, passage to the absolute (i.e., transcendental) is barred, and the truth of this domain is forever outside our reach (Kant, 1998, p.381). Adorno calls this the "self-reflectivity" of reason - the ability to determine what is unknowable (Adorno, 2001, p.7). To Adorno, this is an advantage and not a limitation as it allows us to understand what can be known and directs our intellectual faculties to that domain instead of indulging in speculative exercise in the futile hope of realizing the truth of the absolute (Adorno, 2001, p.7).

Although it is self-evident that the understanding regarding materiality within the linguistic domain is not identical to that of noumenon, from a pragmatic perspective a certain parallel can be drawn between the two. Since the plane of absolute remains epistemically inaccessible, Kant's placement of the noumenon as unknowable was pragmatic in the sense that by showing what can be known and what cannot, it established a proper domain of philosophical enterprise which otherwise would have wasted its critical energy by engaging in futile speculative endeavours to understand the unknowable absolute. Now, the way constructionism frames matter does not ascribe it a transcendental status; neither does it function like a cause, nor is it ever claimed that it cannot be affected by culture. Rather, according to new materialists, constructionism argues that even though matter has a primordial existence beyond and before language, in itself this materiality is insignificant as it can attain significance only through cultural/linguistic interpellation (Coole & Frost, 2010; Alaimo & Hekman, 2008; Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012; Pitts-Taylor, 2016; Ellenzweig & Zammito, 2017). To sum up, matter in its primordial prelinguistic form can have meaning only within language and culture, and processes of cultural signification lie

at the heart of how matter would be interpreted and represented. Hence, any emancipatory narrative would have these interpretative grids, processes, and devices of cultural-linguistic interpellation as its central concern. In this sense, the de facto erasure of materiality can be considered a pragmatic move by constructionists.

As mentioned, the import of the *affective pull* (Hemmings, 2011) of the new materialist narrative lies in its claim to recuperate materiality which, as we just observed, was pushed into oblivion within constructionist philosophy. New materialism holds that - a) with everything interpreted as products of linguistic-cultural investment, the constructionist paradigm has effaced matter from the domain of critical inquiry; b) since according to constructionist positions cultural investiture is paramount for matter to *become as such*, matter in itself is deprived of agential capability. Whatever agential role it has is imparted by culture - a domain synonymous with wilful, conscious human subjects and their institutions.

In 2012, Rick Dolphizn and Iris van der Tuin published a volume on new materialism titled *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* that, along with a few introductory essays on the genealogy and possibilities of new materialism, included interviews of four noted new materialists - Rosi Braidotti, Manuel DeLanda, Karen Barad, and Quentin Melliassoux. Braidotti, in her interview collected in this volume (Dolphizn and van der Tuin, 2012, pp. 19-37) mentions the philosophical background against which the possibility of a new theorization on materiality emerged, and this philosophical background, as Braidotti asserts, was provided by an intense backlash against linguistic constructionism. Before the advent of constructionism, claims Braidotti, a certain Marxist influence governed the field of intellectual production. But this materialist influence waned with the advent of constructionism as it shifted critical theory's focus from materiality to its cultural-linguistic representation. However, discontent slowly emerged from within certain quarters that increasingly felt the need to return once again to the ontological concerns of matter and materiality, and this provided the impetus for a renewed interest in thinking matter beyond the politics of representation. And this is what Braidotti refers as "neo-materialism" (Dolphizn and van der Tuin, 2012, p.20). As Braidotti notes, by refusing the linguistic/cultural monism offered by philosophies of constructionism, this new paradigm emerged as a "conceptual frame and political stand" that focused on the need to explore the "concrete and complex materiality" of entities (Dolphizn & van der Tuin, 2012, p.21).

Discussing how Braidotti envisioned the scope of new materialism, Dolphijn and van der Tuin, in an introductory essay in the same volume, approvingly cite Braidotti's position on poststructuralism and mention how poststructuralist cultural theory is characterized by a dual movement where on the one hand it is full of references to representational politics, on the other hand it sharply rejects issues belonging to the domain of "bodily materiality" (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, pp.105-06). Commenting on the failure of linguisticist positions to address the ontology of matter, they wrote:

cultural theory in the postmodern era has been unable to account fully for materiality, whereas it found itself surrounded by an excessive representation (thus objectification) of (bodily and non-bodily, organic and inorganic, always already feminized) matter in popular culture as well as cultural theory...Postmodernist constructivism is discovered to be a paradigm in which the space for materialism is..."restricted." (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, pp.105-106).

In the prefatory address of their volume on new materialism, Diana Coole and Samantha Frost chart the trajectories and distinguishing features of the new materialist paradigm (2010). In that context, commenting on how theories of cultural constructionism fail to conceptualize materiality adequately and in what sense new materialism is radically different from its predecessors, they write:

the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy. [...] we are also aware that an allergy to "the real" that is characteristic of its more linguistic or discursive forms [...] has had the consequence of dissuading critical inquirers from the more empirical kinds of investigation that material processes and structures require. (Coole & Frost, 2010, p.6)

Susan Hekman, in a similar vein, remarks:

what this⁵⁶ leaves out is that there is a world out there that we understand. Dogmatic adherence to linguistic constitution cannot account for the reality and agency of that world. (Hekman, 2010, p.2)

Before critically commenting on the excerpts quoted above, I want to remind myself and my interlocutors that the excerpts I have selected form but a small segment of the vast amount of work that new materialism has produced in the last two decades. Even a cursory understanding of the field would suffice to know that new materialism consists of a diverse and discordant body of work that are often critical of each other. They have different genealogies and issues as their object of study, research, analysis, and theorization. In this light, it would be just to say that the signifier “new materialism” does not correspond to a fixed set of ideas shared by everyone who has been associated with new materialism. For instance, Karen Barad’s work provides a theory of what she calls “agential realism” that is critical of individualist metaphysics and advances an “intra-active”, relational ontology (Barad, 2007). An ambitious reading of her work would strongly argue for displacing the matter/culture binary or any other form of dualism. But on the other hand, a scrutiny of the work of Jane Bennett (Bennett, 2010), another thinker associated with new materialism, would exhibit that even though she shares with Barad a commitment towards thinking matter and materiality beyond the pieties of constructionism, her project of vital materialism operates within a dualist structure and inadvertently reinstalls ontological essentialism typical of individualist metaphysics. Considering Barad’s neologism, I am tempted to say that if Barad figures as a thinker of intra-action, Bennett represents an interactive ontology that assumes the pre-existence and full presence of ontologically distinct *relatas*. Therefore, despite the shared commitment towards materiality, the frameworks advanced by Barad and Bennett stand in distinction from each other, and such dissonances pervade the entire field of thought associated with new materialism.

However, despite these variations, two interlinked threads running through them allow us to address the field in terms of a provisional generality. The first concerns their shared understanding of constructionism and their position in relation to it. Despite their differences, all

⁵⁶ By “this” Hekman refers to constructionism.

these positions regard constructionism as practising a linguistic monism that reduces matter/materiality to the operation of language-culture-discourse. While implying a minimal and narrow understanding of language/culture, such an interpretation also presupposes a pre-existing binary division between matter (nature) and language (culture). Only within such an interpretive framework governed by ontological essentialism of nature and culture can the new materialist criticism of constructionism become sustainable.⁵⁷ Predicated on this, the second thread consists of their shared notion of matter and materiality which de facto regards them as self-referential categories.

The new materialist propositions briefly cited above, as can be observed, generally attest to this claim. Rosi Braidotti's expositions about the founding traits of neo materialism place "linguistic paradigm" as opposed to "concrete yet complex materiality of bodies" (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p.21). The rhetorical force of this statement lies in its ability to *enforce* an opposition between the realm of language and the realm of matter and materiality. Braidotti's proposition draws its sustenance from the ontological split between the two categories. This proposition conveys that - a) whatever linguistic turn and its corollaries deliberated upon, it did not address the questions of an entity's mode of being. Therefore, being and language stand as two exclusive domains devoid of any ontological overlapping or undecidability. In ontological terms, such a framework conceptualizes the concerned categories as self-referential and self-present. b) Language might or might not have any bearing on ontology, but it has no ontological claim. If we consider these two features which according to Braidotti are definitive of new materialism, then it can be concluded that in ontological terms, the new materialist understanding of matter seems to operate within a framework of classical ontology where being is determined as presence. Because, if it is claimed that matter does not refer to anything outside itself, then it would imply that in terms of its being, it is a self-sufficient, self-referential category signifying pure presence.

Dolphijn and van der Tuin's (2012) account is not as dismissive as Braidotti's, but one can still observe a structural dualism in operation. Dolphijn and van der Tuin's statement might come across as less radical than Braidotti's account since it does not imply a direct opposition between materiality and language as was observed in Braidotti. Their statement about the relation between

⁵⁷ The third chapter would shed light on this in the context of Kirby's polemic with Butler.

the two is more qualified in the sense that Dolphijn and Tuin are not rejecting language's implications for being and materiality altogether. Nevertheless, when we interrogate the logical structure of their argument, we notice two ontologically distinct operational terms. On the one hand, we have the category of language which is understood to have some bearing on materiality; and on the other hand, there is the domain of materiality that is affected or constituted, among many other things, by language.

Now, we can say "x has some bearing on y, but x cannot fully account for y" only when this proposition is premised on the assumption that y is greater than x. In this proposition, y appears to be the general field of which x is a component. Extending the logical thrust of this argument, we can submit that there is an ontological and structural difference between x and y. If one thing is a component of something else, then this "something else" must retain a distance from the thing of which it is a component. Had there been no distance or an undecidable distance, the difference between x and y would have collapsed, rendering any separation between the two unsustainable. Therefore, Dolphijn and van der Tuin's argument, in contrast to its frequent claim of the univocity of the material and the linguistic, implies structural and ontological separability between the two.

In the absence of any ontological elaboration of these two fields, this opposition *de facto* establishes their separability performatively. So, we see a dualist framework of general/particular emerging within van der Tuin and Dolphijn's argument. And as observed in Braidotti, by establishing a clear demarcation between the two domains matter (as well as culture) and its state of being, its mode of existence ends up implying self-referentiality and full presence. Because, without this self-referentiality, addressing matter beyond and before everything would not have been conceivable. Thus, Dolphijn and van der Tuin's position also operates within the classical ontological framework of presence.

Both Barad and Hekman's statements showcase a similar sentiment in that their positions too, exhibit a reluctance towards understanding language or materiality beyond a dualist framework, and implies the possibility of retrieving matter from the depths of linguistic-cultural signification. In this manner, even though criticism towards constructionism's allegedly singular attention to the processes of signification, interpretation, and meaning-making at the cost of rendering the question of the ontological status of material beings irrelevant from a critical and

political perspective has become one of the founding gestures of new materialism,⁵⁸ the new philosophical paradigm seems to reproduce the same classical dualist ontological framework that they claim constructionism to be operating within. And whereas they deprecated constructionism for their placement of language at the subject position, new materialism follows a structurally similar path with the only difference being that here, instead of language, matter occupies the position of the subject. Thus, keeping the ontological framework intact, new materialism merely enacts a reversal. And within this reversal, matter appears to be a self-referential, self-present category.

Now, if critique of constructionism and its emphasis on language, discourse, and culture forms one constitutive aspect of new materialism, then engagement with natural science accounts for its other developmental trajectory. The next section will interrogate new materialism's engagement with natural science in its bid to retrieve matter from the dept of its linguisticist/culturalist interpretations. And we will also establish that in a manner similar to the thinkers discussed above where the thrust on accessing matter beyond and before everything revealed itself to be operating within the classical dualist ontology governed by presence, new materialist engagement with science too is no exception to it.

New Materialism and the Epistemic Privilege of Natural Science

The domain of the body has remained another field of contention since the advent of new materialism, and new materialist arguments regarding the body also manifest their critical stance towards the positions aligned to constructionism. According to new materialist critique, within the paradigm of the linguistic turn, our understanding of matter and other terms associated with it becomes possible only through its linguistic/cultural interpretation. Therefore, any understanding of nature/matter is, in reality, an understanding of how culture interprets it to be. Thus, any access to materiality as such is rendered impossible. In a similar vein, the material substance of the body figures as how it has been interpreted through cultural/linguistic devices. Therefore, according to

⁵⁸ We will discuss this in detail while analyzing a number of pioneering new materialist texts later in this article.

the new materialists, constructionism reduces the material body to linguistic-cultural signification, foreclosing the possibility of inquiring the material stratum of the body beyond signification. Therefore, to access the domain of the material stratum of the biological body, one of the key manoeuvres of new materialism is to deploy insights generated from natural science.

For new materialism, development in the field of natural science stands for a move beyond the Newtonian model that regarded entities as discrete, compartmentalized, individual entities (Coole & Frost, 2010, pp.7-8). But development in science, especially in evolutionary biology, environmental science, and quantum physics, challenges such models of individualist metaphysics and point towards the poietic and relational nature of matter, where instead of being subject to external (f)actors, matter shows autopoietic tendencies and harbours within itself the possibility of differentiation. Also, these new developments encourage us to conceive matter as always entangled with its surroundings to the extent that any conceptualization of it as a hermetically sealed entity waiting for outside actors to render it meaningful and agentic becomes impossible. These insights provide the critical impetus for new materialism to emerge.

However, as has been claimed by the stakeholders, the relation that new materialism has with natural science is anything but unidirectional. As Myra J. Hird observes (Hird, 2009, pp.330-31) following Adrian Murphy and Andrew Mackenzie, working with natural science has hitherto been done in three modes - critique, extraction, and engagement. Critique of science means being critical of scientific rationality which espouses values such as objectivity and neutrality - values historically associated with natural science. Extraction means borrowing concepts developed in natural science to put them to use to address social, political, and cultural issues. However, engagement with science differs from taking a critical stance toward scientific nationality or using scientific concepts as gospels to address political and philosophical concerns. Engagement means working with science as “it engages with science-in-the-making, and it has had to do with formulating questions about how to live in or with science collectively” (Hird, 2009, p.331). Criticising previous decades of feminist theory for its ignorance of science, new materialism claims novelty in terms of its engagement with science.

Addressing matter and materiality by taking the register of the body, Elizabeth Wilson argues that despite the proliferation of discourses on the body, little attention has been paid to the question of biology (Wilson, 2015). Works produced by the previous generation of feminist

thinkers, argues Wilson, have focused chiefly on how the body is constituted discursively (Wilson, 2015, p.3). While these proved immensely beneficial for feminist goals, the biological body has strictly remained outside the purview of feminist analysis. Wilson claims that feminist theory has shown little interest in the details of empirical data generated in various fields of biology, such as genetics, evolutionary biology, biochemistry, etc. (Wilson, 2015, p.3). The reason that Wilson believes is the cause for feminist theory's aversion to biology is that it was thought to be a "reductive materiality stripped of the animating effects of culture and sociality" (Wilson, 2004, p.3). As becomes clear from this statement, the reason for ignoring concrete biological data emerges from the understanding that it is reductive in its understanding and the conviction that a turn to science would lead to "wanton imperialism of science" (Asberg & Birke in Frost, 2014, p.308). Also, since most of the work done in feminist science studies that dealt with biology primarily concerned themselves with the patriarchal formation of biological science and the modes through which hegemonic discourses on gender and sexuality shaped biology (and other domains of natural science), it was thought that engaging with biology would result in getting entrapped within the very domain it had set out to critique. Together, these led to the vehement "antibiologism" that marked the previous generation of feminist theory (Wilson, 2004, p.13). Pointing at this trait of feminist theory, Wilson writes -

how many feminist accounts of the anorexic body pay serious attention to the biological functions of the stomach, the mouth, or the digestive system? How many feminist analyses of the anxious body are informed and illuminated by neurological data? How many feminist discussions of the sexual body have been articulated through biochemistry? (Wilson, 2004, p.8)

Against this background, Wilson envisions her project thus -

It is my argument that biology—the muscular capacities of the body, the function of the internal organs, the biophysics of cellular metabolism, the microphysiology of circulation, respiration, digestion, and excretion—needs to become a more significant contributor to feminist theories of the body. (Wilson, 2004, p.8)

And this engagement with biology in particular and natural science in general is an essential marker of new materialism, where scientific understanding of matter - operating in various registers - becomes synonymous with a self-referential materiality beyond language-culture-discourse. Considering the significance that biology holds for new materialism, it might not be surprising that Samantha Frost, one of the pioneers of new materialism, described the material turn as biological turn.⁵⁹

For Frost, biology becomes the tool for combating the hegemony of language which, according to her, has reduced material body to language and discourse. Much like Wilson's argument, Frost claims that whatever theorizations there have been regarding the body have in reality dealt only with various signifying practices, and thereby failed to address the material stratum of biology. Therefore, feminist theory of the body has de facto bracketed out the body - "For feminist philosophers and theorists, the body as a living organism is a vexed object, so vexed, in fact, that in philosophical and theoretical work, it is often sidelined, bracketed, or ignored" (Frost, 2011, p.69). Agential role has been ascribed to language and discourse at the cost of ignoring the material space of the body. Following Linda Birke, Frost laments that feminist theorists often fail to consider the materiality that "meat" proffers (Frost, 2011, p.76). Therefore, for Frost, one of the key gestures of new materialism lies in its turning towards the biological space of the body, which, following Frost's argument, can also be called the material space of the body. Frost writes:

These 'new materialists' consider matter or the body not only as they are formed by the forces of language, culture, and politics but also as they are formative. That is, they conceive of matter or the body as having a peculiar and distinctive kind of agency, one that is neither a direct nor an incidental outgrowth of human intentionality but rather one with its own impetus and trajectory...In calling for feminists to acknowledge that matter and biology are active in their own right, new materialists push feminists to relinquish the unidirectional model of causation in which either culture or biology is determinative and

⁵⁹ Frost does not use the phrase biological turn, but she refers to this new phase of feminist theory which is rich in engagement with biology as the "the turn to biology" (Frost, 2014).

instead to adopt a model in which causation is conceived as complex, recursive, and multi-linear. (Frost, 2011, p.70)

Two distinct features emerge if we consider the logical movement of the arguments proposed by Wilson and Frost. The first one concerns the association of natural science with materiality. Biology here is opposed to the factors of language and discourse which, according to their argument, have placed body out of the purview of feminist theory, an error which can be rectified by turning to biology that can address the material substratum beyond representation. So, a theoretical movement takes place within the new materialist figurations - biology and biological data is opposed to language and discourse.

The second feature - and this concerns Frost's formulations - concerns the introduction of what we have called interactive ontology which, despite its claims of relationality, understands the material and the cultural to be two distinct self-referential entities with marked boundaries, a distinction that can only operate within the framework of classical ontology governed by presence. Even though Frost, and other proponents of the interactive model, are not inclined to think in terms of compartmentalized categories and instead are keen on understanding them as co-constitutive, our discussion indicates that despite their will to the contrary, these positions often end up understanding concerned categories in terms of an ontology of presence. Frost's introduction of what she calls the 'hyphenated or amalgamated terms' such as biocultural or biosocial attests to that (Frost, 2018, p.550).

A comprehensive critical account of new materialism is beyond the scope of our enterprise. But these statements capture the common thread running through new materialism, and this concerns the new materialist understanding of constructionist ontology. For new materialism, constructionism's singular focus on representation is rooted in the ontological separation between materiality/language distinction and other associated binaries, which implies a triadic structure at work. The first component of this triad is brute matter, inert, devoid of any agential functions. The second component is the buffer zone of culture, where an economy of forces interpellates it within its terms. And the third component is matter-as-signified-within-culture. In this sense, there is nothing natural about nature/matter since what appears as natural/material is nothing but the production of various discursive apparatuses. This is why Kirby calls this "second nature" or

“second order construct” (Kirby, 2016) which, contrary to its appearance as natural, is unnatural through and through:

If it is true that we invent a world through a refractive hall of mirrors from which there is no escape, no substantive appeal to an extra-linguistic or causal origin, then it makes sense to assume that culture’s hermetic self-capture discovers a ‘second nature’ (which is really culture in disguise) as the ground and explanation of who we are and how we should live [...] according to this view it can have no directly perceived, or substantive facticity because the very act of making sense of a world is necessarily an interpretive makeover. In other words, what appears as that which precedes the arrival of the human remains a cultural back-projection with no unmediated presence, and this then implies that cultural signs of nature overlay a now inaccessible and unknowable nature as such. (Kirby, 2017, p.3)

What causes this transformation that takes inert, non-agential nature as its raw material and moulds it into cultural artefacts attributing to it meanings that it lacked before is the domain of the anthropos. This is not to say that what Kirby metaphorically calls the “first nature” is incapable of change, but whatever alteration it undergoes is merely accidental, resulting from various interconnected processes, lacking conscious will and intention. Consciousness, intention, and agency separate humans from other entities, and language/culture being one of the finest manifestations of the ability to think in abstraction, it becomes synonymous with the human - the *homo loquens* (Kirby, 2011, pp.40-41). Moreover, as language, within the constructionist framework, is understood to be productive of matter, any understanding of it within this framework would be anthropocentric.

So, considering that there is a prediscursive domain of materiality that language distorts, and that language and materiality bear two ontologically distinct structures with language being synonymous with humans, new materialism’s call to recuperate matter from the depths of language/discourse/culture is by right critical of anthropocentrism, and this feature is immanent to its constitution. The question of language is particularly significant for new materialism as it continues to reiterate how within the paradigm of constructionism, only processes of cultural-linguistic construction received critical attention and how it reduced materiality to language.

One of the associated claims of new materialism is its commitment to the univocity of being that focuses on how the various dualist distinctions (language/materiality, nature/culture, human/nonhuman) fall short in the face of critical scrutiny and how in reality these categories are entangled. However, our discussion so far provides the ground to speculate whether in their bid to provide a non-linguistic account of materiality, many representatives of new materialism inadvertently reinstall (various forms of) the language/materiality duality and attribute to matter/nature a self-referential status, thereby producing a new form of foundationalism.

The radicalism of new materialism, according to its own proclamations, lies in its commitment to understanding materiality beyond a dualist paradigm. But as we observed, their efforts to refurbish the question of materiality operate on a distinct ontological split between language and matter. Paradoxically, Kirby's critique of certain proponents of poststructuralist feminism for their lingering commitment to the language-materiality distinction can be read against various new materialist projects themselves:

The abstracting technology of language, intelligence, and creative invention is separated from the body of the material world, indeed, from the material body of human animality. Ironically, given the initial concern to question the separation of nature from culture within Cartesianism, the sense that human identity is somehow secured and enclosed against a more primordial and inhuman "outside" (which must include the subject's own corporeal being!) recuperates the Cartesian problematic, but this time without question. (Kirby, 2008a, pp.220-221).

As mentioned, a counterintuitive reading observes that Kirby's critique of the poststructuralist turn for its reminiscent Cartesianism can very well be read as a commentary on the new materialist discourse itself. The presence oriented Cartesian underpinnings of these new materialist enterprises reveal themselves in their literal interpretation of the axiomatic call to eschew the constructionist premise. Like the constructionist paradigm they posit themselves against, new materialists too operate within the classical ontological framework which operates on the basis of a radical separation between matter and language, and grants to matter the status of being a self-referential, irreducible foundation. It ends up translating its commitment to nondualism into a

simple epistemic critique which argues for rendering the conceptual boundary of language and matter ambiguous without working through the categories themselves. Anirban Das's insight (2010), albeit in a different yet analogous context of certain section of Western feminist theory's call to move beyond the sex/gender binary by merely blurring the distinction between these categories, can be brought to bear on this to argue that an offhand rejection of dualist categories through an epistemic critique is not enough. Firstly, because this rejection of dualism by either opting to think through a monist perspective or blurring of boundaries still operates within the broader metabinary of dualism/nondualism; secondly, and more importantly, because even if one questions the epistemic virtue of language, one still has to work through it (Das, 2010, pp.45-46). It is my contention that the absence of engagement with the terms of the various dualist structures that new materialism intends to displace land a number of new materialist ventures squarely back into the domain of dualist ontology determined by presence.

New materialist projects indeed provide new contours for thought and practice. The radicalism of its will to address the question of matter, its conceptual arsenal, affirmative approach, focus on concept creation, and its general critical charge has undoubtedly made a lasting impression in the humanities. But its materialist inflection and its commitment to a nondualist mode of thinking remain deeply qualified in that it often finds itself navigating within a dualist, classical ontological framework which somewhat uncritically accepts the self-referentiality and full presence of matter. To corroborate this, we would critically engage with two representatives of the new materialist turn in the rest of the chapter. Through this engagement, we would establish how new materialism is haunted by the idea of an undifferentiated, self-referential, self-present origin that exists prior to and beyond culture, language, or discourse.

The Failed Non-Dualism of New Materialism and Resurgence of Presence in Manuel DeLanda's Realist Ontology

Tuin and Dolphijn's position on matter and language resonate strongly with Manuel DeLanda's argument that the various forms of matter are not exterior to it, but rather matter itself is morphogenetic. It produces itself through temporal processes, and the stability of its form

emerges through these processes. According to DeLanda, this forms the basis of a “neo-materialist” position (DeLanda in Dolphijn & Tuin, 2012, p.43). By working through Deleuze’s and Guattari’s theory of assemblage, DeLanda provides an outline of what he calls a “materialist theory of language” that considers representation immanent to matter (DeLanda & Harman, 2017, p.21). This “materialist theory of language” regards the mechanistic aspects of language consisting of “pulses of air shaped with our tongue and palates, or physical inscription” (DeLanda & Harman, 2017, p.21) to be the material substratum of language. They form the basic layer on which other layers are produced, which, in turn, sets in motion this material substratum to repeatedly produce “progressive differentiations of monolithic words”, leading to the third and ultimate layer of syntaxes where articulations become possible (DeLanda & Harman, 2017, p.21). In this sense, language is perceived to be an emergent property of bodily matter.

DeLanda’s take on linguistic representation is deeply influenced by Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of *double articulation* that, instead of operating on objective generalities focuses on temporal processes that produce that entity as such. As DeLanda argues reading Deleuze and Guattari, the process of double articulation is how various strata - whether geological, biological, or social - are produced. Double articulation consists of, respectively, first- the bringing together of the quasi-stable primary building blocks which are then subjected to a basic process of ordering; and second, the consolidation of these primary elements into molar units, which through its various emergent properties attain stability (DeLanda, 2016, pp.23-24). DeLanda calls this second articulation the “expressivity of a stratum” (DeLanda, 2010, p.32), and as elaborated above, it is immanent in the materiality of the stratum itself. Thus, to disarticulate the language/matter binary, language needs to be approached through the logic of double articulation. As DeLanda puts it -

the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari is truly ‘postmodern’ in this regard (if one still insists on using this silly label). It is the non- linear flow of lavas and magmas that produces the structures (rocks, mountains) that inhabit the geosphere. Similarly, the nonlinear flow of flesh (biomass) through food chains, plus the flow of genetic materials in gene pools, are what creates the structures (animals, plants) that inhabit the biosphere. Linguistic structures must be approached exactly same way, as products of lengthy

sedimentation of sounds, words and syntactical constructions, and their consolidation into structures over the centuries. (DeLanda, 1992).

For DeLanda, conceiving language in this manner renders the matter-language dualism unsustainable since language has ceased to be a different ontological order and has been exhibited to have emerged from the field of materiality (of the body). Therefore, matter and language are not separate as such. For DeLanda, this new conception of poietic matter⁶⁰ circumvents the “imperialist prehension” of “conservative idealism” that various linguistic theories of constructionism have pushed critical theory into (DeLanda, 2016, pp.25-26).

The organization through which matter emerges does not depend on transcendent forms; instead, it harbours the potential to generate those forms within itself. For example, in one of his projects, DeLanda mentions three layers or levels of being - the geological, the biological, and the linguistic. Despite being structurally different, these layers can neither be said to have gone through the progressive journey towards perfection where we start from basic geological building blocks and then through thousands of years of linear progression arrive at language. Nor can it be asserted that these categories bear a relation of exteriority to each other. Instead, these categories emerge through the accumulation of materials and their various internal interactions, leading to differentiation of form and finally resulting in the emergence of new patternments of matter.⁶¹

In DeLanda’s monist ontology, this entity which through differentiation produces newer forms of being is called *matter-energy* –

In a very real sense, reality is a single matter-energy undergoing phase transitions of various kinds, with each new layer of accumulated “stuff” simply enriching the reservoir of nonlinear dynamics and nonlinear combinatorics available for the generation of novel

⁶⁰ DeLanda considers matter, whether inert or animated, autopoietic, i.e. matter takes part in its own (trans)formation. Commenting on this aspect, DeLanda writes - “Even the humblest forms of matter and energy have the potential for self-organization beyond the relatively simple type involved in the creation of crystals...inorganic matter is much more variable and creative than we ever imagined.” (DeLanda, 1997, p.16)

⁶¹ One can think this in terms of evolution where a vast pool of existing genetic codes undergoes phases of differentiation to produce a new species. Considering the evolutionary framework, it cannot be said that the new species is essentially different from everything else. Instead, it is a differential form of what came before it, and in that sense, it cannot have a transcendent essence. On the contrary, it exists in a relation of differential continuity with its predecessors.

structures and processes. Rocks and winds, germs and words, are all different manifestations of this dynamic material reality, or, in other words, they all represent the different ways in which this single matter-energy expresses itself. (DeLanda, 1997, p.21)

Being, if one follows DeLanda's argument above, is univocal. This ontology of univocity does not allow for conceptualizing the relation between entities in terms of negation. Rather, every material entity expresses a singular force that DeLanda calls matter-energy. But on closer examination, this monist ontology, despite its claims to have destabilized the predominant binary structure, appears to have introduced a host of issues.

As we have discussed in the previous sections, one of the key contributions of new materialism to ontological inquiry lies in its efforts to destabilize the dualist framework, and one of the ways to do it is by showing it to be a false binary. In other words, by showing that the categories which in the dominant discourse present themselves as binary opposites in reality exist in a relation that is far from oppositional or negative, new materialism claims to overcome dualism. Following this logic, DeLanda's neo-materialist account attempts to circumvent language/matter binary by regarding language as the immanent expressivity of the body. However, despite its appearance of overcoming dualism in this manner, an investigation into the operational terms of DeLanda's conceptual mainframe shows that his neo-materialist project functions within a metaphysical premise that derives sustenance by precisely operating on the basis of the dualist framework which it claimed to have dismantled. And this particular fact, i.e., the reinstatement of dualism, both presupposes and (re)produces an ontological framework governed by presence. Let us explore this movement in DeLanda's work.

For DeLanda, matter functions like an all-encompassing entity accommodating everything either as actualizations or in terms of futurity where the *to-come* is already present as an immanent property. As our citations from DeLanda's texts concerning his "materialist" theory of language clearly exhibit, what he considers to be the material stuff of the body is understood to contain the possibility of the emergence of language within itself. A particular formation of matter might not be capable of language at present, but at a structural level it nonetheless includes the possibility of producing it. For instance, the human body, in its embryonic state, is unable to harness language. But in time, the embryo morphs into an organism equipped with the tools formative of language.

Therefore, what is yet not there and would emerge later is still present, but instead of being immediate, it is present in a negative sense. Its presence is a form of *absent-presence* which means that this presence, though not present yet, is already present there in terms of a yet unrealized possibility.

Thus, DeLanda's materialist account can be summed up in two general propositions - a) matter (nature) is the origin of language (culture), and being a product of matter, language is material through and through and shares the same ontological structure as matter; b) being precedes knowing. Hence, if DeLanda's problem with what he calls linguistic idealism was that it conceived being as the product of thought,⁶² then it would appear that despite his announcement of dislodging dualism, his materialist account enacts little more than a mere reversal of the position of the terms involved. Whereas linguistic idealism regarded the domain of language as the de facto primary term, for DeLanda, that position now belongs to the plane of self-referential matter. Thus, in a gesture typical of new materialist texts explored so far, DeLanda's attempted "disruption" of dualism proves to operate within the classical framework of ontology where matter becomes a domain of primordial, pure, self-referential presence.

As is evident in many of DeLanda's works, a narrow idea of language, representation, and culture informs his conjectures regarding his allegations against what he calls linguistic idealism and his own account of the materialist theory of language. Representation, with language being one of its modes, is effectively theorized by DeLanda as a derivative of matter. Both in epistemological and ontological sense, matter figures as prior to all modes of representation. DeLanda's reworking of the notion of matter as morphogenic does nothing but define it as processual and individuating. It is true that conceived thus, matter emerges as radically unstable with its ever-unfolding variations and metastable nature which belies its apparent ontic stability. While such a formulation might deny any simple representative schema (given that representation is understood in the narrow sense) the chance to capture this metastable presence at any given moment, it transmutes it (i.e., matter) into a foundation, into a self-present, self-sustaining origin.

⁶² This is how DeLanda defines linguistic idealism - "the ontological stance according to which the world is a product of our minds" (DeLanda, 2010, p.29).

Focusing his analysis on Elizabeth Grosz's work, Keith Ansel-Pearson, in his analysis of the Deleuzian heritage of new materialism, highlights a trait that he claims Grosz shares with new materialism. Even though her relationship with new materialism is tenuous, Grosz has often been identified with this school of thought, and new materialists have often read her work approvingly (Grosz et al. 2021). New materialism's claims for a new theory of matter resonates strongly with projects that Grosz undertook where she attempted to refurbish existing frameworks of materialism by theorizing matter in terms of events and processes (Grosz, 2011).⁶³ However, according to Ansel-Pearson, these "novel" endeavours strongly resemble "old" forms of metaphysical materialism that new materialists claimed to have severed themselves from. Locating the conceptual problem that lies with theorizing matter in terms of process, Ansel-Pearson writes that Grosz's quest for materiality -

attempts to go beyond the post-war discourses of structuralism and post-structuralism. For her, these discourses have served to foreclose the problem of existence of an independent material reality...she wants, "following Darwin," a concept of matter that does not remove it from its opposing term, be it mind, life, idea, form, or spirit...In essence, she wants a new materialism that conceives of matter in terms of events and processes rather than in terms of things and objects. Already we begin to see the "old" character of much of what is taken to be a new materialism: the concern with an ontology of the real is arguably as old, in its early modern incarnation, as Spinoza, and the desire for a philosophy of events and processes strikes up a rapport and an affinity with the modern likes of Bergson and Whitehead. (Ansell-Pearson, 2017, pp.91-92)

Ansel-Pearson's comment on this general trend of new materialism holds for DeLanda as well because his project too endows matter with morphogenic properties and defines it as a form of pre-individuated metastability; and also because to some extent, DeLanda appears to have a similar reading of their shared philosophical lineage of Deleuze. As we have observed, DeLanda's project

⁶³ However, in her later works, she proposed to think the incorporeal dimension of materiality (Grosz, 2017) as well which does not sit easily with new materialist reductionism. She asserts this point in her 2021 interview with Mercier and Fondecy (Grosz et al., 2021).

functions on the basis of positing matter as a poietic origin where (the possibilities of) future development is already contained within its topological space. Even though language and other abstract forms identified with the stratum of expressivity are granted autonomy and singular affectivity, they are still rooted in a nostalgia for a foundation, for an “ontology of the real” which matter, understood as a domain of pure self-referential presence, provides.

This analysis also highlights another aspect that correlates with DeLanda’s presence oriented ontological framework. His nostalgic inclination to a definitive origin can only operate, despite his claims to the contrary, on the basis of a split between ontology and epistemology, and this entails a host of issues that DeLanda does not address. Or, to be more precise, their exclusion from DeLanda’s work is constitutive of his materialist theory. These issues concern the definitive ontological rupture between matter and language and/or ontology and epistemology that DeLanda’s narrative effectively enacts. According to Delanda, the stratum of expressivity, although functioning as the product of the material stratum, cannot be identified with the material stratum. Language, understood as an expression of matter, is an emergent property of the material assemblage. Owing to certain changes in the stratum of materiality, matter goes through various states, and at a certain stage exhibits properties that were not present before. As DeLanda puts it, these emergent properties are property of the whole that does not exist in the individual parts but can only emerge when the parts function as a totality (Delanda, 2010, p. 3; Delanda, 2016, p.9). Therefore, it cannot be reduced to the domain from where/in which it emerges.

Now, even if we operate on the basis of a narrow understanding of language as expression, it still poses a problem because if we provisionally accept DeLanda’s causal theory of language, we would be required to explain the basis on which language (expressive strata) can be definitively distinguished from matter (material strata). This would require us to have a definite understanding of what matter (or material stratum) really is, and which parts of matter-as knowledge truly belongs to matter itself and what part of it belongs to language. Without this, drawing a line of separation between the two remains impossible. But if matter appears only to the extent that it is enmeshed in culture to the point of inseparability, how can one draw a line between where matter ends and where language begins? Thus, to make claims as DeLanda appears to do throughout his body of work imply that his framework presupposes a knowledge of their absolute ontological distinction.

DeLanda's understanding of language is opposed to the theories of representation where the function of language is to represent all the other stratas, to translate - and here DeLanda quotes Deleuze and Guattari - "all of the flows, particles, codes, and territorialities of the other strata into a sufficiently deterritorialized system of signs..." (Deleuze and Guattari, as cited in DeLanda, 2010, p.34). Here, DeLanda's deployment of the metaphor of translation becomes symptomatic of the absolute ontological separability of language and matter that his account presupposes. In the case of language, translation in the most literal sense entails taking a piece articulated in a particular language and converting it into another. So, here we have a clear separation between the original and the translation, or to put it another way, between the authentic/real and simulation. Whether the translation follows the original to the letter is another question, but one cannot deny translation's theoretical dependence on the original. Whether a translation is faithful to the original or diverging from it significantly can be judged only when one has access to the original. However, in the absence of an original, how does one adjudicate whether or not the translation in question is authentic? In the absence of the original, it would be impossible to gauge the faithfulness of the translation judging by the translation alone.

Reading this into DeLanda's materiality-language problematic, it can be asked that if language is the only medium through which translation becomes possible and if the material stratum is only expressed through translation, then how would it be possible to separate this translation from the original, i.e., the material strata? Even if language is an emergent property, or the result of divergent progression of an assemblage, how would it be possible to draw a dividing line that would separate representation of materiality from materiality itself? If language is the mode through which materiality can be presented, then how would it be possible for any philosophical endeavour to approach this materiality outside language? Wouldn't the outside be an effect of language? Wouldn't the "materiality itself" be an effect of language? DeLanda's project is deeply mired in this problem that he does not address. Rather, his entire project moves on the basis of keeping operational numerous associated binaries such as language-materiality, material stratum-stratum of expression, inside-outside, origin-translation, and attributing one category from each of the pair the originary role and self-referential status.

This same problem manifests itself in a pronounced manner in DeLanda's reading of Foucault, where he also emphasizes a split between the discursive and the scientific framework

(DeLanda & Harman, 2017, pp. pp.7-8). DeLanda's emphasis on this separation once again displays a nostalgia for origin. It exhibits a certain non-reading of Foucault that reveals itself in one of his comments that lays bare his understanding of discourse - "Foucault never wrote about any real scientific field: psychiatry, early clinical medicine, grammar, early economics, criminology etc. are all *mere* discourses, not fields that reliably produce knowledge" (DeLanda & Harman, 2017, p.7). Reading this comment, one gets the sense that what discourse produces is nothing but an illusion. Although DeLanda does not write it in so many words, looking at the rhetorical charge of the statement that commits discourse to something that has nothing to do with "real science" reveals the underpinning binary framework of his reading of Foucault. For DeLanda, discourse stands for insubstantiality comparable to false knowledge and is opposed to the truth that science purportedly has valid access to. Such conceptions of discourse and "truly real" reality govern his ontological inquiry. Although devoid of a thetic essence since it does not emerge from a rigorous philosophical reading of Foucault, this statement is symptomatic of DeLanda's subscription to the classical dualist ontology determined in terms of presence, and his nostalgia towards a self-present and self-referential foundation, i.e., an (*par*) *ousia*. Recourse to true knowledge or truth content of matter, nostalgia for a self-referential, self-present originary matter uncontaminated by language and other forms of human intentionality unfold as the philosophical ground for DeLanda's ontology.

Naïve Realism and the Philosophy of *Life Itself*: Jane Bennett's Thing-Power Materialism

DeLanda's ontological framework echoes Jane Bennett's "speculative onto-theory" that she calls *thing-power materialism* (Bennett 2004, 2010). In one of her works, Bennett provides her ontological account of materiality in an autobiographical mode where she recounts how one morning during a walk, she was struck by the sight of a combination of different types of litter objects (Bennett, 2010, p.4). A dead rat, pollen, a plastic bottle cap, and some wooden things were

sprawled out on a granite surface before her. However, this otherwise mundane collection of litter objects had dual signification to her.

On the one hand, they were the result of human activity. Someone must have once worn the cap, or it served some other purpose upon whose completion it was tossed into the garbage, the rat might have died by consuming mass-produced rat poison. But on the other hand, Bennett notes, this diverse array of human rejects exhibited another kind of materiality that was not entirely anthropogenic, and produced a kind of affect that was not confined to their anthropocentric signification. This affect made a “claim” on her by commanding to itself a type of “attention as vital and alive in its own right, as an existent in excess of its reference to human flaws or projects” (Bennett, 2004, p.350). It is this affect that Bennett calls “thing-power”. This is a kind of materiality that does not express itself as long as these objects are perceived through their anthropocentric signification. It exceeds the grids of human intelligibility and opens a horizon beyond human language and culture.

Bennett places this “less specifically human” kind of materiality (Bennett, 2004, p.348) in opposition to the philosophical productions of “body materialism” that, Bennett asserts, effectively reduced the material body to “bio-culture” (Bennett, 2004, p.348). According to Bennett, body materialism that came into being and was enriched by the works of Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler, only focused on exploring various force fields and networks of power/language through which bodies are produced as sexed, gender, racially interpellated. In this framework, culture functioned as the key to the materiality of the body - “Body materialism, in other words, reveals how cultural practices shape what is experienced as natural and real” (Bennett, 2004, p.348). However, Bennett claims that matter cannot be fully accounted for in terms of culture, since matter does not give itself up completely to human intelligibility but exhibits a kind of “recalcitrance” to its complete assimilation into language and culture (Bennett, 2004, p.348). It is this aspect of matter and materiality that thing-power consists of.

For Bennett, non-human objects have their way of expressing themselves by inducing certain effects on us, and they become accessible to us only if we attend carefully to these objects. Thing power, as Bennett describes, is “the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle” (Bennett, 2010, p.6). This is precisely what Bennett describes through her account of her encounter with a host of objects and the way it exerted a force on her, a

force which, according to Bennett, is not limited to anthropocentric networks of power and modes of discursive formation that bodily materialism finds itself anchored to. Rather, it creates a new horizon of experience leading to an onto-epistemic domain beyond the purview of language and culture.

However, Bennett mentions repeatedly in her account that the nonhuman objects that generate a “less specifically human” affect (Bennett, 2004, p.348) also entail meanings ascribed to them by the social and the cultural. No matter how intense the non-anthropocentric materiality these objects harbour, it remains undeniable that they do not come to us in any immediate sense. During encounters, we bring our life world to interact with them, we place it within our horizon of experience, which in turn leads to the loss of their immediacy. Given this inevitability of mediation, how would it be possible to single out their thing power - their noncultural/nonlinguistic materiality?

Bennett responds to quandary by proposing what she calls “naive realism” (Bennett, 2004) or “naïve vitalism” (Bennett, 2010). She accepts the undeniability of the fact that nonhuman objects are always laced in culture, but argues that a “naive orientation to the thing” (Bennett, 2004, p.356) resists the urge to draw from this the old conclusion that these nonhuman object and their nonhuman affects are, in the last instance, a socio-cultural production. While it is true that an object’s materiality does entail aspects of culture, understanding an object only through the lens of socio-linguistic constructions does not tell us anything new. Such resolutions, Bennett argues, are mere repetitions of the linguisticist/culturalist gesture typical of contemporary body materialism (Bennett, 2004, p.356). However, having a naive orientation toward matter allows us to elide such repetitive accounts, and as a result it attributes actancy to nonhuman materiality. Whereas within the humanist discourses humans function as the sole agential factor affecting and “moving” themselves⁶⁴ as well as everything else (Bennett, 2004, p.359), a naive realism creates the space for considering the agentiality of the nonhuman world. It allows us to conceive of nonhuman objects as a material domain that escapes anthropocentric discourses and bears the potential to affect humans (Bennett, 2004, p.358). Bennett does not deny the role that culture/language plays in the question of the materiality of an object. But in a methodological move somewhat analogous to

⁶⁴ Bennett, in this context, calls such human agents “self-movers” (Bennett, 2004, p.359).

DeLanda's, she brackets out culture-language and other anthropogenic practices. In this manner, Bennett clears the ground for a materialism of thing-power to emerge. As she puts it -

What is manifest arrives through humans but not entirely because of them: we bring something from ourselves to the experience, and so it is not pure or unmediated. But a receptive mood with a moment of naivete is a useful counter to the tendency (prevalent in sociological and anthropological studies of material culture) to conclude the biography of an object by showing how it, like everything, is socially constituted. (Bennett, 2004, p.358).

In terms of its commitment to separate the social-cultural from matter itself and granting matter self-sufficiency and self-referentiality, Bennett's formulation of thing-power is typical of new materialist ontology. This task requires that we be able to draw a clear boundary between the two in the first place. As discussed, Bennett is aware of the fact that nonhuman objects *do have* cultural bearings and that it would not be easy to filter them out. We notice a clear articulation of the difficulty that the task of drawing a line between them entails, and Bennett seems to concede this predicament provisionally when she mentions that encountering the nonhuman materiality becomes possible only through their socio-cultural interpellation. However, this is precisely where the "naive ambition of vital materialism" becomes functional (Bennett, 2010, p. xvii). To her, it promises a way to circumvent the overarching lure typical of the constructivist framework of body materialism which blocks the possibility of thing-power to emerge and pushes one toward interpreting objects/reality in terms of their cultural-linguistic interpretation. Hence, appreciating thing-power requires a "moment of methodological naivete" (Bennett, 2010, p.17). By way of analogy, Bennett urges us to look towards the ancient materialism of Lucretius. Citing Lucretius's statement on how bodies colluding with one another to produce something new affirms that the world is not predetermined but full of unanticipatable events and processes, Bennett argues that such indeterminacy tells us that even inanimate things have a life of their own, that they do not follow a predefined path, and that this vitality is what thing-power is about-

A primordial swerve says that the world is not determined, that an element of chanciness resides at the heart of things, but it also affirms that so-called inanimate things have a life,

that deep within is an inexplicable vitality or energy, a moment of independence from and resistance to us and other bodies: a kind of thing-power. (Bennett, 2010, p.18)

To chart a roadmap for understanding this noncultural, non-linguistic materiality, Bennett takes up a poem by Lucretius to argue that a certain approach towards things can allow us access their bare materiality -

It is easy to criticize this realism: Lucretius quests for the thing itself, but there is no there there - or, at least, no way for us to grasp or know it, for the thing is always already humanized; its object status arises at the very instant something comes into our awareness...But Lucretius's poem...does offer this potential benefit: it can direct sensory, linguistic, and imaginative attention toward a material vitality. The advantage of such tales, with their ambitious naivete, is that though they "disavow . . . the tropological work, the psychological work, and the phenomenological work entailed in the human production of materiality," they do so "in the name of avowing the force of questions that have been too readily foreclosed by more familiar fetishizations: the fetishization of the subject, the image, the word..." (Bennett, 2010, pp.18-19)

Bennett's methodological naivete is problematic on a number of accounts. Starting with the difficulty of distinguishing matter from its anthropocentric interpretations, she suddenly reaches the point where thing-power reveals itself lurking in the objects. But how does the naïve realist approach of being "fascinated by objects" and taking them as "clues to the material vitality" (Bennett, 2010, p.17), or imbibing "taint of superstition, animism, vitalism, anthropomorphism, and other premodern attitudes" (WJT Mitchell, as cited in Bennett, 2010, p.18) lead one towards the bare domain of materiality? Bennett does not provide a genealogical account of them which could have contributed toward understanding the implications that working through these conceptual terrains might have for exploring *thing-power*.

On the one hand, the concepts/schools of thought that Bennett mentions here are themselves produced out of the need to address certain questions, and the production of these concepts is deeply embedded in those questions without which they would not have existed at all.

Keeping in mind Bennett's claimed Deleuzian inheritance, one can recall Deleuze and Guattari's elaboration of what concepts are and how they are intensive in the sense that they do not have a relation of exteriority to their objects (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp.15-34). Such an understanding of *concept* undermines the instrumental approach since the intensive nature of the concept regards objects/questions as co-terminus with the concept. Therefore, objects/questions are immanent to the concept. Reading this into our discussion of Bennett's thing-power materialism, it can justly be said that the concepts that Bennett invokes in her formulation of thing-power materialism do not address a transcendent object called vital materiality. What life is, what event is, or what it means to be "free", all these questions do not have a transcendent reference point or a self-referential object of inquiry called life, freedom, or event. Instead, they emerge post facto within the concept. Hence, there is no life, no vitality, no freedom or no event outside of the contours of the concepts that shape them. But Bennett's postulations do not acknowledge this referential structure of the object-concept constellation. Instead, she treats these objects as if they have a life outside all conceptual contours, granting them transcendent ontological integrity. Thus, the categories she works with such as life, freedom, and nonhuman matter appear to have a distinct ontological claim, a full presence that remains unaltered through space and time; as if these objects have an absolute thereness, a positive existence and where the task of new materialism is to capture this transcendent, absolute presence. Bennett's entire discourse is forged upon such a structure of presence, and this fundamental metaphysical position allows her to invoke the idea of pure life that can present itself in its absolute presence. We have already briefly referred to the ontological status of life as it appears in Bennett's work. Let us look at a few more statements -

Thing-power may...be a good starting point for thinking beyond the life-matter binary, the dominant organizational principle of adult experience. (Bennett, 2010, p.20)

All organisms, and not just humans, are animated by a life force, and thus all organisms have the power to bestow "form" on inorganic matter or on dead meat...(Bennett, 2010, p.48)

A life thus names a restless activeness, a destructive-creative force presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body. A life tears the fabric of the actual without ever coming fully "out" in a person, place, or thing...(Bennett, 2010, p.54)

Life, a recurring theme in Bennett's work, pervades everything, including inanimate matter. And these three quotations lifted from her magnum opus are exemplary of the way they appear in her conceptual framework. The structure of her argument is such that life appears to be self-referential, self-explanatory, self-present presence that transcends any and all referential frameworks as such. However, her vision of life emerges from a number of philosophical traditions, as we have already mentioned. Thus, Bennett's position manifests a logical paradox. On the one hand, her production of the concept of life depends on certain philosophical positions, but her formulation enacts a de facto erasure of its own genealogy. Even while the concept of life is produced within a plane inhabited by various philosophical concepts, and even though these concepts are integral to Bennett's theoretical formalization of life, her exegesis posits life as a bare being.

Since the concept of life, irrespective of its genealogy, appears as a transcendent and full presence, it is no wonder that Bennett would often refer to natural science to understand it. The epistemic assumption that is at play in Bennett's recourse to natural science disciplines (and philosophical systems) proves to be positivist in nature as it believes in generating a positive account of life as if life is a self-referential, self-present, transcendent object existing out there for us to explore. Placing these philosophical and scientific systems as opposed to body materialism contributes to imparting a truth effect to Bennett's analytical framework. Whereas Bennett aligns body materialism with anthropocentric significations, natural science and "naïve realism" are argued to have access to pure, uncontaminated, bare materiality of the self-referring substance called life.

A noteworthy aspect of Bennett's project is that it often finds itself at the brink of a radical undecidability at the heart of matter when she concedes the embeddedness of matter in its signification. She concedes that this embeddedness makes splitting the two impossible. But despite this awareness, Bennett ends up pointing us towards a plane of transcendent, self-present matter/real whether in the form of matter, nonhuman materiality, or life.

Another associated problem with this gesture lies in Bennett's attempt at overcoming this undecidability. To put it in a much reductive manner, undecidability here stands for an aporia at the heart of onto-epistemic investigation into matter, or substance in general. That is, if every presentation of matter is its representation and if there is no absolute outside to this, then how can we determine what belongs to raw materiality and what belongs to its representation? Basile aptly identifies this as one of the key problems of new materialism's commitment to explore being (as matter, life, real, object) in its givenness -

we can make sense of our experience in the first place only on the basis of our efforts to make experience conform to the laws that separate subject and object, substance and accident, cause and effect—we only have something that can count as an experience to the extent that it has been, even without our knowing it, structured according to such laws in advance. There is no experience without these structuring presuppositions...Then, even or especially when a new experience seems to insist on a new legal framework, it will be and will have been impossible to say what part of the phenomenon belonged to our contingent legislation and what part belonged to nature itself, if there is such a thing. (Basile, 2020, pp.7-8)

However, Bennett urges us to overcome this problem by taking recourse to certain philosophical and scientific discourses which she believes can excavate the substance beneath the sedimentations of various manifestations of human intentionality. However, in effect, every attempt at unfolding the truth of life in its uncontaminated materiality becomes possible through the theoretical configurations that set a horizon of meaning and experience on the basis of which "life" makes sense. Therefore, Bennett's various attempts to explore life in its uncontaminated form becomes one more instance of producing a concept of life that is governed by those systems that are deployed to explore it. There can be no life as such outside these configurations within which life figures as such. In this sense, every exploration of life performatively produces what it claims to have uncovered, and every reference to the concept of life constituted thus refers to the aporetic zone of ontological undecidability where alluding to life essentially means alluding to life as *a*

concept configured by the governing laws of the system within which it has been forged. Basile's comment on this symptom in Bennett's system foregrounds this aptly that -

Life cannot be identified with a substance, but requires the difference of form for its appearance. If there were not an order governed by repetition (that of classical mechanics), or one that trended toward indifference (thermodynamics) or decay (death), life would have no background on which to appear as the realm of self-organization. In other words, life never appears as such. (Basile, 2019, p.11)

In this section, we interrogated through close reading the thetic principles of new materialism by taking as exemplary the works of Manuel Delanda and Jane Bennett. As we have already mentioned, new materialism is a vast academic field which is internally fractured and often posits dissonant arguments making it impossible to provide a generalized account of them. And it needs to be noted that our current enterprise did not aspire to produce any such generalization. Doing justice to a position requires that we engage rigorously with the object of analysis, and given the diverse array of works produced within the field of new materialism, it seems to be an impossible task given the scope of our current project. And while it might be a worthwhile project, our purpose in this endeavour does not call for that either. Taking Delanda and Jane Bennett's works as our object of analysis was not aimed at producing a general truth or underlying essence governing the ever expanding field of new materialism. Both the finitude of our present endeavour and the impossibility of finding a general essence of new materialism would have undermined any such will even if we had set that up as our critical task. Undertaking critical analysis of Delanda and Bennett's ontological paradigm therefore was not guided by the intention to posit their formulations as the general truth of new materialism. Rather, their works were taken up to function as the entry point for analyzing the founding gesture of the works that have constituted and/or come to be associated with new materialism. This founding gesture consists in, as our foregoing discussion unpacked - first, establishing and theorizing an ontological framework on the basis of a decisive split between matter (nature) and language (culture); and second, conjuring a new foundationalism that conceptualizes matter as self-referent, self-present form of existence and places it at the origin of everything. And together, these two aspects on new materialism establish it

as a philosophical system operating within the classical ontology determined by presence. Whether operating under the register of matter, real, or life – new materialist positions manifest being in terms of self-referentiality and presence. And new materialism's engagement with its predecessors or contemporary positions is informed by this classical ontology. In the next chapter, we will discuss how owing to its own ontological premise, new materialist ventures misread Butler and fail to appreciate the ontological operation of their theory of matter and materiality.

Chapter 3

The Textuality of Categories in Judith Butler's Theory of Matter and Materiality: Kirby Contra Butler

A cursory glance at the history of philosophical developments in the West reveals how the matter/idea binary and other dichotomous categories working on the same register or associated closely with it had occupied a structurally central position and played a formative role in constituting these systems. Although differing in content, the registers that these dualisms operate on and the relation of dominance-subservience, primacy-secondarity, origin-parasite that they structurally share had consistently found resonance in what, in a Deleuzian vein, could be dubbed the “major” tradition in philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 2005, pp.101-102). It acted as the authorial category setting the terms for the emergence of its pejorative other, especially since the emergence of the Cartesian paradigm that provided the defining structural framework for later philosophemes, excluding a monist tradition, to emerge. Throughout history, matter – be it matter qua matter or matter representing and working within the broader framework of nature/culture and other correlated terms – has been adjudged passive, secondary, lacking form, generative potential, and without any agentic capability; whereas culture, idea, or mind were endowed with formative potentials and remained primary terms in the dualist organization.

If one looks at the ontological framework of the dualist organization, it appears that the dualist structure produces and is produced within the paradigm of classical ontology where, as the previous chapter established, being is determined as *parousia* or constant presence. Even though the previous chapter on ontology analyzed this concept in detail, here we will briefly mention that classical ontology refers to a desire for full presence, a desire for something like a “transcendental signified” whose uncontaminated and undifferentiated presence puts a stop to the play of signification (Derrida, 1982b, p.19). The transcendental signified, regarded as outside and beyond chains of signification is envisaged to be anchoring and stabilizing the signifiatory system itself. It is fully present and epitomizes self-referentiality in that it does not refer to something other than itself. And as Derrida argues in several of his works, the valorization of presence takes various forms

in the history of Western thought (Derrida, 1998, 2011). Matter/culture and other homologous conceptual pairs such as materiality/ideality, nature/culture, voice/writing, meaning/expression, real/discursive operate within the classical ontological structure. The dualism of matter/culture, which is significant here, understands matter to be functioning as a form of irreducible presence. It functions like the ultimate strata where the structure of referentiality ends.⁶⁵ Thus, within this matter/culture binary, matter and the other registers it operates through (i.e., body) figure as the manifestation of self-referential, self-sufficient, fully present presence.

Western philosophy has addressed the problem of matter/language or nature/culture dualism in various forms. But if there is one particular sphere where the question of matter has been approached with a sense of urgency, where an attempt at modification of the terms of theorizing it has been an intellectual task with an immediate ethico-political imperative and effect, it would be that of feminist philosophy. It concerned itself with matter(being)/idea(representation) dualism in terms of sex/gender that is closely related to and operational within the nature/culture binary. However, even as it proved to be a useful conceptual move, the cartesian framework of feminist theory soon started to exhibit its limitations. And within feminist philosophy, efforts to disrupt the Cartesian dualism and concomitant representationalism emerged from at least two quarters - feminist science studies and poststructuralist feminist thought, which is exemplified in the works of Judith Butler.

Butler's notion of matter problematizes a pervasive univocal understanding of either of the terms. A very brief and reductive outline of the core of Butler's engagement with these concerns could be schematically presented thus. Firstly, within the dualist strata body has been assigned to antedate later constructions, and body qua matter is considered to be irreducible. It figures as an entity whose being is determined in terms of presence. Disarticulating such manifestations of a classical dualist ontology, Butler questions the irreducibility and full presence of matter. Secondly, Butler's endeavour tries to illustrate how matter is coterminous with the manifold functioning of discourse such that any pure moment of any of the two (matter or discourse) is an impossibility (Butler, 1993). Drawing upon the horizon coalesced through Derrida's reading of performativity, Foucault's idea of sex-as-regulatory-ideal, and Lacanian misrecognition, Butler elucidates how,

⁶⁵ This is why Butler associates such an understanding of matter with absolute irreducibility (Butler, 1993).

within a certain grid of heteronormativity deeply invested with microphysics of power, through a process that they call “materialization” (Butler, 1993), matters *becomes*. In their formulation, matter is anything but a stable, unified, self-referent, self-present absolute exteriority.

As we have already mentioned, Butler’s work remains crucial to the foundation of new materialism as it is regarded to represent the scholarly terrain against which the philosophies of material turn posit themselves against and declare separation from. Emerging from productively disparate fields of enunciation, new materialism launches sharp and sustained criticism of the way ontological questions of matter and materiality have been dealt with in the preceding intellectual formation that purportedly is best represented in Butler’s theorization on materiality (Hemmings, 2011). Within this framework, Butler’s project is argued to have failed to address the ontological questions of matter as such and remains confined within epistemic concerns pertaining to language and representation. Such a reading, as we will elaborate in the following sections, posit Butler’s ontology squarely within the framework of classical ontology governed by metaphysics of presence. But these criticisms completely disregard many aspects of Butler’s theorization, aspects, as will be argued in the following discussion, that radically refurbish the classical ontological framework governed by presence.

Our discussion in the previous chapter has already established how by conjuring a new foundationalism that conceptualizes matter as self-referent, self-present form of existence, new materialist philosophy erects an ontological framework centred on presence. By critically engaging with the new materialist critique of Judith Butler’s theory of materiality, this chapter would provide a preliminary outline of how Butler’s exegesis moves beyond the framework of self-referentiality and self-presence such that it cannot be conceived in terms of presence anymore. Through critical analysis of Vicki Kirby’s engagement with Judith Butler, it would argue that new materialism’s claim that Butler’s theorization does not engage in ontological inquiry into matter is inadequate because it fails to take into account Butler’s textual strategies which are integral to how matter comes to be resignified in Butler’s work. Kirby’s analysis of Butler’s work does not follow the logic of their textual system, does not engage closely with their reading methods, and disregard the textuality of the concepts of matter and culture in their work, and these, in turn, lead to a misreading of Butler that commits them to the constructionist position that operates within the paradigm of classical ontology.

By engaging with Kirby's reading of Butler's work, in this chapter, we would establish that for Butler, the concerned category (i.e. matter) do not function descriptively. Rather, the value of the concepts is deeply embedded in and predicated upon Butler's textual system that effectively alter it such that it is hollowed out of its metaphysical constitution and is rendered unrecognizable to its dominant understanding that associates it with irreducibility, immediacy, and presence. Butler's textual system resignifies matter such that it ceases to function as a self-referent, individuated plane of pure presence, but emerges as consubstantial, always in constitutive relation to its other, negating any possibility of conceiving it in terms of irreducibility. That is, in Butler's resignification, matter loses its irreducible and self-referential ontological status which had been attributed to it within the frame of classical ontology. It functions within a relation of differentiality and entanglement where the notion of matter as irreducible and originary presence is shown to be produced within the performative function of language and culture. Therefore, Butler's ontological interrogation of matter traces its be-ing beyond its immediate contours, or to put it in other words, Butler traces the question of be-ing beyond being, and this is what this chapter aims to establish.

Theoretical Premise of Vicki Kirby's Reading of Judith Butler

As we have elaborated in the previous chapter, new materialist philosophy functions through certain registers that they uncritically borrowed from the dualist tradition it had set out to dismantle. As has often been argued, while forging a theoretical framework, borrowing categories produced in a particular theoretical tradition tends to bring baggage from the field of its emergence into the new paradigm.⁶⁶ In the case of new materialism, two primary registers it works with are matter qua nature and language qua culture. But since in new materialist texts these categories are

⁶⁶ For instance, we can reflect on Derrida's reading of Ferdinand De Saussure in *Of Grammatology* (Derrida, 1998) or of Condillac in the *Archaeology of the Frivolous* (Derrida, 1980) where Derrida shows how Saussure's effort to break out of the tradition he dubs metaphysical ends up being compromised because of his uncritical reliance on the concept of sign - a concept which evolved in and was central to the tradition Saussure wanted to secure his departure from (Derrida, 1982b); Or how owing to the paleonymic function of language, Condillac, while aiming to erect a new philosophy of language ends up repeating the same metaphysical gestures which he had been critical of (Derrida, 1980).

often deployed uncritically in their old signification where matter stood for immediacy and self-presence, the call to “return to matter” - the marching slogan of new materialism - in effect results in a return to the metaphysical notion of matter as a determinate form of being governed by presence. Also, as we observed in the previous chapter, new materialist reformulation matter and language takes place through the political grammar of the return narrative which irons out the nuances of different philosophical positions, homogenizes them, and clubs them together under the general banner of constructionism. Before going into Kirby’s reading of Butler, we must look into Kirby’s position vis-a-vis these two aspects of new materialism.

Following the general pattern of the return narrative as it operates within the new materialist framework, Kirby locates Judith Butler’s work within the broader framework of constructionism. Even as Kirby maintains that Butler’s theory of materiality is immensely careful about the problems associated with constructionism, in the last instance, Kirby identifies it with the general principles of constructionism (Kirby, 2011).

Cultural constructionism, Kirby claims, while influential in allowing us to understand the myriad ways in which subjectivity is produced, also had the negative effect of relegating nature to the background (Kirby, 2008a, p.5). Nature has always been a contested category for the constructionists because of the importance it had for feminist politics in general. Denaturalizing nature was necessary to contest biological determinism which understood nature to be prescriptive and believed that sexual division prescribed a natural division of labour (Moitra, 2002, pp.1-21; Moi, 1999, pp. 1-21). Theories of cultural construction dismantled this biological determinism by arguing that there was nothing natural about nature as such, and what appeared as nature was its culturally codified representation. The devaluation of the female sex, goes the constructionist claim, does not come organically from nature.⁶⁷ Rather, it is caused by the kind of interpretation it is subjected to and meanings that are ascribed to it within a socio-political force field. While this was definitely a much required political-philosophical step ahead, it posed a host of problems as well.

Constructionist claims were premised on the nature/culture dualism where nature was conceived of as an immutable, intractable, passive entity and culture was entrusted with

⁶⁷ See Rubin (1975), Beauvoir (2010).

authoriality. However, constructionist positions didn't question the foundational logic of the nature/culture binary, and in the absence of questioning the conceptual premise underlying the nature/culture division, feminist theories of cultural construction reinforced the same logic that had historically governed women's devaluation (Kirby & Wilson, 2011, p. 230). Elaborating this point, Kirby argues that the constructionist manoeuvre to dismantle biological determinism reinforce Cartesianism inadvertently by following the same logical structure presupposed in the determinist framework. Biological determinism takes nature to be the foundation of meaning and experience. Nature, in the framework of biological determinism, appears as an entity that exists in itself, and whatever relation it has with other spheres, its ontological priority, and its natural constitution are never in question. Feminists attempted to dissociate the category of the woman from nature by arguing that nature is not given but culturally produced. It shows that nature in itself does not prescribe anything, but its appearance as prescriptive governing the field of experience and action is an effect of culture. But constructionist feminist intervention, while altering nature's epistemic status, does not question its ontological givenness. Thus, they consider nature qua nature to be a priorly given, absolute, and irreducible materiality. And it is this move of granting a primordial thereness and irreducibility to nature that reinforces the same cartesian split between nature and culture. Conceived thus, emancipatory politics remains confined within the domain of culture, while nature, comprehended as a passive entity that becomes agential only to the extent it is invested by culture, is rendered insignificant -

In sum, nature is deemed to be thought-less, and political interventions into Cartesian logic are much more likely to preserve this assumption by expanding the category "culture" to include whatever it is defined against. If the myriad manifestations of nature are actually meditations or re-presentations, that is, second order signs of cultural invention, then nature, as such, is absent... both Cartesianism and its critique are entirely committed to the difference between nature and culture, presence and absence, and matter and form. (Kirby, 2008a, pp.216-17)

In such theorization, nature as we know it, is not really nature as such but is nature-as-represented-by-culture, or what Kirby aptly calls “second nature” (Kirby, 2017, p.3). So, the relation between nature and culture is facilitated by the presumed “gap” that separates the two. Culture is associated with all the actions that bear traces of subjective will, intention, agency, and is placed in contrast with the nonagential world of passive materiality that the category of nature has come to signify. Constructionists argue, claims Kirby, that since the only way to know nature is through its cultural-linguistic mediation, the true reality of nature escapes us forever.⁶⁸

This is the general theoretical structure of cultural constructionism wherein Kirby locates her feminist predecessors’ theorizations of materiality. It is noteworthy that in a manner similar to other new materialists, as Hemmings highlights (Hemming, 2011), Barring Butler Kirby’s work hardly engages with the group of theorists she identifies with the constructionist position. Instead, her locating these unnamed thinkers under the moniker of constructionism occurs mainly through uncorroborated statements that de-facto function in a performative manner. Whether her thematic portrayal of the unnamed thinkers she associates with what she calls constructionism is adequate is a different question, but the absence of engagement in her interlocutions irons out the nuances in the theoretical work developed within continental feminist philosophy in the past few decades. The general tendency observed in Kirby’s work, or new materialism and the material turn in general,⁶⁹ is to project this entire history of thought as a manifestation of a single gesture of

⁶⁸ The subject-object relation is comprehended along a similar structure where the conscious subject, the cogito, stands over and against a passive, nonsentient world of objects.

⁶⁹ This would include speculative materialism and Object Oriented Ontology as well. Although both of these operate differently and is marked by fundamentally disparate exegesis than that of new materialism, from a thematic perspective they share certain common grounds. For OOO, the sites for common thematic affirmations include criticism of structural anthropocentrism, highlighting the limitations of earlier paradigms of matter including constructivism and mechanical/dialectical materialism, and criticism of representationalism and performativity. Graham Harman maps out two broader tendencies traversing the history of western philosophy – *undermining* and *overmining*, which at times are found to be existing together. Harman refutes both scientific-Marxist materialism and constructivism because of their consecutive “upward” and “downward” reductionism (Harman, 2017, 43). Within the framework provided by OOO, the primary unit is neither matter in itself or matter perceived within a phenomenon, but object itself which is distinct from matter. The relation between object and its knowledge, being and knowing is not one of linear correspondence. Neither is knowledge formed by a distorted representation of what is “out there”. With regards to my present research, we would pay attention to three salient features of this paradigm -

- Criticism of earlier epistemo-ontological perspectives on matter
- A new distribution of the relation between being and knowing where being is independent of knowing.
- Extricating object from the confines of solely epistemic concerns and repudiation of different modes of relationality in theorization of object.

privileging culture over nature, a single gesture that consists in the generalised understanding that “everything is a discursive construction” (Kirby 2011, 146). Such a projection “suppresses the differences within the past and present in order to celebrate its own futurity” (Basile, 2020, p.4), and necessarily fails to entertain the possibility of a resignification of the categories within the works she associates with constructionism.

The theoretical implication that such generalization entails is that it reifies the terms of its critique. That is, identifying culture as the exclusively authorial category and matter as a passive, intractable presence is what Kirby finds problematic in constructivist positions, and by hollowing out their metaphysical and anthropocentric presuppositions, she argues that the binarism of nature and culture is unsustainable because culture has all along been nothing but the *play* of nature (Kirby, 2018, p.129). But when she considers a generation of feminist theory as the manifestation of a single constructionist gesture, it fails to regard how these texts might be subjecting the concerned categories ,i.e., nature and culture, to transvaluation. Similarly, in the two instances where she engages textually with representatives of constructionism,⁷⁰ she refrains from exploring the categories as they appear within their writings. Her engagement does not follow the internal logic of these texts. Instead, it reduces them to the single gesture of constructionism, resulting in her failure to attend to the possibilities of resignification of these categories within the contours of these texts. Her criticism of those theorists on the question of their formulations of nature and culture is premised upon the denial of the textuality of these categories.⁷¹ In the following sections, we will investigate how this occurs in Kirby’s reading of Butler, but prior to that we need to

Sharing the formal aspects of these criticisms, speculative realism (Melliasoux, 2008) also problematises the deterministic relations between matter-idea and being-knowing. Locke, and even before Locke, it is in Descartes’ exegesis where we arrive at the idea of two qualities of objects. Secondary qualities rely upon relationality, whereas it is a different matter altogether when it comes to primary qualities which exist independently of relations. “No relata without relations” would be opposed to it. Exegetic formations which take relation to be primary is dubbed as “correlationism” by Melliasoux who takes Kant to be the crucial conjuncture demarcating a shift from a pre-critical tradition that dealt with substance to theorizations pivoting on correlation. Furthermore, Melliasoux depicts another associated position which takes correlation as absolute instead of granting inaccessibility to the absolute. Melliasoux’s task consists of moving beyond the Kantian paradigm. The complexity and nuances of his postulation and close reading of the same would be outside the scope of this work. However, the salient feature that we need to take stock of briefly is how Melliasoux’s philosophical project has also weaved itself around the debate circling around the relation between nature-culture or the homologous binary of matter-idea. Melliasoux takes the relation that these two broad registers have found themselves in within the continental tradition and especially within post-structuralist paradigm as his point of departure against which he proposes a disinterment of object that has been buried deep beneath cultural investiture.

⁷⁰ The two thinkers she engages with are Judith Butler, and to a lesser extent, Drucilla Cornell (Kirby, 1997, 2006).

⁷¹ Here, we are invoking the Derridian notion of textuality.

understand what is meant by textuality of categories. And to do that, we will take a brief detour through Derrida's engagement with Marx's famous eleventh thesis from his *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx, 2010).

The Textuality of Categories: A Brief Detour Through Derrida and Marx

The celebrated eleventh thesis becomes all the more relevant here because of the self-evidentiary manner in which its operational terms have been interpreted within a dominant section of the left in academia and partisan discourses. As philosophers have only provided interpretation of the world, the task of revolutionary practice consists in changing it instead of merely sticking to the abstract domain of thought and interpretation - this is the dominant interpretation of the eleventh thesis where the movement of the text is from the realm of abstract thought and critique to action, doing, practice. The homologous dualisms of *thought* and *practice*, *thinking* and *doing* govern this interpretation where the singularity of Marx's philosophy is interpreted to be residing in the call to transformation.

Such a reading appeals to common sense and leads to a simple understanding of his thesis. But the problem with such simple interpretation is that it takes the concerned categories - namely theory and practice, thought and action - uncritically as it interprets them according to the significations they have accumulated through a metaphysical tradition and everyday usage. It does not interrogate whether, in Marx's textual system, the terms of their deployment and the values assigned to them within the textual space of *Theses on Feuerbach* (Marx, 2010) are incommensurate with their hegemonic interpretations. For example, while commenting on the eleventh thesis, Terry Eagleton, a noted Marxist critique, writes -

A slave knows he is a slave, but knowing why he is a slave is the first step towards not being one. So in portraying things as they are, such theories also offer a way of moving beyond them to a more desirable state of affairs. They step from how it is with them to how it ought to be. Theories of this kind allow men and women to describe themselves and their situations in ways that put them into question, and therefore eventually allow them to

redescribe themselves. In this sense, there is a close relationship between reason, knowledge and freedom. Certain kinds of knowledge are vital for human freedom and happiness. And as people act on such knowledge, they come to grasp it more deeply, which then allows them to act on it more effectively. The more we can understand, the more we can do; but in Marx's view the kind of understanding that really matters can come about only through practical struggle. Just as playing the tuba is a form of practical knowledge, so is political emancipation. It is for this reason that one must take Marx's celebrated eleventh thesis on Feuerbach with a pinch of salt. The philosophers, he writes there, have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it. But how could you change the world without interpreting it? And isn't the power to interpret it in a particular light the beginnings of political change? (Eagleton, 2011, pp.143-144)

Despite Eagleton's somewhat critical reinterpretation of practice in terms of the implications it has for thought, the general tendency of associating change and alterations in the material realm⁷² with practice is what Eagleton's reading of the thesis pivots on.⁷³ Here we observe the institution of metaphysical difference between knowing and doing or thought and practice, where *practical* concerns the actual change in the everyday world while *thought* belongs to the domain of abstraction and ideality.⁷⁴ But does Marx's thesis, interpreted as the clarion call for action instead of philosophical activity, signify an end of philosophy in favour of a certain kind of doing? Does Marx's philosophy mark the end of philosophy qua philosophy? Or does it pose the question of the end of philosophy as a philosophical question (Derrida, 2019, pp.13-14)? It is

⁷² Here, material realm is understood as opposed to the abstract domain of thought and interpretation.

⁷³ Or, a similar theme can be observed in Tom Lewis's comment on Derrida's appropriation of Marx - "Marxists, in other words, should now expend their energies in soul-searching, mourning and atonement, while leaving to others - especially deconstructionists - the task of interpreting the world in order to change it" (Lewis, 1999, p.139) Even though not in direct engagement with the thesis itself, its temperament and emphasis on interpreting (in the realm of thought) and altering (in the material world) seems to borrow from the theoretical charge of the 11th thesis.

⁷⁴ To provide another example, Irfan Habib, commenting on the revolutionary nature of Marx's eleventh thesis, writes - "once individuals have grasped the questions to be taken up, the ideas attained have to be propagated in order to have practical consequence. This surely constitutes 'the significance of "revolutionary", of "practical-critical", activity' of which Marx speaks in his *Theses on Feuerbach*... The action to change the world could come only by the diffusion of ideas leading to revolutionary practice." (Habib, 2017). Here, the *practical* stands in distinction from *thought*. Even though thinking is necessary for altering the world, only the act of altering concerns practice. The interpretation of this thesis as the call for the leap from grasping the ideas to propagating them into action, therefore, maintains the accepted meaning of thinking and doing.

from this perspective that Derrida tends to approach the theory-practice constellation. Instead of reading the two homologous pairs - *theory/practice* and *thinking/doing* - through the semantic significations ascribed to them within the metaphysical tradition that posits them within a binary relation, Derrida's intervention lies in problematizing the categories themselves. Contrary to the dominant interpretations, Derrida does not consider the relation between the texts penned by Marx and the concepts deployed within those texts as one of externality. Rather, as Derrida shows, far from being deployed instrumentally, the concepts themselves acquire their significations from their placement within the relational space of the semantic network of Marx's textual edifice itself. Elaborating how concepts come to acquire a definite meaning only through their differential relation with other categories/concepts within a text, Derrida, referring to the concepts of thought/practice in Marx, writes -

even before knowing what doing [faire] means one knew that its sense, its meaning-to-say would be determined only in the context of an opposition: doing as opposed here to thinking, representing, there to looking, considering, or again to speaking, saying, and even in opposition to several sorts of saying, of language, language uttering what is or language uttering what will be, and what will be in the form of theoretical expectation or else in the form of a commitment or promise...And even, added complication, saying that I intend to do it does not signify that I promise to do it; it's not the same thing, the same sense, the same intention, such that the utterance "I am going" to do it can signify a theoretical expectation, either an intention without commitment or promise, or else a promise. And one could still refine things much more, as we will no doubt do later. For the moment I am content to register that the "doing" of "must be done" includes, in addition to the difficulty that it states ("must be done"), the difficulty of understanding what it does in saying "must be done," doing being determined solely within an opposition; and to be opposite to thinking is not to be opposite to representing, or to looking, or speaking or saying, or expecting or promising, or being passive. Each time, in each instance of the opposition, doing signifies something else, and sometimes something else entirely. Not only does it signify something else according to whether it is opposed to thinking, or

knowing, speaking, expecting, promising, etc., but it can on occasion signify one of those opposites opposed to another one.⁷⁵ (Derrida, 2019, p.2)

Hence, the significations generally ascribed to thinking and doing are far from stable and predefined. Rather, what they would come to signify depends on their constitutive relationality with the network within which they operate. Following this thread, Derrida shows how these operative categories are conceptually refurbished within the textual space of Marx's thesis. Practice, or even theory, as Derrida argues in his exposition, does not have a transcendent, static, and positive semantic content. Rather, their value depends on the semantic network of the system within which they function. And here, these categories operate in a manner that their instantiation within the semantic network of the text performatively produces their significations. Proceeding further, Derrida shows that by functioning in a performative manner, the meaning of practice itself is altered to the extent that we cannot presume, in Marx, practice to be an instrumental translation of thought into doing. Rather, practice, as Marx's text places it, transforms transformation itself.⁷⁶ Hence, within the textual space of Marx's theses, there is no practice before practice itself. Derrida calls this the "enigmatic value of practice" that emerges only in a performative fashion (Derrida, 2019, p.12). The text does not refer to these two categories instrumentally, and neither does this constellation operate on the basis of their predefined meanings. Hence, following Derrida's interpretation, it can be said that Marx's thesis does not refer to these categories in descriptive terms. Rather, the signification that they assume is immanently rooted within the textual system itself, where meaning is produced within the ever open economy of differing and deferral with every invocation of these categories necessarily implicating the textual system in its entirety. This is what we referred to in the previous section as the textuality of categories. Without a perceptive eye for this operation of a text, one would be

⁷⁵ Derrida continues - "It is not enough to think it, it must be said, where saying comes down to doing, it is not enough to intend to promise, it must be promised where promising consists in doing, acting, producing, transforming, therefore, wherever there was only mute thinking or interior discourse or discourse that was theoretical, constative, <illegible handwritten word>, etc. That is in order to announce, in a somewhat jumbled way, the immense difficulty that lies before us, as a theoretical problem and/or practical task. For if one must know what is meant by thinking, representing, speaking, saying, intending, theorizing, speculating, promising, etc., in order to know what doing means, then we won't be able to avoid dealing with an enormous history that cannot be only a history of meaning or a semantico-philosophical one." (Derrida, 2019, pp.2-3)

⁷⁶ Discussed in detail in Thiele (Thiele et al, 2021).

committed to performing a transcendent analysis where a text, and its operational categories would be regarded as referring to an outside, to a transcendental signified, to a form of undifferentiated presence.

Reading the philosophical implication of this discussion intertextually into Kirby's treatment of the category of culture and matter in Butler's work, it appears that for Kirby, the interrogation of these categories⁷⁷ functions in a manner analogous to how theory and practice were interpreted in the dominant readings of Marx. Kirby's reading did not take into account the textuality of matter and culture in Butler's work. Rather, Kirby's critique of Butler and her committing Butler to a constructionist position is governed by her unqualified assumption that Butler's exegesis deploys the concepts of *matter* and *language* in terms of their prevalent and precritical definition. Kirby does not consider whether, instead of taking the concerned terms instrumentally, Butler subjects them to *transvaluation* - understood in the Nietzschean sense of the word - through the textual economy of their work. Keeping this general theme in mind, we would now look at Kirby's reading of Butler.

Judith Butler and the Transvaluation of Matter: Kirby's Misreading

We need to make two general points before delving into a close reading of Kirby's engagement with Butler. What attributes Kirby a singular position in terms of new materialism's engagement with Judith Butler is her thorough engagement with Butler's work, a feature which remains absent in the works of other new materialists. However, despite her decade-long engagement with Judith Butler, the axis of her criticism consists of only a particular section from Butler's body of work - namely, Butler's argumentation on materiality in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (Butler, 1993) and an interview of Butler with Kirby (Kirby et al., 2001). Kirby's book-length work on Butler is not an exception to this either. This book was published in 2005, hence it seems obvious that it would focus on Butler's publications prior to

⁷⁷ As mentioned earlier, Kirby's engagement with the term is limited in the sense that in her oeuvre, the critique of culture as a category does not emerge from her interrogation of texts whose philosophical position she refers to as "constructivist". Rather, in a tone which is characteristic of the return narrative as outlined by Claire Hemmings (Hemmings, 2011), assumes that there prevails a general consensus in feminist theory regarding what constitutes constructivism and on what grounds it is flawed and rejected.

2005. But even while considering a finite number of Butler's works, Kirby focuses only on certain themes that serve her ontological interests. However, it does not limit the critical purchase of Kirby's position on Butler since the themes considered in these works appear to be, according to Kirby, "more important" (Kirby, 2006,p.vii). Therefore, with certain limitations, it can be said that Kirby's interrogation of the "more important" themes in Butler's work becomes a synecdoche for Butler's theoretical framework in general.

My second general point is that Kirby's own ontological account does justice to the thetic premise of new materialism by efficaciously undoing the nature/culture binary. As I have provided a detailed account of this elsewhere (Chatterjee, 2021), and given that our focus here is on new materialist reading of Butler which does not necessitate the adjudication of whether a particular position can do justice to the founding claims of new materialism, I would not be commenting on this aspect here. But I would like to mention in passing that barring certain aspects of her work concerning Butler, I do not intend to impugn the general import of Kirby's ontological framework. With these two statements in place, we would now focus on the critical aspects of Kirby's reading of Butler.

Kirby situates Butler's work within the broader domain of cultural constructionism. Even though Butler's work, Kirby maintains, questions various aspects of constructionism, it still operates within the general premise of constructionism (Kirby, 2002, p.266), and her criticism revolves around this particular point. Kirby defines the central structure of construction in this manner -

A constructionist perspective appreciates that the weight of reality is experienced through the force field of the political, where sociocultural grids of understanding are active in producing our most intimate sense of self, our dearest moral and ethical convictions, the rationale and felt compulsions for why we love or hate, or why we live our gender, race and sexuality in ways that are historically and socially legible...What matters for constructionists, then, and this is the real leverage in this position, is the conviction that social and political forces are comparatively mobile because they are not subject to natural decree. Without a foundational, prescriptive, universal constant – at least, none that escapes the vagaries of interpretation – it makes sense that the lability of culture's agencies

should receive special analytical attention. Cross-cultural and historical evidence offers further proof that inherited ways of being and knowing morph over time and are open to change; in short, if the ingredients of injustice can be challenged then things can be otherwise. (Kirby, 2017, pp. 6-7)

Defined thus, there are multiple implications of starting from such a conceptual premise. However, to Kirby, the most significant point is the constructionist will to incorporate everything within the ambit of culture to the extent that whatever we encounter is understood to be a product of culture. Therefore, any discussion or interrogation into nature and natural objects (or whatever is deemed natural) is, in reality, not an interrogation of nature itself but of the cultural interpretation of it. As Kirby puts it - "If the myriad manifestations of nature are actually mediations or re-presentations, that is, second order signs of cultural invention, then nature, as such, is absent" (Kirby, 2011, p.71). Thus, such a position effectively forecloses any interrogation into nature/matter as such since it interprets matter as a cultural production. Any effective critique of this dualist ontology appears impossible from within such a position, because structurally it is marked by the same conditions which define Cartesian dualism.

The problem that dualism entails and the implications they have for feminist theory and politics have already been deliberated upon repeatedly by feminists (Moitra, 2002; Haraway, 1991), and there is no point in reiterating it. For our current purpose, we need to briefly reflect on why a constructionist position is argued to have been premised upon a cartesian structure. As noted by feminists and various other critical theorists, cartesian dualism implies primacy and domination of one category over another, and it is precisely such a system of thought that had been the object of critique in several feminist accounts. Many of these critical encounters did not necessarily focus on the works of Descartes but seized upon the Cartesian binary structure which operated in various forms and contributed to the domination of women and other marginal genders and sexualities. As Lloyd explains -

Neither the alignment of reason with maleness nor the opposition of the sexless soul to 'female' sex difference was of Descartes's making. But his influential dualism has interacted with and reinforced the effects of the symbolic opposition between male and female. (G Lloyd, 1984, p.xvi).

Given that the Cartesian structure found itself embedded in various symbolic oppositions that valorized men and values/signs that men were synonymous with, feminists needed to counter its theoretical force (G Lloyd, 2002, p.9). However, these endeavours allegedly ended up inadvertently reproducing the Cartesian structure within their arguments. Particularly, it is the sustaining of the nature/culture split by cultural constructionists that Kirby finds deeply problematic because this split assumes nature to be a passive, mute, intractable entity devoid of agential action (Kirby, 2011). Therefore, the nature/culture split and the subsequent theorizations that treat nature as a cultural artefact are premised upon, and at the same time reinforce, the primacy of culture by granting it agentiality exclusively. Thus, culture appears as the sole agential force capable of attributing meaning and interpretation to the otherwise passive stratum of nature. Or, to put it more accurately, it is precisely by imparting an authorial role to culture that these theoretical systems re-enact a split between nature and culture where culture, by virtue of its sole authority over meaning and interpretation, comes to acquire a higher position -

Further to this, as language is regarded as a tool, an instrument, a medium through which the world is reinvented and re-articulated, then the pedigree of human identity is discovered in the unique ability to do that—to reinvent the world, and even the self, through the externalizations of tool use. (Kirby, 2014, p.52)

Beginning with the split between nature and culture, its association with anthropocentrism, foreclosure of the possibility of approaching nature beyond language and culture - the ramifications of constructionism are manifold. And for Kirby, Judith Butler's engagement with the question of matter and materiality, despite its wish to dismantle the dualist ontology, inadvertently reactivates it. Our exegesis here will closely follow, or rather mimic, Kirby's own argument.

On the question of Butler's ontological framework, Kirby refers to Butler's 1993 publication *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (Butler, 1993). As Kirby notes, Butler's agenda in this book is to take on the ontology of matter and language/discourse along with certain interconnected issues pertaining to cultural constructionism (Kirby, 2006, p.65). Kirby correctly observes that existing theories of cultural construction and their criticisms provide the primary ground for Butler's intervention. While on the one hand constructionist positions gained

immense theoretical and political currency, it gave rise to scepticism concerning the reality of the palpable, physical materiality. Is everything really a product of cultural and linguistic construction? If so, then how do we account for the *stuff* of the body? While the theories of construction might be on point on many things, it does not refute at least the possibility of some liminal, acultural materiality, something that is natural through and through. But on what does this faith on a liminal materiality rest? And how do we know where primordial materiality ends and the domain of construction begins? These queries, posed in the context of the body, become the starting point for Butler's interrogation into the question of materiality itself, a task which is, Kirby notes, from the very beginning imperilled due to its strained relation with constructionism. Because Butler has to be on both sides at once. On the one hand, they need to refute constructionist discourse because its thetic slogan that everything is cultural in the last instance has lost currency. But on the other hand, their exposition on "materialization", on how matter comes into being within the discursive framework of power/knowledge, is anchored in the basic tenets of constructionism (Kirby, 1997, p.105).

Thus, according to Kirby, Butler's endeavour suffers from a congenital torsion that they attempt to resolve by conceptualizing an "overlap"⁷⁸ between the domain of matter and the domain of ideality (Kirby, 2002, p.266), an overlap which makes possible for Butler to deny that matter is purely linguistic stuff while at the time mainlining that matter exert itself on language all the time (Butler, 2005, p.65). The separation of the two domains allows Butler to counter the "uncritical" constructionist claim that every bit of materiality is linguistic through and through. Also, at the same time, it obviates falling back into the trope of a mute and passive matter by entertaining the possibility of an unassimilable excess that cannot fully be co-opted or represented in language, (Kirby, 1997, p. 103; Kirby, 2002, p.266).

Now, if we follow such an assessment of Butler and read them together with Butler's assertion that the referential structure of prediscursive matter and materiality is itself produced discursively, then one thing becomes evident – that matter is anything but a stable, self-referential structure governed by full and immediate presence. This is not to say that we must agree with the

⁷⁸ As Kirby writes, the connection between nature and culture in Butler can be likened to 'the enfolding overlap of a Venn diagram, wherein two unrecognizable different spheres are nevertheless involved in a mutual and constitutive relationship that compromises their integrity.' (Kirby 1997, p.103)

assessment in its entirety since, as will be explored in the following pages, Butler's formulation does not grant self-referentiality or self-presence to either matter or culture. Nor does their postulates entertain a nostalgia toward undifferentiated presence. But even if we discount all these for now, the destabilization of matter's ontological status alone makes it evident that such a theoretical gesture is incommensurate with the constructionist premise which implies the presence of a mute, passive, undifferentiated domain of prelinguistic, precultural materiality.

However, overlooking this aspect, Kirby places Butler squarely within a constructionist position, and claims that Butler's critique of constructionism and their concomitant rereading of materiality appears "convoluted" because it attempts to recognize the existence of a prelinguistic materiality while at the same time maintaining the this prelinguistic materiality can only appear to us within a discursive formation (kirby, 1997, p.105). Situating this in the context of the contested field of feminist theory's engagement with the materiality of the body, Kirby writes -

If we situate this debate within feminism, then those who purport to represent real women without recourse to quotation marks will presume themselves to be in receipt of the truth of (the) matter, as if the compelling facts of women's lives simply present themselves. According to this view, signifying practices are the mere vehicles of such truths, having no formative input of their own...The other side of this debate stresses the constitutive force of signifying practices, concluding that we have no access to an extralinguistic reality because the truth of its apparent facticity is produced in language. Butler is in obvious sympathy with this latter position but disagrees with the conclusion that often accompanies it, namely, that the question of matter has been disposed of...Although Butler agrees that we cannot access an "outside language" that is unmediated by language, she does not take this to mean that we can, or should, try to censor any mention of this outside. Indeed her thesis is that inasmuch as the received grammar of the debate will necessarily produce an exteriority, an outside discourse, that is nevertheless internal to discourse, the task is not to deny, or presume to exclude, this materiality but to analyse the "process of materialization that stabilises over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (Kirby, 1997, p.105)

If we look at Kirby's analysis, it appears that her reading of Butler poses a serious contradiction. For instance, Kirby argues that Butler does not deny the existence of a materiality beyond and before language. Following Kirby, if the relation between language and matter (or materiality and ideality) is conceived of in terms of overlap, then such a conception necessarily implies the existence of a primordial materiality irreducible to language. Therefore, irrespective of whether it is accessible or not, the existence of a domain of prelinguistic materiality cannot be denied as such. However, this interpretation that Kirby's conceptual scheme of "overlap" and "venn diagram" advances is followed by statements arguing that Butler envisages this exteriority as a linguistic production. While thinking in terms of *supplement*⁷⁹ allows one to think of a materiality-prior-to-culture to be a supplement that itself produces the materiality-culture division, Kirby does not read Butler's notion of matter and materiality along such lines and instead finds Butler to be simply reducing matter to language. Kirby does not follow the ontological ramification that a theorization of prelinguistic materiality as discursive production might entail. To elaborate, this is how Kirby reads the status of the outside in Butler -

Butler's discussion of the discourse of construction acknowledges the necessity of foreclosure, the inevitability of producing an "outside" or "beneath," a "before" or "beyond" language and discourse. In other words, Butler would not exempt herself from this same necessity. Her point, however, is that spatial and temporal separations between the ideal and matter are in fact internal to discourse: the political assumptions that inform them are therefore open to contestation. If language and discourse are constitutive of lived reality, then the possibility of change is discovered in the internal and interminable movement within language. Thus, inasmuch as Butler's position is predicated upon the delimitation of this movement in language, it does not preclude the existence of an outside language that truly does exceed our perceptions and representations. *Butler's aim is to remind us that the perception and representation of this outside, despite its convincing transparency, is always/already a language effect—a cultural production. Indeed, this point is underlined by Butler's reliance on the overarching term "culture" as an explanatory category that both locates and frames this shifting production.* (Kirby, 1997, pp.106-107)

⁷⁹ Derrida, 1998.

According to Kirby's interpretation, Butler regards the prelapsarian, pure materiality unmarked and untouched by cultural and discursive forces as a discursive production, which in turn obviates the possibility of drawing a clear ontological separation between what belongs to nature (matter) and what is contributed by language. Rather, and this is what Butler argues - and Kirby is right on point on this - that this separation between the two takes place *within* language.

But despite unfolding the status of the outside in Butler in this manner, Kirby fails to fully explore its implications which could have led to the understanding that Butler's theorization is not merely sticking to the old metaphysical notions of matter (nature) and language (culture), but by working through the problematic of materiality, Butler is effectively hollowing out the traditional definition of these two categories.

To put it in a simplified manner, the movement of Butler's text is somewhat like this - it takes the categories involved, namely matter and language, in terms of their assigned meanings that are dependent on the binary relation between the two which determines their meanings. But even if their works starts with this premise, it does not keep the involved categories intact. Rather, starting with the assigned meanings of these categories, Butler's texts transform them through their theoretical intervention by showing the language/matter binary to be a false dualism since the two cannot be opposed to each other as such. Because, as Butler clearly argues, what appears as matter appears as such precisely through discursive investiture prior to which matter cannot said to be as such. But it does not elevate discourse to a subject position either, because discourse exists only in and through the instance of its action (Butler, 1993). Thus, in a sense, both matter and discourse appear only within the phenomenon of discursive production of matter, and none of them exist prior to this. This, in turn, within Butler's theoretical framework, transforms these categories. Thus, reading these categories as having a static essence within Butler's work would be a misreading.

As mentioned earlier, what a category or concept would entail emerges from the specific textual system of which it is a part, and that particular meaning can be sustained only within the economy of *that* system. For example, the particular signification of matter as reality becomes possible when the category is placed in polar opposition to the signifier which signifies illusion or non-reality. And the meaning which matter has generally come to determine in terms of being the

self-referential and self-present ground absolutely prior to everything has been the product of a certain metaphysical, materialist tradition. Assuming these significations to be *the* essence of matter per se would be to commit a conceptual error because Butler's work, as we observed, moves beyond the metaphysical conceptualization of matter or culture. As Derrida puts it – "I will not say that *the concept of matter is in and of itself either metaphysical or nonmetaphysical. This depends upon the work to which it yields* (emphasis added)" (Derrida, 1982b, pp.64-65). Similarly, the way Butler places the concerned categories (i.e., matter or culture) within a particular semantic network effectively transform them. Butler starts from the concepts of matter and language as they were determined within a system of opposition between the two where matter metaphorically and metonymically stood for absolute exteriority, irreducibility, immediacy, and full presence whereas the function of culture/language was to represent. But their exposition, as exhibited in the preceding discussion, unveils that such metaphysical conceptions of matter and language cannot be sustained. In Butler's anasemic analysis, the structure of referentiality is radically refurbished such that matter ceases to remain as the stable, irreducible subterraneity, and language ceases to be mimetic. Rather, as Butler maintains, matter as absolute exteriority beyond, before, and impossible-to-capture-fully-within language is produced within language. As addressing the debate within feminist theory regarding whether the material body is prior to signification, Butler writes –

The body posited as prior to the sign, is always posited or signified as prior. This signification produces as an effect of its own procedure the very body that it nevertheless and simultaneously claims to discover as that which precedes its own action. If the body signified as prior to signification is an effect of signification, then the mimetic or representational status of language, which claims that signs follow bodies as their necessary mirrors, is not mimetic at all. On the contrary, it is productive, constitutive, one might even argue performative, inasmuch as this signifying act delimits and contours the body that it then claims to find prior to any and all signification. (Butler, 1993, p.6)

Conceived thus, the ontological status of both categories does not remain the same anymore. Since matter is anything from a simple and immediate thereness, its ontological structure

cannot be one of self-referentiality and full presence. Rather, any interrogation into its being would have to take into account the signifiatory economy within which it emerges as predating the signifiatory matrix. And in a homologous manner, the signifiatory economy cannot be said to exist independently of its signification. Rather, as we observed, it becomes manifest only in and through the process of materialization that produces and stabilizes the boundary of matter.

But disregarding this aspect completely, Kirby interprets Butler to be deploying the concepts of matter and culture as conceived of within the metaphysical tradition, and that is why she reads Butler's reference to language and culture as symptomatic of the dualist ontology of constructionism which presupposes the prior full presence of matter. Operating under such an interpretation, Kirby erroneously places Butler squarely within the Cartesian dualism -

Unfortunately, however, by privileging the term "culture" in this way, the identities and sexualized hierarchies between ideality and matter, culture and nature, and mind and body, are surreptitiously reinstalled. Although Butler's strategy might be described as placing the second term under erasure and rendering it unknown, the effect is to actually expand the first term by evacuating the contents of the second. Instead of opening both terms to their different implications, Butler has drawn a separating line of clarification between them. Her critique of separability within language is founded upon this essential separation. (Kirby, 1997, p.107)

Here, Kirby misreads Butler's notion of culture. Culture, or language, is not merely a domain of representation anymore that takes some prior origin or materiality as its object. Had that been the case, we could have conceded Butler's theory to be operating within an essentialist framework and thriving on the neat maintenance of a dualist ontology between matter/language or nature/culture, as Kirby claims it to have done. But neither culture nor matter stands in their previous valuation, but both have been altered radically within the textual economy of Butler's works, a fact that Kirby fails to address adequately.

That Kirby reads Butler's theorization through the metaphysical understanding of these two categories (matter and language) also becomes evident in Kirby's repeated use of the word "mediation" while interrogating the relation between matter and language in Butler's framework.

For example, let us take a look at some of the statements that Kirby makes while discussing the relation between matter and language in Butler's formulations of materiality -

Butler agrees that we cannot access an "outside language" that is *unmediated* by language. (Kirby, 1997, p.105)

Butler conceptualizes language as a mediating barrier (Kirby, 1997, p.110)

Language mediates a reality that resists its translation, a language that is doomed to misrepresent because intercourse between nature and culture, matter and ideation, object and subject is literally barred (Kirby, 2017, p.10)

Nature, now under erasure (in Butler's work), reappears as radical alterity, "something" that pre-exists human arrival, language, and mediated representation. (Kirby & Higgins, 2022, p.340)

The word "mediate" or "mediation" implies a middle space between (at least) two self-referential, compartmentalised, individual entities. Mediation, if we follow its definition, means – "the process of talking to two separate people or groups involved in a disagreement to try to help them to agree or find a solution to their problem", or "to help two sides in a disagreement" (Cambridge dictionary, n.d.). The word "Mediation" comes from the Latin root "medius", which means – "The central part of, the middle of", "situated between or among; intervening, occupying a middle position in time or order", among others (Glare, 1968, p.1091). As the preceding interrogation highlights, Butler's exegesis does not keep the metaphysical constitution of the two concepts (i.e. matter and culture) intact. Rather, Butler shows how these categories have always been undoing their metaphysical constitution from within. That is, these categories have never really been what they were claimed to be.

Kirby's emphasis on mediation, I argue, comes from her pinning down and also at the same time performatively committing Butler to constructionism. Despite Butler's emphasis on the performative nature of language, Kirby's reading of them through the concept of mediation imparts to their work the ontological dualism of matter and culture where these categories are conceived of as self-present, ontologically determinate, separable, self-referential entities. It

presupposes a hiatus between the two, a spatio-temporal gap that keeps these two categories at a distance. But as we observed, this is precisely what Butler argues against by showing that any temporal gap between the two is unsustainable and that this hiatus as such is produced in and through language.

Inadequate attention to the performative function of language, the function that forecloses the possibility of thinking in metaphysical terms of *before* and *after* with matter signifying a prior *thereness* become formative of Kirby's placement of Butler within the constructionist tradition. Kirby's conflation of a general model of social constructionism with that of Butler's transvaluation of the involved categories (i.e., matter and language/culture) shapes her critique of Butler. This fundamental conflation allows her to portray Butler's framework as one consisting of a ternary structure made up of - a) a self-present lost origin or primordial materiality somewhat resembling the inscrutable Lacanian "real" that precedes and stands as the outside and the condition of any mediation, b) a buffer zone like mediatory space that is culture, and c) reality as translated and incorporated within culture. This buffer zone is where the translation from pure nature to second nature, or to put it differently, the movement from *nature-in-itself* to *nature-for-us* occurs. And by virtue of being a representation, *nature-for-us* is essentially distorted. But such readings become only possible, as we just observed, owing to Kirby's non-cognizance of the radicalism of Butler's transvaluation of these categories.

A similar theme emerges in Kirby's reading of Butler's response to questions she posed during an interview. What differentiates Kirby's criticism of Butler's response in this interview is that here what grounds Kirby's criticism is her somewhat uncritical reliance on natural science. This relation to science, as observed in the previous chapter, is one of the defining traits of new materialism. In light of new developments in natural science and a general atmosphere of frustration with constructionism, new materialism found science to provide new grounds for its ontological inquiry into matter. Regarding their frustration with constructionist critique, new materialists often tend to share Latour's exasperation with "critique" which Latour believes has, with its tendency to reduce everything to construction, rendered the entire field of critique unproductive to the extent that any mention of "facts" elicits a violent knee-jerk reaction. As Latour writes -

a certain form of critical spirit has sent us down the wrong path, encouraging us to fight the wrong enemies and, worst of all, to be considered as friends by the wrong sort of allies because of a little mistake in the definition of its main target. The question was never to get away from facts but closer to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism. (Latour, 2004, p.231)

But whereas Latour's own project emphasised how the notions of stability and self-evidentness that scientific knowledge entails is dependent on that object's network (Latour, 1999, pp.24-79), what we often observe in new materialism is its perception of science as a provider of absolute, self-referent truth.⁸⁰ However, unlike few other new materialists whose reference to science is often without any limits or qualification,⁸¹ Kirby does not claim that engagement with science will lead us to the absolute truth of things. Rather, her exegesis understands matter/nature in terms of *differance* (Kirby, 2011, p.12). But despite that, her engagement with Butler precisely on the question of scientific knowledge of the biological body seems to catapult science to a privileged epistemic position. Within the terms of Kirby's engagement with Butler, science tends to emerge as the ultimate and undeniable producer of knowledge, a domain with which other fields of knowledge *must* be in harmony. Such an undertone can be found in one of Kirby's statements on scientific models -

⁸⁰ See our discussion of DeLanda and Bennett in the previous chapter.

⁸¹ For example, Stacy Alaimo, while commenting on what she calls "material memoirs", writes - "Whereas Joan Scott argues that "experience" cannot be understood apart from the discourses that constitute subjects, thus making "the question" "how to analyze language" (34), in the material memoir, the question becomes how to understand the very substance of the self...In other words, material memoirs emphasize that personal experience cannot be directly reckoned with, not only because discourse shapes experience, but also because an understanding of the self as a material, trans-corporeal, and always emergent entity often demands the specialized knowledges of science...As a mode of critique, the material memoir undertakes... self-questioning, which risks unrecognizability. But what makes these selves even less recognizable is the extent to which they undertake investigations not only of norms, principles, and genealogy but of their own materiality—a materiality that must often be understood via scientific knowledge." (Alaimo 2010, 87-90). Or, for example, we can look at the work of another new materialist Myra J. Hird who, in order to look past cultural constructivism in order to grasp materiality in its proper sense, takes recourse to science. To corroborate her claim that sexuality is a diverse domain and not confined to the schema that heterosexuality presents, Hird approvingly reads a number of biological works on animals, as if the facts of sex is self-evidently present in the scientific account she presents (Hird, 2004). As Nikki Sullivan notes - "What Hird's universalizing vision necessarily excludes, then, and what it shares with Janet Schaw's perception, is any sense that the species-being (in the Foucauldian sense) of the creatures who cross her path is 'the product of a specific form of perceptual practice, rather than the natural result of human sight' (Alcoff, 2001: 268)." (Sullivan, 2012, p. 305).

if they are mere illusions, then how can they possess the extraordinary capacity (as we see in the case of quantum relations) to anticipate verifiable outcomes whose pragmatic results are evident in such achievements as the computing and electronic technologies of contemporary life? (Kirby, 2011, p.78)

This statement concerning natural science is made in the context of Kirby's argument where she cites Karen Barad to exhibit how scientific concepts do not exist outside the material world but are consubstantial with their objects. In alignment with Barad, Kirby concedes that the relation between the two is that of *intra-action* and *entanglement*.⁸² But despite such an understanding, the rhetorical structure of the statement performatively catapults science into an exalted position by emphasising its capability to anticipate pragmatic results.

But one might ask, what does this ability to anticipate indicate? What does its ability to find verifiable outcomes signify? Does it necessarily mean that scientific knowledge yields better and truer representations? If we place Kirby's vision of science against her reading of Butler where discourse appears to be the producer of false knowledge, it becomes increasingly evident that the epistemic virtue accorded to science by new materialism rests on its opposition to discourse, where on the one hand we have science that predicts the future and on the other we have discourse that distorts reality.⁸³ As Kirby puts it -

If finding ways to keep "the in-itself of Nature" out of the play of significance has been a matter of ongoing vigilance, a political practice in itself, more recent shifts in intellectual attentions, coupled with quite dramatic medical and computational breakthroughs in the sciences, threaten to render the defensive reasoning in these positions increasingly irrelevant. After all, how does one explain the referential purchase of forensic investigation, genetic testing, and the like, the predictive capacity of mathematical algorithms in

⁸² Intra-action refers to the a model where entities in relation do not precede their relation. That is, *relatas* are not prior to the relation, rather they emerge in and through the relation. Therefore, their relation is consubstantial with their individual identities. Intra-action contrasts with interaction which assumes the existence of individual entities prior to their relation, whereas intra-action question such individualist metaphysics and argues for ontological inseparability of the *relatas* (Barad, 2007, p.128)

⁸³ This gesture is analogous to what we observed in our analysis of DeLanda.

computational programs and so on? As cultural constructs, or models of a world that cannot in reality be that world, it is entirely unclear how such representational abstractions might be deemed to work at all. (Kirby, 2011, p.91)

Even though multiple references to forensic science⁸⁴ are made to establish how an entity's ontology is produced within a field of relationality, implicit in these references is the idea, even if inadvertent, of a priorly existing, fully present nature whose true account can be produced through scientific intervention. Science here is posited as opposed to the manifest forms of discursive productions. As if, and this is a point we have highlighted earlier in Kirby's reading of Butler, what is produced within the discursive field is a mere delusion, a distortion of the true object. And science is de facto positioned in opposition to this. If a system successfully predicts the outcome of something, could it not be said that this system has finally understood the ontology of the object it has been inquiring into? If this systematic study can harness the object by making it "work", then wouldn't it mean that this system engages with the object's truth? In this manner, the rhetorical structure of Kirby's argument, as can be seen in the citation above, ends up catapulting science to this privileged position in terms of its access to the true ontological structure of entities (Kirby, 2011, p.91). This opposition between science and discourse, translated into an antinomy between truth and illusion, governs Kirby's interpretation of Butler's response to her question concerning biology.

This question comes from Kirby's postulation that the relation between the world and scientific models is one of intra-action. Therefore science cannot be said to produce false knowledge. Rather, scientific signification is a *play* of the world/nature itself (Kirby, 2011, p.37). It is in this sense that signification or concepts do not come after nature, but are forms of nature's "playing with itself" (Kirby, 2011, p.37). Therefore, argues Kirby, science cannot be claimed to produce false representations. It is this background that informs Kirby's question to Butler -

In the face of contemporary medical research on the body in genetics, the cognitive sciences (I am thinking of the similarity between neural-net behaviour, Saussurian

⁸⁴ Kirby's preferred reference is quantum field theory as interpreted by Karen Barad (Barad 2007) and the field of forensic science, among others.

linguistic), immunology and so on, there is a serious suggestion that 'life itself' is creative encryption. Does your understanding of language and discourse extend to the workings of biological codes and their apparent intelligence? (Butler et al., 2005, p.15)

Kirby talks about the code-cracking capability of bacteria in terms of its interaction with antibiotic data. In the absence of a detailed account of the chemical functions Kirby mentions, we must conjecture that this statement is referring to the mutability of bacteria, i.e., how they alter their structure upon encountering antibiotic elements. Bacteria cannot be held synonymous with passivity and lifelessness owing to their capability to alter themselves which implies a certain dynamism on its part. Consequently, if bacteria, an object that is natural through and through, proves to be agential, then the argument that culture imparts agentiality to nature becomes redundant.

Building on this, Kirby seeks to disarticulate Butler's account of materiality by interpreting their response as typical of constructionist positions which foreclose inquiry into the authentic structure of matter/nature. However, such an interpretation of Butler's postulation on the biological, similar to Kirby's critique of Butler for their constructionist inclinations, rests on her misreading the status of discourse in Butler. Kirby understands Butler's argument on how the biological emerges in and through the discursive as a declaration on the inadequacy of science. However, Butler's understanding of discourse and science does not adhere to the binary of true and false but merely points out the possibility of equating the metaphoricity of science with the general truth of being. To understand the incommensurability of Kirby's reading with what it reads, let's look at Butler's response to Kirby's question. Butler, in responding to Kirby's query whether life is a creative encryption, says -

There are models according to which we might try to understand biology, and models by which we might try to understand how genes function. And in some cases the models are taken to be inherent to the phenomena that is [sic] being explained...I worry that a notion like "biological code;" on the face of it, runs the risk of that sort of conflation. I am sure that encryption can be used as a metaphor or model by which to understand biological processes, especially cell reproduction, but do we then make the move to render what is

useful as an explanatory model into the ontology of biology itself? This worries me, especially when it is mechanistic models which lay discursive claims on biological life. What of life exceeds the model? When does the discourse claim to become the very life it purports to explain? I am not sure it is possible to say "life itself" is creative encryption unless we make the mistake of thinking that the model is the ontology of life. Indeed, we might need to think first about the relation of any definition of life to life itself, and whether it must, by virtue of its very task, fail. (Butler et.al, 2005, 15)

In light of our previous interrogation of Kirby's reading of Butler, one way to read this statement is to interpret it in terms of a binarity between truth of content and its false representation. There is a truth to life, but the biological models and metaphors we use to understand it are not adequate for granting us access to it. Therefore biological science, working through models and metaphors, fails to provide its proper account. Life as such indeed exists, but by distorting its truth the models and metaphors we use to understand it lead us away from it. In this account, the function of the discourse from which these models and metaphors of life emerge is nothing but to produce delusions. Therefore, taking the models to be the general ontology of life would be to commit an error because, in the name of deciphering life, models and metaphors proliferate illusory accounts. Hence accepting them as the ontological truth of life would mean getting mired in delusion, accepting false representations for truth. And this is the source of Butler's caution about readily accepting the biological figures. This is precisely how Kirby reads Butler's response.

For Kirby, Butler is wary of the suggestion that life is "creative encryption" because it risks conflating "representation, models, and signs that substitute for material objects, with the objects themselves" (Kirby, 2011, p.74; Kirby, 2009, p.112). That is, Kirby understands Butler to be subscribing to an ontological dualism where on the one hand there exists the domain of real material world, and on the other resides its (false) representation. Even though the material domain becomes functional only through its entry into discourse and language, it maintains an ontologically determinate and distinguishable status. Since the material world is distinct in terms of its being, its existence is independent of its representation. In this sense, this material world is ontologically self-present and self-referential, because even though the system of representation

distorts it, in truth, this material domain harbours a reality that exists in itself beyond and prior to all representation. This prelapsarian reality exists before its fall into discourse and language, implying the future possibility its unconcealment. And since in its essence this reality is determined by nothing but itself, an interrogation into its being will refer to nothing but this materiality itself.

According to Kirby, if this plane of prediscursive, self-present, self-referential materiality forms one pole of Butler's ontological framework, then on the other pole is the force field of discourse and language that represents this prediscursive materiality according to its own laws and produces representations that might not be commensurate with the material objects themselves. That Kirby commits Butler to such an ontological framework can be seen in this remark -

Butler is understandably vigilant about the seductive slide that conflates representations, models, and signs that substitute for material objects, with the objects themselves. In other words, although it is inevitable that we will misrecognize one in the other, Butler cautions against committing to the error. When dealing with scientific objects the transparent self-evidence of reality is even more persuasive, but even here we are encouraged to remember that these objects are actually literary-textual, or encoded forms of language-and to this extent, if they can only emerge through cultural manufacture, then their reality and truth is attenuated, or even illusional. (Kirby, 2011, p.74)

Here we observe how Kirby uses the notion of misrecognition in reading Butler's claims of naturalising tendency of discourse. The use of the word misrecognition has significant ramifications here. It emerged from Kirby's locating of Butler within a constructionist premise. It understands Butler to subscribe to the binarised ontological framework of objects-in-themselves and objects-represented-in-discourse that we just mentioned. Kirby claims that Butler's warning comes from their belief in the inevitability of mistaking objects-as-represented in discourse for object-in-itself. The object-in-itself, therefore, is determinately different from its representation which is, by all means, a misrepresentation. However, the moment one invokes the concept of misrepresentation, it brings with it its binary opposite, i.e., (the plausibility of) a true representation closer to the object-in-itself. That misrepresentation or misrecognition implies the

possibility of a true representation becomes clear if we look at another operative term that governs Kirby's reading of Butler – "illusion".

"Illusion" is a term that Kirby uses to describe Butler's notion of the discursive formation of materiality. Illusion, precisely in this context, functions within and brings into function its binary opposite - reality. The manner in which the term "illusion" has been put to use here and rendered synonymous with the representation of objects within discourse implies the existence of the realm of a pure, prelapsarian, prediscursive material world that liminally exists beyond and before all linguistic-discursive interpellations. So, once again, we notice how language, culture, and discourse are interchangeably used with illusion, delusion, , and misrepresentation/misrecognition, and how such usages presuppose the existence of a self-present, self-referential prelinguistic plane where objects are one with themselves, where their presence is individuated and immediate. Whether or not that domain can be accessed is another matter, but the rhetorical force of the passage quoted above ends up implying the self-presence of these categories.

But as we have already mentioned, such an interpretation of Butler's notion of discourse, language, culture, and matter, emerges from Kirby's inadequate attention to the transvaluation that Butler subjects these categories to. As my reading suggests, Butler's formulation does not grant a prelapsarian, self-referential, self-present ontological status to matter, nor does it assume culture or discourse to be ontologically separate domains that come *after* matter that it then represents. Such a structure would grant these categories ontologically determinate, self-referential, separable identities, and would regard them to be ontologically present to themselves. But our examination so far suggests that it is precisely such an ontological framework determined by various forms of full presence that Butler's exegesis renders unsustainable. By conceiving language, culture, and discourse as performative, Butler's theorisation effectively alters the ontological status of both matter and culture such that it dismantles the seamless chronologization of *before-after*, and renders any substantive, ontological split between the categories impossible. And this, in turn, vacates the categories of their metaphysical structure of self-presence. In Butler's thesis concerning materiality, neither matter nor culture/discourse is granted a pure and full presence, whether in the sense of a lost origin or a possibility of future unconcealment. Rather, the only way matter becomes matter as such is through its being addressed within the force field of discourse, and the force field of discourse does not precede the domain of matter, but it is only through the

manifestation of matter's becoming itself that the force field can be identified as such. As Butler writes, there is no power prior to its manifestation in its production, and power exists as such only in through the iterative manifestation of what it produces (Butler, 1993, p.xviii). Such an understanding of discourse and power is most prominently articulated, along with other texts, in Butler's critique of the personification of discourse in *Bodies That Matter* (Butler, 1993). Here, Butler brings up the issue of the relation between discourse/power and materiality in the context of the ontology of the subject.

Butler unequivocally states that the postulation that being - understood in its various manifestations - is produced within the force field of discourse does not mean that the discursive regime exists independently of what it animates. Rather, this model of one thing animating the other remains deeply attached to the metaphysical tradition (Butler, 1993, p.xviii). Such a model assumes that there exists an authorial entity independently of what it authors, and what it authors also exist independently, and that both these categories exist in a self-referential manner where they are identical to themselves and fully present to themselves in all their immediacy. Butler, citing Nietzsche, calls this the "the metaphysics of substance" (Butler, 1999, pp.27-28). Butler explains metaphysics of substance in terms of the ontology of gendered subjects in this manner -

What is the metaphysics of substance, and how does it inform thinking about the categories of sex? In the first instance, humanist conceptions of the subject tend to assume a substantive person who is the bearer of various essential and nonessential attributes. A humanist feminist position might understand gender as an attribute of a person who is characterized essentially as a pregendered substance or "core," called the person, denoting a universal capacity for reason, moral deliberation, or language. (Butler, 1999, p.14)

The manner in which Kirby reads Butler commits them to such a metaphysical position that presupposes the existence of a prediscursive, prelinguistic plane of materiality while at the same time granting language and culture an authorial position. Such a position also assumes a temporal space between the primordial substance and its cultural representation. But this is not a position that Butler subscribes. Rather, by showing how materiality cannot be addressed beyond linguistic-discursive regimes and how this linguistic-discursive regime cannot be said to have any

ontological claim independent of what it materializes, Butler's postulations actively disrupt the ontological individuality and self-presence of all the concerned categories. In this sense, one can read Butler's work in terms of the materialist framework of "intra-action" where the *relatas* do not exist prior to their relation, and where the *relatas* are consubstantial with the relation they find themselves in. This consubstantiality becomes manifest in this statement concerning the ontology of the subject -

If gender is a construction, must there be an "I" or a "we" who enacts or performs that construction? How can there be an activity, a constructing, without presupposing an agent who precedes and performs that activity?...I would suggest that it takes a certain suspicion toward grammar to reconceive the matter in a different light. For if gender is constructed, it is not necessarily constructed by an "I" or a "we" who stands before that construction in any spatial or temporal sense of "before." Indeed, it is unclear that there can be an "I" or a "we" who has not been submitted, subjected to gender, where gendering is, among other things, the differentiating relations by which speaking subjects come into being. Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the "I" neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as the matrix of gender relations themselves. (Butler, 1993, p.xvi)

But this crucial aspect, which is fundamental to Butler's ontological paradigm, is unjustly ignored in Kirby's critique as well as in new materialist readings of their work in general. Instead, these criticisms read the concept of culture and matter in transcendent form, leading them to situate Butler's project within the constructionist premise. Such readings completely ignore how Butler transvaluates the concerned categories and how their postulates hint at a different ontological framework in general. As we have observed, by deconstructing the referential framework within which the matter-language dualism operated, Butler subjects the categories to a radical transvaluation where they lose their predominant meaning. Matter, in Butler's formulation, does not function like a predisursive, substantive outside and culture or discourse does not function by producing a distorted representation of those primordial materialities. As Fiona Jenkins notes, even though Butler works with categories which have been read in a metaphysical

manner in the philosophical cannon, their theorization hardly keeps their canonical conceptualization intact (Jenkins, 2008). Rather, by subjecting them to rigorous interrogation and immanent critique, Butler, in a sense, renders these categories unrecognisable to their canonical interpretations. However, this fundamental ontological aspect of Butler's work has never been addressed in new materialist criticism. Rather, by taking the concerned terms in Butler's narrative - namely, matter and language (discourse, culture) - in a descriptive manner, their focus remain solely on projecting a foundationalism in Butler's work which completely misses the force of Butler's textual system that does not remain confined within the metaphysical constitution of these concepts, but rather, through its textual exercise, ushers them into a new ontological framework beyond the dominance of presence and self-referentiality.

Engaging with new materialist criticism of Butler's work, in this chapter we presented an outline of how Judith Butler's engagement with the question of materiality can help us move towards an ontological framework that is not governed by the metaphysics of presence. Whereas many contemporary ontological accounts suffer from the particular tendency of erecting a new foundationalism in their formulations, Butler's interrogation of the concerned concepts of matter and culture does not proceed as an exercise driven by foundationalist underpinnings. Rather, by arguing that matter is always already cultural and that the prior givenness of matter as a domain of primordial materiality is a cultural-linguistic effect as such, Butler puts into question the dominant framework within which the question of matter appeared. Therefore, and as established through our critical analysis in this chapter, to claim that matter is reduced to culture in Butler's formulation is to miss the central thrust of Butler's anasemic interrogation of the ontology of matter which, instead of taking matter as irreducible primordially and originary, proceeds by questioning that very irreducibility and originality which has hitherto shaped the understanding of its ontological constitution. It shows that matter's placement as immediate, irreducible, originary, self-referent, fully present to itself becomes possible only within the linguistic discursive grid. Hence, what defines the ontology of matter, i.e., the being of matter cannot be understood in its own terms. Its ontology cannot be thought of in its own terms that associate it with all the qualities stated above. Instead, it needs to be approached through an excess that exceeds the immediacy that matter within the metaphysical framework stands for. And if ontology stands for the study of being, and being has historically been defined in terms of presence, then it would be

justified to claim that an ontological exploration that approaches the question of being beyond presence essentially resignifies ontology as such. Our discussion in this chapter concerning Butler's formulation of matter hints at the presence of this possibility in Butler's work, and in the following chapters, we would see how Butler's work across a spectrum of subjects essentially refigure ontology by theorizing being beyond presence.

Chapter 4

Sex/Gender Beyond the Metaphysics of Presence: Butler and Psychoanalysis

In the course of centuries the naive self-love of men has had to submit to two major blows at the hands of science. The first was when they learnt that our earth was not the centre of the universe...This is associated in our minds with the name of Copernicus...The second blow fell when biological research destroyed man's supposedly privileged place in creation...This revaluation has been accomplished in our own days by Darwin...But human megalomania will have suffered its third and most wounding blow from the psychological research of the present time which seeks to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house, but must content itself with scanty information of what is going on unconsciously in its mind.

*Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud*⁸⁵

Modern philosophy and the modern notion of the subject begin with what Foucault calls the “Cartesian moment” (Foucault, 2005, p.17). This moment can be linked to two particular philosophical issues. First, the quest for what gives certainty to knowledge has been a persistent one in the history of philosophy. The search for an unshakable foundation reached its temporary zenith and solution with Descartes’s concept of the cogito or the self-conscious doubting subject. Second, the concept of the cogito is a response to the question asked after that which intends to anchor knowledge to absolute subjective certainty (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994, p.17). The Cogito attempts to provide the absolute foundation of knowledge. Within the Cartesian plane, it functions as the bedrock that grounds knowledge. Within the Cartesian framework, what is true and what is false depends on “subjective certitude” espoused by Cogito (Habermas, 2007, p.133). But on what basis can the cogito impart such certitude? In what sense does the structure of Cogito usher philosophy into the domain of the “sovereignty of the subject” (Balibar, 91, p.33)? Whether

⁸⁵ Freud, 1991, p.326

the concept of the subject is nominal or substantive will be addressed later. But first, let us briefly examine the self-conscious subject that cogito signifies.

According to Descartes's *Meditations*, Cogito is a self-referential and independent entity (Descartes, 2008). The existence of the body and its perceptions do not subtend the absolute self-certainty that Descartes seeks, but it is the ability to doubt, question, and think that establishes the indubitable existence of the self, the "thinking thing", the "I" (Descartes, 2008, pp.18-20).

Everything else can be doubted, but the fact that "I" am doubting proves beyond doubt that I exist. There is a leap from thinking to being, or to put it differently, there is a movement from the epistemic to the ontological that starts with doubt, and since doubting is an act of thinking, it prepares the ground for the assertion of the being of the "I" as that which thinks. While the body can be significant for knowledge production, it cannot provide the ultimate and unquestionable foundation (Deleuze, 1978). Hence, the cartesian system presupposes absolute faith in the absoluteness of being as a thinking substance.

The modern subject espoused in the Cartesian cogito is self-referential in a dual sense. First, unlike its philosophical predecessors, wherein concepts depended on various presuppositions and where grasping a concept required one to refer to something other than itself, the Cartesian cogito didn't require one to have a predefined ground to anchor itself (Deleuze, 1978). Rather, it immanently contained all the necessary components required to posit itself as such. For cogito or the self-conscious human subjectivity, one only requires a pre-philosophical understanding of thought (Deleuze, 1978).⁸⁶ Second, the Cartesian cogito is based on absolute certainty as regards the basic understanding of oneself. As Heidegger notes, knowledge does not emerge from blindly following a random path but has as its precondition an absolute certainty regarding one's self. It is only on the condition that the being of the "I" is absolutely certain of itself, that the ground of knowledge production is prepared. Hence this "I", the agent of thought or the agent which it is to the extent that it is a thinking being, must be transparent to itself, it must be in absolute proximity to itself.⁸⁷ Knowing oneself is the condition of all knowledge.

⁸⁶ However, the meaning of thought is itself produced performatively within the text. The act of thinking establishes and simultaneously begins with cogito, the doubting-thinking subject.

⁸⁷ "Man does not simply accept a doctrine on faith, but neither does he procure knowledge of the world merely by following a random course. Something else comes to the fore: man knows himself absolutely and certainly as that being

The consequences of such a structure of the concept of the subject are manifold. First, the subject becomes the organizing principle of the field of knowledge. Situating itself at the centre, it lends coherence to the outside world. This becomes especially prominent with Kant when in his reading, the indeterminate form of existence of cogito becomes determinable in terms of spatio-temporal coordinates, and this coherent, spatiotemporally determined subject becomes the model and condition of knowledge production (Deleuze, 1978). Second, the subject in the Cartesian paradigm functions as *subjectum*, which is the Latin term for the Greek word *hypokeimenon*. *Hypokeimenon*, if we recall our discussion in the first chapter, is that which underlies everything, that which “lies-at-the-base-of, what already lies-before of itself” (Heidegger, 1991, p.97).⁸⁸ The subject remains self-same throughout its practices of doubt and acquisition of knowledge. The Cartesian subject remains constantly present as what it is - a thinking being whose being consists in self-representation of itself, and it is the unique nature of self-representation that gives it distinction (Heidegger, 1991, p.220). As already noted by Heidegger, its self-representation is also singular in nature since representation here is immediate - i.e., it does not need to make any detour outside itself to represent itself to itself. In a certain sense, the being that represents and that which is represented are identical since what *is*, is nothing but its representation.

So, the two features of the cartesian subject that concern us are: first, it is self-referential, and second, it is fully present to itself. This testifies to the individualist metaphysics of the cartesian subject, implying a clear separation of the inside from the outside. The self, the inside, can interact with the outside, but throughout all such engagements, the subject in the sense of *subjectum*, remains unaltered in terms of its being, its essence. And this subject - coherent, conscious, able to think, agentic - is at the origin of everything since everything else, in an epistemological sense, come *after* it. The subject exists *before* what comes to it; without it, there would be no representation. Thus, from an ontological perspective, this cartesian subject is self-referential, self-sufficient, and fully present to itself. It is a domain defined by pure, irreducible, presence. Since Descartes, such an

whose Being is most certain. Man comes to be the self posited ground and measure for all certitude and truth” (Heidegger, 1991, p.90)

⁸⁸ However, Balibar disagrees with Heidegger’s reading of Descartes which, argues Balibar, erroneously interprets the Cartesian subject in the metaphysical sense of the *subjectum*. For Balibar, the proper evaluation of Descartes’s text requires us to understand whether the Cartesian cogito needs to be ascertained as *subjectus* - i.e., subject to the sovereign authority of someone else, namely another divine or earthly sovereign (Balibar, 1991).

ontological structure of the subject has remained pivotal to the philosophical developments through enlightenment and romanticism, only to be questioned as regards its constitution and mode of existence with the advent of existentialism.⁸⁹ But even the existentialist dialectic also presupposes being as a determination of presence operating within and remaining riveted to the cartesian structure of dualism typical of Western metaphysics.

By putting subjective certitude as that bedrock of knowledge, the Cartesian Cogito resolved the question of what knowledge could unshakably ground itself in. But the moment one asks after the constitution and the genealogy of the Cartesian subject, it creates a bridge that allows one to cross over to the domain of other concepts. The Freudian unconscious, I submit, is one such concept that pushes us toward rethinking the ontology of the subject as decentred.

Whereas the cartesian self was argued to be autonomous, conscious, self-referring, fully present, and self-identical, the Freudian self is essentially fragmented in nature. Freud presents two topologies of the psyche in his work, with both comprising three sets of components. The first consists of the conscious, preconscious, and unconscious; and the second topology, presented in his later works, features another tripartite structure consisting of the id, ego, and superego. Even though the components of these two topographies cannot be said to be identical, some overlap between the corresponding elements of each set can be observed in Freud's writing. While neither the ego nor the id is identical to the conscious or the unconscious, the components of the former topography can be traced back to the latter. And in a homologous manner, the unconscious, in both descriptive and dynamic sense, corresponds to the id and the ego to consciousness.⁹⁰

The ego is often associated with "I" or "self". As Freud notes, the ego is that to which consciousness is attached, implying space for incorporating within it unconscious elements (Freud,

⁸⁹ We have discussed this in detail in the first chapter.

⁹⁰ As has already been mentioned, the first topography, conscious-unconscious-preconscious, does not correspond seamlessly to the second topography of id-ego-superego, since the earlier topography went through a lot of modification throughout Freud's work, and in light of therapeutical-analytical discoveries over time, the second topography established strongly in *The Ego and Id* (Freud, 1961a) allowed psychoanalysis to get a better picture of analysand's psychological constitution and brought to light hitherto uncharted territories. However, it needs to be stressed that the latter topography also deployed the components from the earlier topography even though at times the terms were deployed in purely descriptive sense. The shift to later topography allowed Freud to consider various ambiguities concerning the conscious and the unconscious. For example, despite being posited as the agentic faculty of the psyche, the ego is not identical to consciousness. Rather, as Freud states succinctly, while various elements can become conscious in the ego, there is much in it that remains unconscious, even permanently (Freud, 1969, p.22; Freud, 1961a, p.18)

1969, p.22). This ego is a “frontage”, an “external, cortical” layer of the id. Holding onto the metaphor of frontage allows Freud to endow a constitutional dynamism to it.⁹¹ It is neither biological nor given at once; it does not exhibit self-sameness through time. Rather, it is a “mental apparatus” of the id and is modifiable through external stimuli (Freud, 1969, pp.18-19). Overall, the defining characteristic of the ego consists in its functioning as a coherent organization of various mental processes (Freud, 1961a, p.17), and it is agentic in the sense that it looks after its constitutive processes and is oriented toward synthesizing various components of an individual's psychic life (Freud, 1969, pp.18-19).

Had an individual's psychic life consisted only of the ego, the coherent, unificatory agent capable of filtering out undesired elements, then it would have allowed us to place it in an unruptured continuum with the Cartesian cogito. But the existence of the unconscious distinguishes it from the structure of the Cartesian self since even though a functional ego⁹² works in an agentic manner by all appearance, its formation and actions depend, in reality, on the overdetermined economy of both conscious and unconscious elements. Its decisions, reactions, behaviour, speech, and desire - factors that we consider to be the conscious action of a coherent subject- are circuited through the engagements of the unconscious. It is in this sense that Freud makes the now-famous statement that “the ego...is not...master in its own house” (Freud, 1991, p.326).⁹³ The absolute proximity of the self to itself is arguably disproved by Freud's introduction of the unconscious into the psychic life of the self. There is a constitutional barrier when it comes to the subject's attempt to know itself, since the elementary components (i.e., unconscious) that construe the subject as such remain unknown to the self. And analysis aims to explore and address this domain of knowability.

Now, two opposing propositions follow from this. First, if the analytical procedure is oriented towards uncovering the unknowable, it can be stated that the unconscious, in the last instance, is not inaccessible to consciousness. Such an approach renders psychoanalysis a positivist

⁹¹ The import of this would become clear in the later sections of this chapter.

⁹² Here, the term “functional” has been used in the most general sense. In my usage, a functional ego means where a person's psychic structure is not exhausted by symptoms.

⁹³ For example, Freud mentions how in certain psychic disorders, the symptoms remain unresolved even when it is refuted logically, it defies all wilful enforcement of rational argument. Freud's writings bear testimony to a multitude of such events where it can be clearly seen how the conscious self shows itself to be incapable of understanding, let alone addressing, the manifestation of irregularities or symptoms.

discourse inclined to produce objective knowledge about the psyche. Second - and this dismantles the theoretical premise of the first proposition - that this knowledge of the unknowable (i.e., unconscious) which is the precondition for the self's absolute proximity to itself is not immediate. The self is not immediately present to itself but is always already mediated through something other than itself. The other therefore supplements the self, and the dual signification of *supplement*⁹⁴ hollows out the full presence promised by that knowledge. Hence, the presence of the unconscious (and by extensions, its various elements and formations) establishes the subject as non-identical to itself, at some remove from itself. Freud's concept of the unconscious can thus be argued to transvaluate⁹⁵ the metaphysical notion of the subject.

These two approaches to psychoanalysis remain at the heart of the differential spectrum of the psychoanalytic concept of the subject. The first approach roots the subject, even if in a deferred manner, in presence because the subject is ultimately knowable to itself. Freud's position often seem to put his formulations on this side of the spectrum because his statements, as we will see, seems to suggest analysis is aimed toward exploring, knowing, and making known to the analysand elements of their unconscious. This approach to psychoanalysis consists of making a subject conscious of the elements that were *already present* in her, and it works by excavating the repressed marks of events by filling gaps within the memory. It is true that when the elements at the root of symptom formation are discovered and addressed adequately through analytic mechanisms, the symptom would stop, leading the nonspecialist to think that the psyche of the analysand-subject has been altered, resulting in the production of a new (or cured) person. But according to this approach, psychoanalysis does not *change* a subject as such. Rather, it turns them into what they had really been all along. Explaining what getting cured means in psychoanalysis, Freud writes, taking a neurotic patient to be prototypical of all analysands, that "The neurotic who is cured has really become another man, though at bottom, of course, he has remained the same; that is to say, he has become what he might have become at best under the most favourable conditions" (Freud, 1991, p.109). In *The Question of Lay Analysis* (Freud, 1969), Freud states in a similar tone-

⁹⁴ See Derrida (1998, pp.144-145).

⁹⁵ The word *transvaluate* has been used in the Nietzschean sense.

We seek rather to enrich him (the analysand) from his own internal sources, by putting at the disposal of his ego those energies which, owing to repression, are inaccessibly confined in his unconscious, as well as those which his ego is obliged to squander in the fruitless task of maintaining these repressions. (Freud, 1969, p.109)

Following this line of inquiry renders psychoanalysis a task synonymous with bringing oneself closer to what one, under the best circumstances, should have always been. In this sense, the psychoanalytic concept of the subject is auto-affective, where analysis aspires to remove that distance of self to itself. By addressing the unconscious elements through analytic intervention, the subject begins the journey of mastering what was previously unknown and inaccessible to her, a journey towards what was *already present* in her. Psychoanalysis therefore appears to be an archaeological practice in nature, predisposed towards excavating the origin narratives which has been buried under the traces of events. Analysis, in such instances, proves to be an exercise geared towards producing a self-referential, fully present subject. As Derrida rightly observes, Freud's theoretical-therapeutic framework testifies to a pull towards retrieving that which could have been, i.e., what the subject at her origin truly was. It exhibits "an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of commencement" (Derrida, as cited in Trumbull, 2012, p.101). The ontology of the subject, understood thus, appears to be that of a being oriented toward the unconcealment of what is truly proper to the subject. Such an ontology remains strongly rooted in the metaphysics of presence functioning as a discourse of truth.

If the foregoing discussion forms the first approach to psychoanalysis, then the second approach mentioned earlier intends to understand the analytic procedure, its conceptual tools, and all that it involves as *supplement*, putting the supposedly self-present origin (what the psyche should have been in the ideal situation) forever at abeyance. Within its terms, the subject emerges as radically ek-static. And this chapter would argue that Judith Butler's reading of psychoanalytic text pushes us toward understanding the subject and subjectivity along this line.

Since psychoanalysis - both in and out of the clinic - is a productively dissonant field where various analytic theories and practices involving the clinic and the text remain at extreme variance, reaching a generalized understanding of psychoanalysis inclusive of all of its variants remains an

impossible task. Butler's engagement with psychoanalysis is also qualified in that it primarily engages with the works of three psychoanalysts - Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Jean Laplanche.⁹⁶ However, given the focus of this chapter, our discussion would be limited to Butler's reading of Freud and Lacan, and through this discussion, we would try to establish how their interpretation of psychoanalytic literature prepares the ground for the embodied subject beyond the determination of presence.

Difference Beyond Presence: Ek-static Ontology of the Gendered Ego

Judith Butler's engagement with psychoanalysis, for the most part, is centred around the question of the morphology of gender and sex. Their works make inroads into the question of sexuated and gendered subjectivity by dispelling the ontological integrity of the category of woman, arguing how instead of being a disposition, gendered subjects are the result of stabilization of and appropriation into particular categories of sex and gender through a network of prohibition, abjection, and exclusion. Butler's engagement with the question of foundational categories such as sex, gender, and desire is observed to have a multi-pronged approach. These categories operate under multiple registers that, in a structural sense, function as what Butler calls the "irreducibles" (Butler, 1993, p.4). These irreducibles function as the ungrounded ground for everything while existing as that whose analysis cannot lead us anywhere except to themselves. Subjecting these irreducibles to analysis results in either finding oneself bound to end up in tautological arguments or reinforcing them as ungrounded foundations, providing the bedrock for further constructions. Thus, irreducibility implies self-referentiality, an undifferentiated, constant and full presence of itself to itself. Hence, these irreducibles bear a metaphysical ontological structure determined by presence.

Sexual difference and gender, within contemporary feminist circuits, figure as irreducibles, appearing as the unalterable unit that persists through constructions and perversions, something of an "undertow" that exists before everything (Butler, 2015a, p.59). There could be multiple

⁹⁶ Butler also considers the works of a few other analysts, namely Donald Winnicott and Melanie Klein. But for our purpose, we will be focusing only on their reading of Freud and Lacan.

formations of subjectivity in terms of gender and sexuality, but in themselves they remain as subterranean components undergirding gendered existence and expressions. Sex/gender, as a position within the bipolar framework of compulsory heterosexuality, is something we are said to have, where the proprietary relation of the self to sex and gender is understood to be firmly secure. While the emergence of non-normative sexual and gendered existences within contemporary discourses expands the horizon of modes of being sexuated/gendered by dismantling the framework of normative sexual duality (man-women, male-female), they often fail to question and destabilize the self-referentiality of the two positions which the heterosexual paradigm consists of in. Thus, within these terms, non-normative genders remain subject to the possibility of being translated as some form of the combination of the primary terms - masculinity or femininity. Gendered existence is understood as aligned either directly or, through variations, indirectly to the primary strata of heterosexuality. Masculinity or femininity is what is *proper* to the sex/gender system. The domain of the *proper* is governed by the law of untranslatability and inalterability, and its function is structured in the manner of the transcendental signified. It is nothing but pure presence, absolute self-referentiality, subtended by nothing but itself (Levesque, 1985, p.93). Hence, it cannot be substituted by anything other than itself without losing some amount of the reference itself (Derrida, 1987, p.312).⁹⁷ Other modes of existence as gendered beings can and would refer to masculinity and femininity, but masculinity and femininity themselves exist beyond chains of signification; it is that which defines how certain modes of gendered existence should be, but in itself it is defined by nothing but itself. Thus, the attempt to destabilize the normativity of heterosexuality inadvertently draws upon the very categories it had set out to problematize.

In the works of Sigmund Freud, the ontology of sexual difference appears to have been founded on a similar structure. While it is true that in psychoanalytic narratives, femininity and masculinity, interpreted as the sexual facts of the psyche, present themselves as achievements secured through a journey of psychosexual development, Freud's theory of primary bisexuality appears to understand these categories in terms of dispositions. Although Freud's account of sexuality and gender can be deployed to undermine the affective pull of biological determinism, the

⁹⁷ "any signified whose signifier cannot vary or be translated into another signifier without a loss of signification induces a proper noun effect." (Derrida, 1987, p.312)

theoretical presupposition of primary sexual dispositions posits masculinity and femininity as self-referential and self-present categories, functioning as the conceptual building blocks for development of the psyche.

Apart from the question of psychosexual difference as a result of sexual disposition, phallus, the marker formative of this difference and functioning as the master signifier, enjoys an absolute status within psychoanalytic narratives. Phallus or its absence becomes central to the initiation, development, and maintenance of the boundaries of sexual development. Functioning as the unconditioned condition of sexual differences and subsequent variation of the sexual facts of the psyche, the phallus operates by enforcing a metaphysical closure on the structure of sexual difference that results in the stability of sexual difference within psychoanalytic texts. Thus, on the one hand, psychoanalysis observes a critique of the self-evidence of categories of sexual and gendered identity, and establish them as contingent formations by arguing that sexuated and gendered positions are the result of multiple processes; but on the other hand, through its rhetoric of “disposition”, psychoanalysis attributes a certain ahistoricity to them and presupposes the primacy of heterosexuality.⁹⁸ Therefore, the possibility of opening up avenues to scrutinize the categories of sexual difference is undercut by the placement of that very difference as constitutive of a psyche’s sexual interpellation.

But it is this very incongruence, or what after a certain fashion one might call the difference between the gesture and the statement in Freud’s texts, brings forth the possibility of extrapolating from it an alternative reading of Freud geared toward reading difference not on the basis of stable identities of self-present and self-referential categories, but as categories that are always at some remove from themselves; as categories which are ontologically ek-static, originally displaced, devoid of a centre, essence, irreducible to any definite origin, *ousia*, or any other determinations of presence. Judith Butler’s engagement with psychoanalytic texts follows such a line of argument. In this section, we will examine Butler’s reading of Sigmund Freud on the question of sex and gender and explore how it tends articulate an ek-static ontology of sexual difference.

In one sense, it could be said that psychoanalysis concerns itself with unfolding the truth of being through analysis. Much like other approaches, it too begins from a set of positions central to

⁹⁸ Since for Freud, an individual’s sexual disposition is either masculine or feminine.

the knowledge of the psyche. It is only on the basis of a theory of the psyche that psychoanalysis is built, and the questions of how the psyche is structured, what are its constitutive components, what is the mechanism of the emergence of a functional psychic makeover, what is consciousness, what are its modes of operation are some of the fundamental conceptual prerequisites for the psychoanalytic understanding of subjectivity. However, these theories are argued to have been derived purely from the empirical evidence and knowledge produced at the clinic.⁹⁹ Thus, the general argument that comes from the analytic circle and its adherents is that while it produces a theory of the psyche and the concomitant practice is based on it, the theory of psychoanalysis itself is not grounded in anything other than its clinical discoveries. As Johnston notes, given its spatial and temporal location, it would be evident that the early writings produced within the domain of psychoanalysis often drew their inspiration from the cultural and intellectual background of its own time. And, given the erudition and extent of interest in various events concerning the human condition, it seems evident that, much like his predecessors and contemporaries, Freud would often interact with, draw from, and be influenced by his contemporary social, political, and philosophical positions. But despite these influences and resonances with its contemporary intellectual world, psychoanalysis emerged with the development of the systematic notion of the unconscious, a notion unprecedented in the history of European thought before Freud (Johnston, 2014, pp.319-321). It is with the discovery of the unconscious that the century-long journey of psychoanalysis began. And as the development of this new concept and the shaping of its contours were the product of clinical evidence, psychoanalysis claimed to be a field of knowledge free of presuppositions since all its discoveries are the product of clinical experience.¹⁰⁰

Another crucial point has been maintained by analysts and critical theorists alike that what differentiates psychoanalysis from other fields is that, as a clinical approach, it is descriptive and not prescriptive. It does not propose a normative code of conduct or an outline of how objects (i.e., psychic formation, behaviour etc.) should function; rather, it is focused on uncovering the structure, function, and mode of the operation of the psyche and elucidating, through analytic

⁹⁹ In a number of his works, Freud makes such statements that explicitly or implicitly states how analytic knowledge is produced through analysis, rendering it into a presuppositionless knowledge. For instance, see Freud(1969, 1991).

¹⁰⁰ And during its inception, Self-analysis performed by Freud also played a crucial role in delineating certain key concepts and providing accounts of analysis, enriching the arsenal of this discipline.

methods, how the objects actually *are* and how they come into being (Rose, 2005; Freud, 1961b). Thus, the general argument that comes from the analytic circle and its adherents is that while it produces a theory of the psyche and the concomitant practice is based on it, the theory of psychoanalysis itself is not grounded on anything other than its clinical discoveries. Hence, even while reproducing certain normative positions on sex and gender, Freud's arguments on psychosexual developments firmly rest on these two qualifiers - first, that its discoveries are presuppositionless; and second, it is descriptive in nature. Freud's response to the question of the discrepancy between a boy child and a girl child in the analytic narrative bears testimony to Freud's understanding of analysis as what might be loosely called a descriptive science. Anticipating objections regarding the centrality of the phallus in the Oedipus complex from the quarters advocating for equal rights of the sexes, Freud writes -

The female sex, too, develops an Oedipus complex, a super-ego and a latency period. May we also attribute a phallic organization and a castration complex to it? The answer is in the affirmative; but these things cannot be the same as they are in boys. Here the feminist demand for equal rights for the sexes does not take us far, for the morphological distinction is bound to find expression in differences of psychical development. (Freud, 1961c, pp. 177-78)

This particular aspect of psychoanalysis has been elaborated upon by several feminist philosophers and analysts of different theoretical inclinations.¹⁰¹ However, while wary of uncritically accepting the received notions of various psychosexual elements and formations that the Freudian schema offers, these engagements often end up presupposing the fundamentals of that same schema it had set out to disprove (Butler, 2015a). Thus, the basic Freudian presuppositions concerning the markers of sexual identity, its psychological imprints, and the often unquestioned paradigm of heterosexuality on which the psychoanalytic framework rests come to be reproduced in that body of critical literature.

¹⁰¹ For instance, see Chodorow (1978), Beauvoir (2010), Gallop (1982), Irigaray (1985), Mitchell (2000).

To come back to the question of the absence of presupposition in psychoanalysis, it can be said that Freud's theories, including the fundamental precepts that would concern us in this section, tend to posit as its outcome a positive knowledge about the psyche, tempting one to move towards the conclusion that despite its contested relation with the framework of the natural sciences, psychoanalysis fell prey to scientism. Although it would take a multi-pronged research crossing the boundaries of psychoanalysis, science, and continental philosophy to provide a detailed account of this particular aspect of analysis, with some risk, it can be inferred that Freud's strong articulation of analysis as a purely data-driven framework obliterates the possibility of a critical self-assessment of the genealogy of its own operating concepts.

The absence of subjecting itself to a reflective practice geared towards charting its own etiology often leads to the emergence of ideologically laden concepts to appear as a positive truth. In this sense, it can be argued that psychoanalysis becomes subject to bearing the marks of what, in an Althusserian vein, can be called a "spontaneous ideology" (Althusser, 1990) that it actively materializes in and through its theories and clinical practice. To be specific, it is in the attempt to understand the formation of the tripartite structure of the psyche that Freud's system shows the operation of the regnant culture of heteronormativity. However, in line with our statement on the discrepancy between gesture and statement in Freud's work, Freud's oeuvre exhibits multiple openings for destabilizing its fundamental conceptual tools. It is this productive tension in Freud's work that Butler exploits to find an alternative reading of the Freudian structure, a reading that would not be susceptible to the dominant ideologies of gender. Whereas gender is conceived of in terms of essence, Butler's reading of Freud yields a counter-intuitive reworking of these concepts. By closely following Butler's reading of Freud concerning this particular aspect, we would question the ontological integrity of gender, explore how its status as an ontological category premised upon the understanding of ontology as an inquiry of being as presence, and building on this we would try to establish how this primary marker of identity and being proves ek-static.

As is often the case with many other concepts of Freud, his postulations regarding psychosexual development undergo differential treatment across the span of his oeuvre. However, despite variations, the trajectory and certain key components of the developmental process remain almost identical. In particular, we refer to three founding aspects of Freud's developmental narrative. The first of these three aspects is the thesis of primary bisexuality. The second aspect that

concerns us is the taboo on incest that, from an analytic perspective, plays a definitive role in the formation of the ego, and the third is related to the place of the anatomical body and its relation to the psyche. These three aspects often function confluent, each weighing on the other. Hence, our discussion of Butler's engagement with Freud would take these three aspects into our critical account of the Freudian scheme.

Since primary bisexuality is thought of in terms of predispositions rather than achievement, Freud's framework does not allow tracing the genealogy of this aspect of infantile sexuality. Primary bisexuality operates within the heterosexual matrix with two functional terms - masculinity and femininity; both regarded as innate characteristics of human beings. It plays a crucial role during the Oedipal scenario preceded by (in the case of the female child) or followed by (in the case of the male child) the castration complex (Freud, 1961c). But what does Freud understand by masculinity and femininity? Does he borrow these terms from the existing socio-cultural discourses? Or, does he impart different attributes to these categories? Freud appears to have addressed the criteria for defining masculinity/femininity in a number of places in his vast corpus. But for my argument, I would like to cite a particular footnote from one of his works titled *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud, 1953).

In the introductory sections of the essay, Freud postulates that libido works in the principle of activity, and, in this sense, it *has to be* understood as invariably masculine. To clarify his position on why this must be the case, he adds a footnote to the statement 10 years later. While noting that in everyday usage these two words present no ambiguity, Freud, in this footnote, distinguishes between three criteria according to which something is marked as either masculine or feminine -

'Masculine' and 'feminine' are used sometimes in the sense of activity and passivity, sometimes in a biological, and sometimes, again, in a sociological sense. The first of these three meanings is the essential one and the most serviceable in psychoanalysis... The second, or biological, meaning of 'masculine' and 'feminine' is the one whose applicability can be determined most easily. Here 'masculine' and 'feminine' are characterized by the presence of spermatozoa or ova respectively and by the functions proceeding from them. Activity and its concomitant phenomena (more powerful muscular development, aggressiveness, greater intensity of libido) are as a rule linked with biological masculinity; but they are not

necessarily so, for there are animal species in which these qualities are on the contrary assigned to the female. The third, or sociological, meaning receives its connotation from the observation of actually existing masculine and feminine individuals. (Freud, 1953, p.219)

Adjudication of gender by passivity and activity is a theme that Freud alludes to in several other writings,¹⁰² but his later works revisit the association of these terms with masculinity or femininity. For instance, in discussing what constitutes femininity¹⁰³ in his brief essay titled *Femininity* (1964b), Freud begins his account in a manner somewhat similar to the excerpt cited above by disarticulating both common biological and sociological factors historically associated with femininity. Indeed, there is a distinction between bodies that bear different kinds of genitals. But this distinction, Freud argues, does not provide any substantial basis for understanding the essence of femininity, because traits generally thought to manifest themselves only in a particular gender have often been seen in people of the opposite gender as well (Freud, 1964b). But whereas the previous works focused on activity and passivity as operative categories, in this text, he unequivocally argues against colouring one's judgment based on a general understanding of passivity/activity and their respective association with male and female bodies since the role played by socio-cultural conventions in forging such associations, argues Freud, cannot be ignored.

Thus, according to this argument, neither the biological nor the social can adequately respond to what shapes gendered identity. Consequently, only the work of analysis, contends Freud, can provide an etiological account of their formation. Noting the absence of knowledge on the ontology of femininity (and, by extension, masculinity as well), Freud states -

In conformity with its peculiar nature, psycho-analysis does not try to describe what a woman is...but sets about enquiring how she comes into being, how a woman develops out of a child with a bisexual disposition. (Freud, 1964a, p.116)

¹⁰² *Female Sexuality* (Freud, 1961d), *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1961a) among others.

¹⁰³ By extension, this is applicable to the analogous constitution of masculinity as well.

A thorough reading of Freud's oeuvre establishes the import of these primary sexual dispositions, such that a theory of the formation of the ego cannot be arrived at without taking it into account (Freud, 1961a), and it is precisely this thesis of an original bisexual disposition that remains at the heart of Butler's reading of the Freud's developmental narrative of the psyche. As stated earlier, Freud's postulates on primary bisexuality often figure without any corroborations apart from it being argued as knowledge gained by analysts during analysis of a number of patients (Freud, 1991). Whereas femininity or masculinity observed in adult people is explained through recourse to the Oedipus complex, primary bisexuality is stated as an innate trait that is there in a child from the very beginning.

A performative contradiction can be noted here since on the one hand femininity is something that is achieved through a tortuous path, and on the other hand, the thesis of primary bisexuality presupposes the natural pre-existence of both masculinity and femininity in a single human being. That is, both masculinity and femininity are argued to be existing together in the human infant, and this factor takes a crucial role in the Oedipal scenario. But as to their genealogy, it is difficult to find any exegesis in Freud's writing except it being stated as a fact observed to be there from the beginning.¹⁰⁴ This raises the question regarding the ontological status of these categories.

Being at the origin of sexuality, it functions as one of the unfounded foundations for later developments. It is a "constitutional" factor¹⁰⁵ of human beings, an innate property, something that one is born endowed with, something that upon interrogation does not produce a historical narrative of its emergence, but itself becomes the premise of future developments of the psyche.¹⁰⁶ In Freud's lexicon, The word "constitutional" appears in a binary relation with "accidental" which, functioning as a qualifier, furnishes it with a restricted meaning. That which is deemed constitutional cannot be constituted out of anything. It exists in a relation of identity with itself, it is always in touch with itself, fully present to itself. In this sense, the thesis of primary bisexuality

¹⁰⁴ "Psycho-analysis has a common basis with biology, in that it presupposes an original bisexuality in human beings" (Freud, 1955, p.171); "bisexuality...is present...as we believe, in the innate disposition of human beings..." (Freud, 1961d, pp.227-28).

¹⁰⁵ The Dynamics of Transference (Freud, 1962, p.99).

¹⁰⁶ The following discussion would address this in detail.

operates as one of the metaphysical foundations of the entire Freudian structure of the psyche.¹⁰⁷ The only explanation regarding its nominal genesis (nominal because being there at the origin, it cannot have an origin story for itself) reads -

The manifestation of the innate disposition is indeed not open to any critical doubts...Nor do I see any theoretical difficulty in this. Constitutional dispositions are also undoubtedly after-effects of experiences by ancestors in the past; they too were once acquired. Without such acquisition, there would be no heredity.¹⁰⁸ (Freud, 1991, p.407)

Thus, figured in terms of dispositions, primary bisexuality functions as an ahistorical foundation of the Freudian schema. And Butler's interrogation of this foundation starts from Freud's ambivalent attitude toward it.

If the definitional markers of masculinity/femininity referred to earlier in this section constitute one aspect of Freud's ambivalence, then, for Butler, another would be its role in how it affects the acquisition of a somewhat stable gender identity (Butler, 1999, pp.75-77). By closely reading Freud's texts where such ambivalences bordering at times on contradiction present themselves, Butler attempts to excavate a genealogy of what in Freud's system appear as innate dispositions. Apart from disarticulating the innateness of primary bisexuality, this line of reading also opens up the avenue for rethinking the structure of post-oedipal psychosexual development and the general ontology of gender.

At the centre of Butler's engagement with Freud on the question of the ontology of gender are three texts by Freud - *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1953), *Mourning and Melancholia* (1957), and *The Ego and the Id* (1961a).¹⁰⁹ In *Three Essays* (Freud, 1953) Freud first advanced the theory of primary bisexuality of infants which remained firmly at the heart of Freud's

¹⁰⁷ In several of his texts, Freud repeatedly mentions the indispensability of the role of primary bisexuality in the formation of the psyche.

¹⁰⁸ In his second topology, Freud places these dispositions into "id" which he calls the oldest province of the psyche and of utmost importance to psychoanalysis (Freud, 2006, p.).

¹⁰⁹ Butler's engagement with Freud is not limited to these three texts, however. Their reading spans other works as well, such as *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (in Butler 2015b), *Civilization and its Discontents* (in Butler, 1997) among others, and they often provide a critical perspective for interrogation into the genealogy of gender or sexuality. For detail, see Butler 1997, 2015b.

developmental narrative for the next three and a half decades. However, insights generated from a critical reading of *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud, 1957) - apparently an essay that hardly addresses psychosexual questions - and *The Ego and the Id* prepare the ground for reimagining the ontology of gender from within the Freudian framework. Given that our task in this section is to understand how Butler derives through her engagement with Freud an ontological framework premised upon originary ek-stasis, our discussion would primarily follow Butler's critical engagement with these two texts.

In *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud, 1957), Freud posits melancholia in opposition to Mourning. Mourning consists of the natural process of grieving. When someone suffers the loss of something they loved,¹¹⁰ the libido is withdrawn from that object. But in its bid to resist the loss of the object, the ego creates ways to prolong the departure of this object in forms verging on "hallucinatory wishful psychosis".¹¹¹ In this sense, it undergoes a temporary loss of command over itself as it tries to defer the loss. However, mourning does not fall into the category of the pathological. Because the ego holds onto the reality principle, and acknowledges the loss in due time. This puts a natural stop to the process of mourning, and relieved of its affliction, the ego becomes "free" and "uninhibited"¹¹² and proceeds towards forming new object cathexis. Now, if we consider the structure of the psychic phenomenon of mourning, then it becomes clear that the ego exists prior to its cathexis with the object. Thus, the object does not occupy a constitutive role in relation to the ego. It is this prior ontological individuality and the full presence of the ego that Butler notes in Freud -

An already formed ego invests and withdraws its attachments at will from "objects" (Freud's euphemistic term for others) that have no integral relationship to itself. Freud's vocabulary here falls short of conveying the sense in which the ego might be understood nonsubstantially, that is, as the very consequence of *attachment*, the intentional enthrallment with the objects of the world...(Butler, 1995b, p.9)

¹¹⁰ As Freud Observes, the loss that is mourned might not necessarily be a person, rather it can be an "abstract" entity as well such as nation, liberty, or some ideal (Freud, 1957, p.243).

¹¹¹ Freud, 1957, p. 245.

¹¹² Freud, 1957, p. 245.

If we notice Freud's articulation, it becomes clear that his exegesis proceeds based on, first, a stable psychic topography constituted by id, ego, and superego; and second, a clear distinction between the internal space of the psyche and the external world that the ego attaches itself with. The neat topography consisting of fully present intrapsychic orders and the presupposition of a clear demarcation between the interior(psyche) and the exterior(outside) enables Freud to forge the "explanatory scheme" to account for the phenomenon of melancholia (Butler, 1997, p.171). Interrogating whether such an exploratory scheme is sustainable within Freud's postulations on melancholia, Butler focuses on a particular segment toward the end of his essay, which elaborates on the mechanism of melancholia.

In both mourning and melancholia, the psyche aims at detaching itself from the object. However, Butler notes, it is not the object as such that the ego decathect itself from, rather it is its "thing-presentation" which becomes the object of repudiation. Thing-presentation implies that it is not identical with the object, but is a "cathected trace" that is always already a "substitute", a "derivative" with regard to the object (Butler, 1997, p.173). Thus, what is lost, is never truly lost in the proper sense of the word, but becomes a "psychic preserve" (Butler, 1997, p.134). Two things mark the economy of mourning - first, the thing-presentation is not blocked from its entry into the consciousness since the nature of "thing-presentation" is such that there is no embargo on its moving through the "normal path" from the preconscious to consciousness (Freud, 1957, p.257). And second, in mourning, the ego functions under the knowledge that the object has actually been lost, and this knowledge prevents it from slipping into a pathological condition (Freud, 1957, p.255).¹¹³

Melancholia, while sharing similarities with mourning in terms of having as its precondition the loss of a loved one and subsequent suffering of the ego, is distinguishable on two grounds. First, in the case of melancholia, unlike mourning, the cognition of loss does not

¹¹³ "Each single one of the memories and situations of expectancy which demonstrate the libido's attachment to the lost object is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists; and the ego, confronted as it were with the question whether it shall share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished. We may perhaps suppose that this work of severance is so slow and gradual that by the time it has been finished the expenditure of energy necessary for it is also dissipated." (Freud, 1957, p.256)

necessarily operate on the register of consciousness. Here, the loss does not have to be the empirical loss of a loved object, but the loss might be that of the object *as* the object of love.¹¹⁴ It could also be that in losing some object, one might not know what it is that has been lost to her.¹¹⁵ Second, the management of loss takes a path different from what is observed in mourning. In the aftermath of losing the love object, the melancholic ego refuses to let go of it in a radical sense. That is, instead of the libido becoming free of its cathexis to the lost object and becoming eligible for being invested in something else, it withdraws itself into the ego by establishing identification of the ego with the lost object.¹¹⁶ Therefore, the possibility of its being subjected to reality testing in the manner of mourning becomes impossible. The ambivalence as to the ego's relation with the object makes absolute decathexis impossible, and this ambivalence causes it to remain on the level of the unconscious.

This ambivalence, argues Freud, can be constitutional, i.e., it can be a part of every love relation that the ego engages in, or - and this is what Butler emphasizes - this ambivalence might be the result of the experiences that threaten the ego with the prospect of losing the object. As Freud maintains, a number of processes work together in melancholia. On the one hand, the libido attempts to detach itself from the object, whereas on the other hand, it wants to safeguard the libido from the pain of detachment (Freud, 1957, p.256)

Also, through the substitutive mechanism of narcissistic identification, the lost object gets installed in the ego and becomes the object of hatred, thereby generating pleasure in the ego (Freud, 1957, p.251). This mixture of various actions where love and hate contend with each other manifests in the ambivalence toward the object (Freud, 1957, p.256). This ambivalence causes the conflict to remain unconscious till melancholia sets in and manifests itself in a set of symptoms which Freud articulates as “a conflict between one part of the ego and the critical agency split off from ego” (Freud in Butler, 1997, p.174).

Thus, we observe two contradictory propositions in Freud's theory of melancholia. First, the critical agency that Freud identifies as the domain of the superego is produced as the effect of melancholic incorporation. Therefore, the superego cannot be said to preexist the operation of

¹¹⁴ Freud, 1957, p.245.

¹¹⁵ Freud, 1957, p.245

¹¹⁶ Freud, 1957, p.249.

melancholia. Second, as melancholia is a form of conflict between the ego and the superego, it must presuppose the prior existence of these two agencies. Butler's intervention in reading Freud on melancholia resides partially in bringing out this formative contradiction at the heart of the Freudian exposition regarding melancholia. If the object loss remains "withdrawn" from consciousness precisely due to the ambivalence towards the object, and if this very ambivalence expresses itself in the pathological formation of melancholic symptoms in the form of a conflict between segments in the ego that oppose each other - namely, the ego and the superego, then it must be that this ambivalence ontologically antedates both the ego and the super-ego, and that the representation of the psychic topography in terms of the ego and the super-ego becomes possible only in and through melancholia. As Butler puts it -

Ambivalence thus precedes the psychic topography of super-ego/ego; its melancholic articulation is offered as the condition of possibility of that very topography. Thus, it would make no sense to seek recourse to such a topography to explain melancholia, if the ambivalence that is said to distinguish melancholia is what then becomes articulated—after a period of being withdrawn from consciousness—as ego and super-ego. The internal topography by which melancholia is partially explained is itself the effect of that melancholia. (Butler, 1997, p.174)

The split between ego and superego does not precede melancholia; rather, the psychic topography comprising the ego and the super-ego is consubstantial with it. The topographic model of the psyche, hence, cannot be deployed to understand melancholia since this topography itself is the *effect* of melancholia. The tripartite "internal world" of the psyche does not predate melancholia, but it is melancholia that "interiorizes the psyche", allowing the analyst to approach the psyche through the "topographical tropes" of conscious/unconscious/preconscious or the id/ego/superego (Butler, 1997, p.170).

To go back, the ambivalence toward the love object remains withdrawn from consciousness prior to the setting in of melancholic symptoms which consists of "the threatened libidinal cathexis at length abandoning the object, only, however, to draw back to the place *in the ego* from which it proceeded" (Freud, as cited in Butler, 1997, p.175). The cathexis comes back to the ego, from

which it had emerged in the first place. However, commenting on this, Butler insists on how this particular section loses some of its major theoretical nuances in the English translation. Both Strachey's translation, the one that Butler cites here to point out the inadequacy in translation, and the later version by Adam Phillips (Freud, 1996, pp.310-326) assume the centrality of the ego as a point of departure in melancholia. That is, both these versions convey the sense that the journey of libidinal cathexis starts *from* the ego, and after being threatened with the prospect of losing its love object, it comes back into its place *in* the ego. Such a journey presupposes the ego as a preexisting site that, in its self-sameness, functions as the place of departure as well as the point of return for the libidinal cathexis. However, if the ambivalence is formative of both the ego and the superego, then the presupposition of a self-identical ego as origin and place of return, strictly speaking, cannot be maintained because the ego cannot be said to have existed prior to the advent of melancholia. Addressing this problem, Butler offers what they call a "more precise translation" of the excerpt quoted above (175) -

A more precise translation would clarify that melancholia involves an attempt to substitute the ego for that cathexis, one that involves return of the cathexis to its point of origin : the threatened cathexis is abandoned, but only *to pull itself back onto the place of the ego* ("aber nur, um sich auf die Stelle des Ichs . . . zurückzuziehen"), a place from which the threatened attachment has departed ("von der sie ausgegangen war"). (Butler, 1997, p.175)

The *place* of the ego, contends Butler, is not the same as the ego. Instead, it functions as a "point of departure" of libido, as well as the site for its "melancholic withdrawal" (Butler, 1997, p.175). However, this withdrawal is not a mere turning back of something as it always already was. Butler observes that the German version deploys a particular word - *aufhebung* - which the English translation completely overlooks, resulting in a translation that loses the crucial connotation that the German *Aufhebung* carries (Butler, 1997, p.176). *Aufhebung* is impregnated with a multitude of significations that often do not easily sit with each other. It implies cancellation and the preservation of this cancellation qua cancellation. Thus, it annuls and preserves this annulment. The English translation of the concerned section as "love's escape from extinction by taking shelter in the ego" cannot quite preserve the heterogeneity that the movement of *aufhebung* signifies - a

simultaneous cancellation, overcoming, and preservation (Butler, 1997, p.176). Therefore, keeping the importance of *aufhebung* in consideration, Butler notes that the withdrawal of libidinal cathexis into the place of the ego means-

Love has withdrawn or taken away its own overcoming, withdrawn a transformation, rendering it psychic. Here it is not a question of love “escaping an extinction” mandated from elsewhere; rather, love itself withdraws or takes away the destruction of the object, takes it on as its own destructiveness. Instead of breaking with the object, or transforming the object through mourning, this *Aufhebung* - this active, negating, and transformative movement - is taken into the ego. This “flight” of love into the ego is the effort to squirrel the *Aufhebung* away inside, to withdraw it from external reality, and to institute an internal topography in which the ambivalence might find an altered articulation. The withdrawal of ambivalence thus produces the possibility of a psychic transformation, indeed, a fabulation of psychic topography. (Butler, 1997, p.176)

As Butler observes, this flight and withdrawal is referred to as regression which allows for the conscious representation of melancholia, i.e., the setting in of melancholic symptoms where it figures as a “conflict between the ego and the critical agency” (Freud, as cited in Butler, 1997, p.176). Here, a particular feature that is characteristic of *aufhebung* becomes immensely important that Freud’s commentators overlook. The psychic fabulation does not pre-exist *aufhebung*. As Zupancic notes, *aufhebung* is a “mode of being” that does not have any facticity other than its own operation (Zupančič, 2014, p.487).¹¹⁷ Hence, if we appreciate the importance of *aufhebung* following Butler, then we cannot say that the relation between the psychic topography and melancholic withdrawal is that of an externality. Rather, the emergence of the psychic topography is immanent in the process of the melancholic withdrawal - understood as *aufhebung* - of love into the place of the ego. As Butler writes -

¹¹⁷ In Freud, as Zupančič notes, *Verneinung* or negation alludes to *aufhebung*. Here, negation is not a mere cancellation, but a determinant cancellation.

If melancholia constitutes the withdrawal or regression of ambivalence, and if that ambivalence becomes conscious through being represented as oppositional parts of the ego, and that representation is made possible on the condition of that withdrawal, then it follows that this préfiguration of the topographical distinction between ego and super-ego is itself dependent upon melancholia. (Butler, 1997, p.177)

Thus, the psychic topography does not pre-exist melancholia but is itself produced as a melancholic operation. The psychic topography cannot be deployed to analyse melancholia since its formation is dependent on the onset of melancholia. Therefore, argues Butler, the description of melancholia as the departure of libido from the ego and its consequent withdrawal cannot be maintained since it is only in this reflexive activity of the libido that the psychic space consisting of the ego and the superego is produced (Butler, 1997, p.177). Therefore, any ontological priorness of the ego (and the superego) is annulled. Since melancholia is the product of abandoned relation with provisionally external objects, the general conclusion forwarded by this reading is that the ego can come into being only through its relation to something other than itself.

Apart from disarticulating a simple narrative of cause and effect, another crucial implication of such a reading of Freud is that it questions the metaphysical presuppositions of the Freudian system erected on the basis of a neat division between the inside and the outside, external prohibition and a certain structuring of the interior space of the psyche. The psychic topography - with its unencumbered zone of desires, the space that is governed by the reality principle, and the critical agency - does not exist from the outset. Such a pre-constitution of the psyche would have allowed us to conceive the scene of cognition-perception in terms of a passive interiority waiting to be imprinted upon and an active outside affecting and writing on this passive space. A linear reading of Freud appears to be more inclined to such a distribution of space, but Butler's textual engagement with Freud produces a different narrative elaborating how the inside-outside division becomes possible only through a melancholic withdrawal of the libido. As Butler established, the inside-outside binary can be sustained only under two conditions. First, that the two categories are understood as being exclusive to each other; and second, that each of the categories signifies something other than what the other category demarcates. At the risk of appearing tautological, it

must be emphasized that both these categories convey what they are generally regarded to be standing for only by counterposing itself against the other. If either of the categories were to lose its ontological singularity based on their mutual exclusivity, the binary structure itself would collapse. Hence, the two categories can maintain their stability and their ontological claim only by being antithetical to each other. However, the foregoing analysis of Freud's texts hints at a different ontological framework, one where the prior existence of these categories cannot be assumed. That which is inside cannot be distinguished from the outside at the outset, rather, the differentiation between them is the production of what their difference is deployed to explain. There is no prelapsarian outside or inside that is fully present at the beginning. In fact, the beginning itself is provisional, and the drawing of the line between the two spaces comes after. The psychic topography does not signify a pure interiority but is produced only through its attachment to something other than itself. The deployment of the category of "outside" to demarcate the locus of this other is therefore nominal, and at this stage, one can call it a fiction or fabrication necessary for developing concepts that would stabilize this temporary provision.

As Butler notes while reading Freud diffractively with Nietzsche and drawing analogy with how in Nietzsche the will's turning on itself retrospectively produces the "I", the "logical circularity" witnessed in melancholia in which the ego is both presupposed in one argument and is argued to be resulting from the loss of love object and the subsequent melancholic withdrawal of libido in another, can be resolved if we understand the ego to be a "figuration" without any ontological claim (Butler, 1997, p.69). As Butler writes conjoining the "strange" figure of reflexivity in Freud and Nietzsche, approaching this reflexivity as a predefined object's turning back on itself is a bizarre way to speak because the object does not preexist the figuration. As Butler clearly mention, reflexivity is a "a process which cannot be detached from or understood apart from that very figuration" (Reference, Butler *Psychic Life*, page 69). It is this figure that makes the ontological claim without having any prior ontological integrity.

To go back to Freud, in *The Ego and the Id* (Freud, 1961a) Freud revisited the theory of melancholia. Whereas on the surface level *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud, 1957) presupposed a wholeness and a full presence of the ego prior to melancholia, his revision approaches melancholia as fundamental to the constitution of the ego. His previous formulation regarding melancholia exhibited two particular properties, one explicit and one implicit. First, as already

mentioned, melancholia was placed in a differential relation with mourning; second, melancholia was comprehended to be a pathological condition affecting an otherwise normally functioning ego,¹¹⁸ rendering its status as contingent with respect to the constitution of the ego. However, his reconsideration in light of analytic observation now turns melancholia a “prerequisite”¹¹⁹ for the possibility of giving up one’s love object. While Freud reformulates his argument on melancholia, his exegesis stops short of thoroughly following up on how this reformulation radically alters the ontological structure of the ego, and it is precisely these ontological queries that Butler takes up in their reading of Freud.

Butler’s engagement with Freud allows us to conceive of the ego as a space that comes into being and is maintained as such by being attached to the other; or to be more precise, it is the existence of the *other-as-lost* that forms the ego and shapes the psychic topography. Thus, observes Butler, the ego cannot be conceived of as anything other than its attachment, its “passionate intentionality” toward the world (Butler, 1995b, p.11). Without this attachment, there is no ego as such. Hinting at the ontology of the ego thus formed, Butler calls this “the mundane *ek-stasis* of being” (Butler, 1995b, p.12). Being, whether regarded in terms of a general ontology or regional ontology, is always at some distance from itself, it is always something other than itself. Hence, an ontological inquiry into its status cannot remain within the domain of self-referentiality but must be geared towards something other than its immediate contours. It is not that the ego, or broadly speaking, the psychic topography, primarily exists securely within its own contour which then, through various psychological maladies, gets split into something other than itself. Rather, the psychic topography comes into being and becomes eligible for staking an ontological claim - that is, a claim of having an essence, a full presence - by virtue of its being at distance from itself. It barely calls for mentioning that this “itself”, or that which is argued to be at some remove from itself, is also a figuration devoid of any ontological claim. The ego, and the “interior” psychic space in general, is ek-static precisely because it is produced through its melancholic attachment with the other. Formed thus, its contours are structured beyond the limits posed by the metaphysics of self-

¹¹⁸ The structure of melancholia does not necessitate understanding it as a stand-alone condition. That is, often it might be mixed with other maladies of the psyche. However, being a contingent pathological condition, it implied that it does not play any formative role in psyche.

¹¹⁹ Butler, 1997, p.134.

referentiality. In light of such an understanding of ego, let us take up the question of primary bisexual predispositions.

Within the Freudian paradigm, one's psychosexual being is generally understood to attain stability by undergoing the Oedipus complex, where under the incest taboo the boy is supposed to identify with the father and renounce the mother as his love object in the hope of fulfilling his sexual desire toward her by displacing it later onto another female figure; and for the girl child, it is vice versa in that her object of renunciation is her father under the assurance of one day having a penis in the form of birthing a baby with a penis.¹²⁰ However, as Freud reiterates in a number of works, psychosexual development does not depend solely on the outcome of the Oedipus complex. Rather, primary bisexuality plays a key role here.

Freud makes it clear that since the ego is the site of "abandoned object cathexis", and that the trajectory of one's psychosexual development depends a lot on how the sedimentation produced by the loss of love objects functions within the space of the psyche. But despite that, claims Freud, the first identification of the child with his parents, circuited through its primary bisexual orientation, plays a general and lasting role. Taking up the case of the male child owing to its apparent simplicity, Freud begins his narrative with the earliest attachment formed by the child. His first object of desire is his mother, and his relation to his father at this stage is marked by the infant's identification with him. However, Freud writes, what differentiates this identification is that -

This is apparently not in the first instance the consequence or outcome of an object cathexis; it is a direct and immediate identification and takes place earlier than any object-cathexis. But the object-choices belonging to the first sexual period and relating to the father and mother seem normally to find their outcome in an identification of this kind, and would thus reinforce the primary one. (Freud, 1961a, p.31)

¹²⁰ However, for the girl child, the oedipal phase offers a host of complexities, and it is not exactly similar to that of the bearer of penis. Whereas the boy's Oedipus complex reaches a resolution with the onset of castration complex, in the girl child the oedipal phase comes into being as a consequence of castration complex. But since we are focusing primarily on the aspect of renunciation of desire due to the incest taboo, we will not be delving deeper into the difference in the emergence and dissolution of oedipus complex in the male child and the female child. For a detailed discussion on this somewhat dissonant manifestation of the oedipus complex in boys and girls, see Freud (1961c).

That is, according to Freud, this first identification is not the result of the melancholic incorporation of the lost object. It does not come about in the aftermath of the infant's loss of a love object. However, with Freud's thesis on the presence of primary bisexual dispositions, there is nothing, observes Butler, that prevents this primary identificatory attachment from being construed as the product of the son's original sexual desire for the father. To recall Freud's thesis on melancholia, the condition on which an object can be repudiated is that this object is substituted by a melancholic identification within the ego. Hence, it seems theoretically appropriate to understand the boy child's identification with the father as a result of his losing his father as his object of love. But Freud's work denies this aspect (Butler, 1999, p.75).

After the onset of the Oedipus complex, the boy child is set on the path of giving up the mother as the object of love, and, concomitantly, taking an ambivalent attitude towards the father. Here, Butler presents a crucial observation regarding this ambivalence. That the boy, despite his primary bisexual disposition, opts for a heterosexual object choice by choosing the mother can be the result not of the threat of castration by the father but of the fear of a metaphoric castration that associates male homosexuality with femininity. The fear of castration is the fear of being defined as a feminine character. This assumes, Butler notes, that a heterosexual paradigm of desire has already been established in the infant because, in its absence, the male child's choosing of the mother becomes a random act. But that the boy child generally shows libidinal investment in his mother implies that there is an ambient fear of femininity that the dominant culture of heterosexuality associates with homosexual love (Butler, 1999, p.76). Thus, even before the oedipal phase, when the infant boy must repudiate her mother as a love object, he must forego homosexual desire for his father. Before maternal cathexis, the boy must reject both the aim and object of his homosexual desire. This loss of homosexual desire, Butler notes, is a peremptory loss in which not only the present object and aim is lost, but the general possibility of homosexual attachment is foreclosed forever (Butler, 1991, p.135).

For the girl child, this process takes an analogous path whereby she rejects one object and chooses another, but the force of identification depends on how strong or weak her masculine and feminine predispositions are (Freud, 1961a, p.32). In repudiating the father as an object of love, the boy stabilizes his masculinity, and in giving up the mother as the aim and object of libidinal

cathexis, the girl consolidates her femininity. Thus, prior to the heterosexual choice, there remains as its condition, on the one hand, an established differentiation between homosexuality and heterosexuality (Butler, 1997, p.135), and on the other hand, a prohibition against homosexuality that propels one to abandon nonheterosexual forms of libidinal attachment. If the girl child fixes her femininity by repudiating the mother, then it would have to presuppose that she is terrified at the prospect of being identified as masculine if she chooses her mother as the object of love. It would mean that she is not a “proper woman” because she has not attached her desire to the father. And even if she is not a man, she can be like one by virtue of her object choice. Similarly, the boy cannot be construed as a *proper* man unless he gives up his father as his object choice (Butler, 1997, p.135).¹²¹

Butler’s observation is of crucial import here that the *proper* of man or woman is centred upon foreclosing the desire for the same gender and placing it on the opposite gender. Hence, even before attaining sexuated subject positions, one’s homosexual predilections must be abandoned. Without this abandonment, acquiring a stable sexual position that is measured against the presumption of normative heterosexuality appears to be impossible. Here, Butler draws our attention to the fact that whereas Freud maintains identificatory melancholic incorporation to be the only way to give up a love object, he forecloses the possibility of any such identificatory network prior to the Oedipus complex. However, as Butler observes, if giving up libidinal attachments becomes possible only on the condition that the ego installs the lost object inside it through identification, then there is no analytic reasoning for discounting the primary cathexis form that (Butler, 1999, p.78).¹²²

Additionally, as Freud reformulates his thesis of melancholia in *The Ego and the Id*, if giving up the libidinally cathected object becomes possible only on the condition of a melancholic identification with the object, and if the ego is argued to be the sedimentation of abandoned

¹²¹ “the girl becomes a girl through being subject to a prohibition which bars the mother as an object of desire and installs that barred object as a part of the ego, indeed, as a melancholic identification. Thus, the identification contains within both the prohibition and the desire, and so embodies the ungrrieved loss of the homosexual cathexis.” (Butler, 1997, p.135)

¹²² “If there is no way to distinguish between the femininity acquired through internalizations and that which is strictly dispositional, then what is to preclude the conclusion that all gender-specific affinities are the consequence of internalizations? On what basis are dispositional sexualities and identities ascribed to individuals, and what meaning can we give to “femininity” and “masculinity” at the outset?” (Butler, 1999, p.78)

object-cathexis, then the abandoned aim and object of the infant's primary homosexual love is formative of the gendered ego as well. In light of this, Butler argues that giving up the primary cathexis becomes possible only through a melancholic identification -

If a man becomes heterosexual by repudiating the feminine, where could that repudiation live except in an identification which his heterosexual career seeks to deny? Indeed, the desire for the feminine is marked by that repudiation: he wants the woman he would never be...She is his repudiated identification (a repudiation he sustains as at once identification and the object of his desire). (Butler, 1997, p.137)

The lost object and the lost desire are therefore preserved in the ego. But this internalization through melancholic identification, as discussed earlier, institutes a critical agency within the psyche. Or, to be more precise, the melancholic incorporation of *Aufhebung* institutes the psychic topography consisting of the ego and the superego. This critical agency, i.e., the superego subjects the ego to beratement, anger, and blame felt originally toward the object of loss and measures the ego against the ego ideal set up inside as the result of this incorporation. This results in the consolidation of "stable" gender identities that works through what Freud calls a reaction formation.¹²³ Citing Freud, Butler notes how the superego does not just operate as a sublimation of the earliest cathexis but forms a strong reaction formation against the object as well. In terms of consolidating gender, this reaction formation works by instituting an embargo inside the ego in the form of prohibition - "You may not be like this (like your father) - that is, you may not do all that he does: some things are his prerogative" (Freud, as cited in Butler 1999, p.80). Thus, the object of primary cathexis - the father for the boy and the mother for the girl - is not only installed in the ego in the form of abandoned object cathexis, but also functions as a prohibitory agency that serves a dual function. On the one hand, it prohibits desire for the parent, but on the other hand, it functions as a space where this love attachment is preserved in a transformed manner. The love object, as observed in our foregoing discussion, finds a place in the form of melancholic preservation where the prohibited object and the prohibited sexual aim are sustained in a

¹²³ See Freud, 1959.

sublimated manner because this melancholic *Aufhebung* is the only way in which the libidinal cathexis can be abandoned. Thus, Butler writes -

The identifications consequent to melancholia are modes of preserving unresolved object relations, and in the case of same-sexed gender identification, the unresolved object relations are invariably homosexual. Indeed, the stricter and more stable the gender affinity, the less resolved the original loss, so that rigid gender boundaries inevitably work to conceal the loss of an original love that, unacknowledged, fails to be resolved. (Butler, 1999, p.81)

Thus, the gendered identity and concomitant desire appears to be constitutively bound to its other, to what it is not.

Reading Butler's intervention in the Freudian paradigm, this discussion observed how the ego can exist only to the extent that it attaches to something outside itself through melancholic identification, and without this melancholic identification, there can be no ego as such. Therefore, the homosexual investment toward the parent which the infant must repudiate becomes formative of the ego. This has immense implications for the ontology of gender since it signifies that the appropriation of the ego into masculinity or femininity *proper* is constituted by what it must foreclose. The exclusion of homosexuality becomes perversely constitutive of heterosexuality, and the positions within the heterosexual framework, in this sense, comes into being by constitutively attaching itself and harbouring within itself foreclosed, abject positions. Thus, what constitutes the *proper* masculinity of femininity and produces the gendered character of the ego is the melancholic attachment to the domain of what lies outside the *proper* of these genders. In this sense, gender cannot be understood as a metaphysical, irreducible self-referentiality. Instead, what defines a stable gender is neither fully present to itself, and nor is it reducible to another presence in any sense. Rather, it is produced in and through the melancholic identification with what exceeds itself and spills over the domain of the *proper*. In this sense, gender and gendered ego are nothing but melancholic figurations, entities which cannot be outside/apart from the passionate attachment to the other, to the outside. Thus, as the gendered being is produced by an originary displacement, by an originary act of splitting, an originary act of attachment prior to which there cannot be a gendered ego as such, it can be concluded that

Butler's reading of Freud reveals the ontology of the gender and gendered being to be originally ek-static.

Disarticulating the Origin Narrative: Butler's Reading of Jacques Lacan

The work of Jacques Lacan remains important not only for analytical reasons but also for its immense significance for positing philosophical problematics concerning ontology. In contravention to the ontological tradition which presupposes that something always already *is*, Lacan enjoins his readers to consider how being is instituted in the first place, and takes as his object of inquiry the processes through which the apparent stability and ontological integrity afforded to being is secured. Working within the Freudian tradition, the object of Lacan's inquiry is centred around the psyche and its constitutive components. Therefore, his position as an interjector of the ontological tradition is located within the contour offered by the Freudian schema. Following Lacan, hence, one hopes to disarticulate the presuppositions of the ontological tradition while being located within the Freudian problematic concerning psyche (Althusser, 1971).

Lacan's reading of Freud, famously known as his return to Freud, does not approach him through the registers that Freud and his contemporary collaborators had developed. Rather, influenced by Ferdinand Saussure and Levi-Strauss, Lacan rereads the psychoanalytic enterprise from within a structuralist network. The impact of Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology propels Lacan to forge the concept of the symbolic as the structuring principle of social systems (Evans, 2006, p.203). According to its precepts, the emergence of the speaking *I*, or the subject of locution, becomes possible only through entering the domain of the symbolic structured by the law of the father that institutes, controls, and censors desire.¹²⁴

Within the tripartite ontology of Lacan, the symbolic holds one of the most crucial functions in that it exists as a function of the limit of intelligibility. Things become knowable only after their interpellation in the symbolic. Thus, what can be known and how it should be known is

¹²⁴ The importance of the symbolic can be gauged by Lacan's statement that the task of analysts is to operate in and through the symbolic order (Lacan, 2002a, p.72).

governed by the syntaxes of the symbolic (Lacan, 1991, pp.29-30). In this sense, the symbolic is prior to all possibilities of knowledge.

Being instituted as a subject, within the Lacanian scheme, implies assuming a sexual position within language. Without assuming this position, a subject cannot exist. Sexuation is facilitated through the machinations of the symbolic, and it is the figure of the phallus that comes to occupy a central position in this process where one's relation with it demarcates the sexual positions he/she occupies. While both the symbolic, an intra-subjective order, and the phallus, the governing signifier within the phallus, are institutions lacking an a-priori ontological claim, they demonstrate a certain amount of stability in the sense that they define a proper domain with secured conceptual contours that maintain their individuality and integrity among/against other intrapsychic orders. The Lacanian understanding of the psyche and subjectivity presupposes the exclusivity and stability of these categories and their respective functions. Therefore, despite questioning the ontological tradition by asking after the condition of the institution of being, once instituted, these institutions function as the ground for the formation and sustenance of one's status as a subject.

Now, since within the Lacanian schema the subject assumes being only by entering and subscribing to the laws of the symbolic, it apparently implies an originary decentering or displacement of the subject. In other words, since the subject comes into being through the symbolic, it can be said that the subject emerges only at the cost of forfeiting its self-referentiality by being-outside-itself. However, the presence of the symbolic roots the subject, functioning as the groundless ground putting a stop to the play of displacement (that is, the endless play of the signifier). Since the symbolic law is assumed to be situated at the origin of culture and thereby turns into its de facto origin, the Lacanian subject, by being rooted in the symbolic, appears to be reproducing the privilege accorded to presence in the history of philosophy as it developed in the West.

But is it possible to maintain the self-referential status of this origin? Is the symbolic agency - namely, the phallus - that imparts stability and mastery over a field of signification allowing one to occupy a position within the sexual economy, self-referential? Does the conceptual contours that these categories entail remain strictly confined to themselves? Do they have a centre that grounds them? Or are these origins themselves produced performatively through the rhetorical function of

the textual systems within which they operate? Our critical engagement would read Judith Butler's engagement with Jacques Lacan's work in terms of responding to these queries and would try to establish that the grounding agencies cannot be firmly located within a structure demarcating and governed by the privileging of presence, and establish that far from being the fully present and self-referential ungrounded ground, their mode of being qua being is ek-static.

Performative Ontology of the Phallus

Within the Lacanian framework, the mirror stage occupies a formative role in the production of the ego. This argument which took a definitive form with the presentation of *The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I As Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience* (Lacan, 2002b) in 1949 first started to take shape in 1936 when Lacan presented a preliminary version of it in the 14th International Congress of psychoanalysis held in Marienbad, Czechoslovakia (Lacan, 2002a, p.150). But it is in the 1949 text that the role of this phase in the formation of the ego finds elaborate articulation and gets taken up in many subsequent seminars.

Like Freud, the morphology of the body is, for Lacan, a "psychically invested projection" (Butler, 1993, p.42) before which there is no body as such. The image that the body has of itself is produced through the mirror stage, and this primary perception becomes the condition of all later perceptions. The structure of the imaginary has a crucial import for a general epistemic framework (Lacan, 2002b). Thus, the mirror stage is not a mere developmental phase but occupies a structural role governing the relation of the subject to itself and the world (Butler, 1993, p.42). But if the body comes into being as such through the formation of the morphological imaginary in the mirror stage, what exists before it?

Prior to the formation of its own image, the body exists in a fragmented state, in "bits and pieces"¹²⁵ lacking any coherence or mastery over itself. If the body in the *proper* sense is a formed mass with definite contours, then the body in its fragmented state cannot be considered a body. As

¹²⁵ The fragmented body, which Lacan calls 'le corps morcelé' is at times translated as body in bits and pieces - translator's notes in *Ecrits* (Lacan, 2002a, p.774). Lacan, in his *Positions of the Unconscious*, uses the analogy of omelette - signifying a mass without a proper form - to describe this stage early stage of an infant's life. Lacan's term is *l'hommelette* (Lacan, 2002d, p.717).

Lacan understands it, human infants are born prematurely (Lacan, 2002a, p.92), implying that the infant at their earliest stage lacks control over itself, and in order to sustain itself, must depend on the other. When this little *l'hommelette* looks at itself in the mirror, it becomes fascinated by its own image. Whatever this infant lacks in reality - motor control, libidinal mastery, a coherent image of itself - is supplemented by the image that it sees of itself. So far, the infant lacked a clear idea of its own physical dimension, functioning like a formless mass existing nowhere and everywhere at the same time. However, the instance of looking at its own image puts an end to this phase. This event needs to be understood, Lacan maintains, in terms of identification.¹²⁶

Identification, in the analytic sense, means the transformations that occur when the subject “assumes” an image. As Laplanche and Pontalis elaborate, given that the concept of identification finds place in both every day and philosophical as well as analytical spaces, it is required that we understand that in the proper analytical sense identification means “identification of oneself with” through which something modifies itself in part or whole after the properties that the other provides.¹²⁷ It is different from internalization or incorporation, for both these processes imply the prior existence of an agent who then subjects itself to these processes. As opposed to them, identification is an originary process through which the agent itself comes into being. As mirror stage is formative of the ego, there can no ego prior to it. Rather, it is through this process of identification - understood in the analytical sense - that the ego in the imaginary order or the imaginary *I* is produced. In this sense, identification precedes the ego, and as there is no ego prior to it, the division of inside/outside or interior/exterior does not predate this process (Lacan, as cited in Butler, 1993, p.43).¹²⁸

To go back, the image that the identifies with produces the imaginary *I* or the imaginary ego in an alienated manner. That is, what the child sees in the image, is what it would become at a later stage. In this sense, the image that it sees of itself is of a temporally different order. The child is

¹²⁶ “It suffices to understand the mirror stage in this context as an identification, in the full sense analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes [assume] an image.” (Lacan, 200b, p.76)

¹²⁷ While providing an initial definition, Laplanche and Pontalis describe identification as the process through which a subject comes to incorporate some aspects of the other presented before it. However, since the subject comes to be first through the process of identification, it cannot be said the subject exists prior to this process (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p.205).

¹²⁸ In a manner similar to Butler’s reading of Freud where the ego itself is instituted through melancholic identification creating the interior space of the psyche, the ego in the imaginary order is constituted by identification.

captivated by this image - Lacan calls this “identificatory capture”¹²⁹ - and puts on this futurally distant image of itself, thereby configuring for itself a definitive dimension of its own body. The qualifier “body” in the phrase “body in bits and pieces” is a misnomer in this sense. The body - understood here as a misnomer, as a necessary fiction - finds its coherence only through the identification with the image, or in Lacan’s parlance, the “*imago*”, which itself being outside the body grants this body imaginary stability and mastery over itself, even though empirically this mastery and control will prove to be a distant reality. Being at a distance from itself, the *imago* designates the site of the other and lends to the infant a sense of ideality and integrity. Thus, as Butler notes, the very sense of the body is produced in and through the projection of this future ideality.¹³⁰

As the analytic discourse maintains, the ego is always already a bodily ego.¹³¹ Now, as the *imago*, the specular image of the body is itself a “subjunctive delineation” (Butler, 1993, p.44), and since the identification with the image that produces the ego remains formative of the subject, the embodied subject manifests an ek-static ontology lacking proximity with itself in terms of temporality (Butler, 1993, p.44). Reading such a constitution of the body, the (bodily) ego, and the subject through a relation to the *imago*, Butler observes a dual ambiguity at the heart of their constitution.

First, the *imago* which is formative of the ego and the subject, is located outside the psychic space, and is futurally distant. But it is through a misrecognition of the spatially and temporally distant *imago* that the ego is produced in the imaginary phase. Since the subject accomplishes mastery over itself through the formation of the ego, and as formation of the ego takes place outside itself because the *imago* belongs to a different spatio-temporal order, it can be said that what allows the subject to exercise mastery over itself becomes its decentring agency that undoes the very agency that it lends to the subject. And second, being a “particular object within the experience of the subject”¹³² that fills certain functions, the ego remains at some distance from the subject. Thus, what emerges from this twofold observation is this –

¹²⁹ Lacan, 2002a, p.151.

¹³⁰ “[t]his mirroring transforms a lived sense of disunity and loss of control into an ideal of integrity and control (“*la puissance*”) through that event of specularization.” (Butler, 1993, p.43)

¹³¹ Freud, 1961a.

¹³² Lacan, 1988, p. 44, as cited in Butler, 1993, p.44.

As imaginary, the ego as object is neither interior nor exterior to the subject, but the permanently unstable site where that spatialized distinction is perpetually negotiated; it is this ambiguity that marks the ego as imago, that is, as an identificatory relation. Hence, identifications are never simply or definitively made or achieved; they are insistently constituted, contested, and negotiated. (Butler, 1993, p.44)

Now, we must think these two aspects together. First, the ego in the imaginary order is formed through its relation to an alterity - the imago. Second, the body attains an imaginary control over itself through its relation to the imago since the ego is the psychically projected investment of the body. Third, the ego itself operates like an object with regard to the subject. Butler reads these three resolutions gathered from this discussion on the mirror stage together with Lacan's postulation that on the libidinal level, the relation of the ego with outside objects is narcissistically invested. While Butler's text seems to merely posit Lacan's argument about the ego's narcissistic relation with objects of perception after the discussion on the mirror stage, what it effectively achieves is a *staging* of these insights in the context of the ego's narcissistic investiture in objects of perception. This staging establishes that the morphology of the body too is narcissistically invested, and the body achieves coherence and control at the imaginary level through this very investment. This staging becomes crucial in the context of Butler's bringing into discussion of Lacan's privileging of "certain organs" in the production of the ego.

Lacan writes, and as Butler cites him, certain parts of the body come to occupy a privileged position in terms of the "centring and controlling functions of the bodily imago" (Butler, 1993, p.45). However, by entering into a narcissistic relation, these organs turn into imaginary effects. Since the body taken up by narcissistic relation is the precondition of the body's attaining control over itself, and since the organs turn into imaginary effects by being narcissistically engaged, these objects become "token and proof" of the body's integrity and control (Butler, 1993, p.45). And these narcissistically invested organs function as the structure of all future epistemic relations to every other object. Placed in the context of the postulates advanced in Lacan's *The Signification of the Phallus* (Lacan, 2002c) this extrapolatory function opens up a different way of imagining the

Lacanian schema. For Butler, reading the extrapolatory function revealed in the mirror stage in the context of the aforementioned text becomes crucial for rethinking the ontological and epistemological status of the phallus.

As Butler observes, the narcissistically invested organs in the mirror stage work in a manner parallel to the status of phallus in *The Signification of the Phallus* (Lacan, 2002c).¹³³ While the former acts as the structuring epistemic principle governing the domain of knowability, the phallus in the latter text is construed as the agency governing signifiability. This parallelism can be contested because the extrapolating function of narcissism is located in the imaginary order while phallus operates in the symbolic, and Lacan's tripartite division of intrapsychic orders firmly allocates objects to their particular orders. However, Butler's contention can still be theoretically sustained on two grounds. First, *The Signification of the Phallus* (Lacan, 2002c) is about how the condition of signifiability is secured, while the mirror stage is about the condition of knowability. Second, within the theoretical context of the *The Signification of the Phallus* (Lacan, 2002c), signification becomes the condition of knowability while image - within the imaginary set in terms of the symbolic - is sustained only by signs. Thus, argues Butler, the narcissistically invested organs in the mirror stage are somehow maintained, in and through the Phallus, within the symbolic (Butler, 1993, p.46).

However, as we mentioned, Lacan would have categorically debunked such a thesis, obviating any parallel between the two because to him objects are assigned to their singular and particular orders. And also, the separation of the imaginary from the symbolic is crucial to Lacan. But it is this structural separation between the apparatuses of the symbolic and operations of the imaginary that Butler puts under scrutiny.

As observed in Lacan's claims regarding the mirror stage, the body before the mirror appears in bits and pieces, in a fragmented manner, which then attains coherence and a definitive contour by assuming the imago. This operation alters the body in a radical sense because the body turns from its fragmented state into a whole. Butler recognizes this operation as a "synecdochal extrapolation" through which "part substitutes for the whole and becomes a token for the whole" (Butler, 1993, p.48). Now, if mirroring operates through a synecdochal logic where a part is taken

¹³³ Butler, 1993, p.46.

for whole, and if it is through this operation that the body achieves control over itself, then, Butler conjectures, the constitution of the phallus must operate through a synecdochical logic -

By changing the name of the penis to “the phallus,” is the part status of the former phantasmatically and synecdochally overcome through the inauguration of the latter as “the privileged signifier”? And does this name, like proper names, secure and sustain the morphological distinctness of the masculine body, sustaining the *percipi* through nomination? (Butler, 1993, p.48)

If the conjecture that regards the operation of the symbolic in the constitution of the phallus as a synecdochical extrapolation characteristic of the process of mirroring is followed through, then the process of the construction of the phallus signifies the “phantasmatic rewriting” (Butler, 1993, p.49) through which penis, an organ, a *part* of the body, comes to be posited as phallus which instead of being a mere body part (which it is), comes to signify a *whole* endowed with the agency to attribute mastery and control over the body. This interpretation has immense implications for the ontological status of the phallus. As Butler writes -

If the position for the phallus erected by Lacan symptomatizes the specular and idealizing mirroring of a decentered body in pieces before the mirror, then we can read here the phantasmatic rewriting of an organ or body part, the penis, as the phallus, a move effected by a transvaluative denial of its substitutability, dependency, diminutive size, limited control, partiality. The phallus would then emerge as a symptom, and its authority could be established only through a metaleptic reversal of cause and effect. Rather than the postulated origin of signification or the signifiable, the phallus would be the effect of a signifying chain summarily suppressed. (Butler, 1993, p.49)

If something sustains itself within an economy of signification, then it cannot be held to be the transcendent origin of all significations. Being situated within a signifying chain forfeits the phallus’s transcendental status and resumes its originary play. Originary, precisely since it is through the rhetorical operations of the signifying chain that the phallus comes into being as we observed

following Butler. Understood thus, phallus loses its status as the self-referential, self-present origin within the sexual economy and is rendered ontologically ek-static.

Butler makes another interesting question regarding the genealogy of the phallus by taking the rhetorical operation of the narrative of the mirror stage in Lacan's text. How is it, asks Butler, that the body appears in bits and pieces before the mirror and the symbolic? Before the law? A body can be argued to exist in bits and pieces only when the idea of body-as-a-whole is presupposed. However, the body as a whole or totality becomes possible only after the "body" assumes the imago, prior to which there is no body as such. And the qualifier "bits and pieces" can become operational only when it is posited against a notion of the whole. The qualifier "bits and pieces" can retain its referential function only within a dualist economy where it is posited in opposition to the notion of the body as a whole. Thus, the narrative of the body-in-bits-and-pieces before the mirror in Lacan's exposition on the mirror stage already presupposes a sense of totality with respect to which the body's fragmented status makes sense. Thus, a body in a fragmented state can convey its status as being-fragmented only when it is hermeneutically opposed to the body as a whole. Hence, the fragmented body before the mirror has as its constitutive element an understanding of the body as a totality, and being dependent on a futurity, the general ontology of the body becomes thoroughly ek-static.

On the other hand, if the phallus functions as the centring principle, the body in pieces and beyond control can be interpreted as devoid of the phallus, hence, "symbolically castrated" (Butler, 1993, p.49). And if a body attains coherence only by being signifierily rooted in the phallus, then the assumption of coherence - or in other words - assumption of the phallus, or the body's "coming to have the phallus" is produced by gaining specularized control through the imago (Butler, 1993, p.49). Therefore, argues Butler, the phallus is always already presupposed in the notion of the fragmented body before the mirror. Thus, instead of a linear developmental narrative that moves from the phallus's absence to the presence of the phallus, the phallus is *always already present* in the narrative that describes its absence and subsequent production. In other words, the phallus is already present before being present. As Butler puts it, the phallus "governs the description of its own genesis" (Butler, 1993, p.49). Such "textual knots" elevate the penis, a body part, into the status of the phallus. These textual knots and rhetorical devices formative of the phallus are covered over, or rather, terminated by Lacan's assertion of the phallus as the privileged

site in charge of governing signification. Contra Lacan's strong denunciation of the understanding which would render the phallus into an imaginary effect, the proliferation of the meaning of phallus through negative qualifiers¹³⁴ might be understood, Butler contends, as an aspect of performative production of the phallus where its performative establishment as the privileged signifier is geared toward putting an end to its "catachrestic wanderings"¹³⁵ -

To claim for the phallus the status of a privileged signifier performatively produces and effects this privilege. The announcement of that privileged signifier is its performance. That performative assertion produces and enacts the very process of privileged signification, one whose privilege is potentially contested by the very list of alternatives it discounts, and the negation of which constitutes and precipitates that phallus. Indeed, the phallus is not a body part (but the whole), is not an imaginary effect (but the origin of all imaginary effects). These negations are constitutive; they function as disavowals that precipitate—and are then erased by the idealization of the phallus. (Butler, 1993, p.50)

If the origin itself is produced through performative apparatuses and signifying chains, then it would mean that the deemed origin has always already been situated within the non-structure of *différance*. Without any grounding site that would stabilize the signifying economy, there is no limit to this purported origin's infinite signification differing and deferral. Butler's reading of Lacan rescues the concept of phallus from its performative closure that puts it out of signification chain to establish it as the agency endowed with the controlling mechanism governing signification, and puts it back into *play*, into the domain of "infinite substitutions" (Derrida, 2001, p.365). If Phallus itself is constituted in *différance*, if phallus itself exists in ek-stasis, then it cannot be said to retain its signification fixity and self-referentiality within the symbolic. Thus, the almost neat bigendered structure of sexual difference based on the economy of *being* or *having* the phallus becomes untenable, and the bipartite ontological structure of sexuality becomes difficult to

¹³⁴ "...the phallus is not a fantasy, if what is understood by that is an imaginary effect. Nor is it an object (part, internal, good, bad, etc. . . .) in so far as this term tends to accentuate the reality involved in a relationship. It is even less the organ, penis or clitoris, which it symbolizes. And it is not by accident that Freud took his reference for it from the simulacrum which it represented for the Ancients. For the phallus is a signifier..." (Lacan, as cited in Butler, 1993, pp. 49-50).

¹³⁵ Butler, 1993, p.50.

maintain. And as it is the phallus that governs intelligibility and knowability and defines sexual ontology, the ground of this ontology proves to be tenuous and emerges as being scaffolded on an infinitely expanding and radically unstable chain of significations.

The Textuality of the Symbolic: The Ek-static Origin of the Lacanian Framework

Within Lacan's framework, the symbolic plays the central role in positing the phallus as the origin of significations. While the foregoing discussion observed how the centrality of phallus is produced in a performative manner, it also raised certain questions about the ontological status of the symbolic as well. And it is a line of argument to that Butler develops in their engagement with Lacan. In the following section, we would go through this.

Any understanding of the symbolic in Lacan's exposition must make a detour through the formulations of Levi-Strauss. Levi-Strauss, in his *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1969) defines the taboo on incest as the rule that governs the structure of kinship and social norms. But the norms are neither purely cultural nor entirely natural. It is social to the extent that it is a rule. And at the same time it's universal, hence prior to the contingencies that the social-cultural domain entails (Levi-Strauss, 1969, p.12). The taboo against incest is located at the transitory passage from nature to culture (Levi-Strauss, 1969, p.24; pp. 28-29; cited in Butler, 2000, p.16). Referring to Derrida's captivating¹³⁶ reading of the "scandal" that the taboo manifests, Butler notes that the juxtaposition of the two arguments by Levi Strauss - where on the one hand he secures the taboo outside both the social and the natural and on the other hand proposes that we think of it as a link between the two - makes it difficult to understand the taboo as a link, because if nature and culture are mutually exclusive, then it becomes difficult to understand the taboo as a transitory mechanism from the one to the other. Now, as Lacan develops his theory of the symbolic under the influence

¹³⁶ Even though Butler does not reflect in detail on Derrida's reading of the incest taboo (Derrida, 2001, pp.352-270), their reference to Derrida in a small footnote (Butler, 2000, p.84) clearly suggests that the problematic status of the taboo in Levi-Strauss's work which becomes a key in unfolding certain aspects of the symbolic in Lacan, is clearly influenced by Derrida's reading.

of Levi- Strauss' postulates on the rule against incest, the ambiguity as to the status of this rule manifests itself in a somewhat similar manner in Lacan's work.

Levi-Strauss postulated that the exchange of women was formative of kinship systems. However, instead of regarding kinship as derived from blood relation, Levi Strauss analogized kinship with linguistic system. Therefore, the exchange of women came to be analogous to the economy of signs, and similar to the linguistic structure where each term maintains its apparent stability only in relation to all the other linguistic marks, kinship system came to be theorized on the basis of linguistic structures where the social positions were secured only in terms of a position's relation to the whole of kinship system (Butler, 2000, p.41). Drawing on this, Lacan argues that this is a phenomenon that's located in an order elsewhere than that of the human. This function, which Lacan calls the symbolic function, "intervenes" in the human order all the time (Butler, 2000, p.42). Since it governs the domain of sociality and kinship, it does not coincide with either of them.

For Lacan, the symbolic order is regarded as the realm of law that governs the trajectory of desire in the Oedipal stage, where this complex is understood to originate from a primary, symbolic prohibition against incest, and this is claimed to be formative of kinship systems. The family members, within the symbolic, are regarded as occupying a certain position in relation to others. The law of the symbolic makes possible the assignation of pronominal positions. The Lacanian subject comes into being through its interpellation within the symbolic law. It is what governs one's entry into the space of social and cultural intelligibility. Being the precondition for the production of the subject, the symbolic itself remains outside the governance of the law it enforces. Producing and structuring history, the law itself remains ahistorical because even before proceeding to account for a metahistory of the law, we need to enter the domain of the Law. As reflecting on the law is possible only after one comes into being as a juridico-legal subject, what was there (i.e., the real) before the law cannot be narrated as such. As Lacan writes succinctly, "The letter kills it, but we learn this from the letter itself" (Lacan, 2002a, p.848). That is, to speak of the time before the symbolic, one has to work through the concepts and categories of the symbolic. Hence, no metahistory of the phase before the law can be presented as such, and the pre-symbolic real which is the state of being before the law is, in the last instance, purely "our own hypothesis" from within the symbolic (Fink, 1995, p.27). Accordingly, the sexual positions that are allocated to subjects, i.e.,

masculine and feminine, do not preexist the subject's interpellation into the symbolic. There can be no metahistory of account of the body prior to its entry into the symbolic (Butler, 1993, p.62).¹³⁷

Now, the mechanism through which the assumption of sexuality and the production of desire becomes possible is prohibition and the threat of punishment by the order of the law. This prohibition, as already noted, is the prohibition against incest taboo, and even prior to that, if we recall our discussion on Butler's reading of Freud, there is a prior prohibition against homosexuality as well. Now, within the analytic framework, these prohibitions and taboos are secured by the "spectre of psychosis" which signifies that there are certain boundaries crossing which would induce psychosis in the subject (Butler, 1993, p.63). But, asks Butler, is the relation between transgression and psychosis one of cause and effect? Or, is it rather that the spectre of psychosis is deployed precisely to "guard against" forms of sexual interaction which would "abrogate the heterosexual contract?" (Butler, 1993, p.63). Does the law function as a limiting agency marking off the boundary of what is truly living at the cost of exclusion of other ways of being? Recalling the prior abjection and foreclosure of homosexuality that we explicated in our discussion of Butler's reading of Freud, psychosis emerges less as an outcome of transgression than a machination of the symbolic which actively delegitimizes certain sexual positions and modes of interaction by marking them as transgressive, as deviation from the norm. Thus, instead of being the outcome of transgression, psychosis appears to be performatively producing, securing, and reiterating heteronormativity. Butler's reading of Lacan's seminar on Antigone provides a crucial perspective on this.

Taking Lacan's reading of Antigone where she is posited as symbolizing the "border" between the imaginary and the symbolic where her death is interpreted to be resulting from unsustainability within the symbolic of what Antigone represented and desired, Butler makes a point analogous to their questioning of the causal-effect relation between prohibition and psychosis. Countering Lacan's general claim that Antigone's death implies the "limits of cultural intelligibility" (Butler, 2000, p.29) whose violation for Antigone meant the certainty of death by

¹³⁷ "...any recourse to the body before the symbolic can take place only within the symbolic, which seems to imply that there is no body prior to its marking. If this last implication is accepted, we can never tell a story about how it is that a body comes to be marked by the category of sex, for the body before the mark is constituted as signifiable only through the mark." (Butler, 1993, p.63).

entombment, Butler asks whether Antigone's death conveys the message that only certain forms of life and living can be sustained within the symbolic (Butler, 2000, p.54). Since Antigone's desire and existence represent a way of living that stands in contravention to the "terms of livability" established by the law, death seems to be the only possible outcome for her. But death does not function as an *effect* of violating the laws of the symbolic, but figures as the *delimiting agency* demarcating what forms of life and desire would be sustainable. Thus, it is not that incest or homosexuality is barred by law. Rather, it is by rendering them abject that the law itself is produced and enforced. And if prohibition on homosexuality is itself formative of the law, then the apparent *effect* of the law appears to be *productive* of the law, a structure not entirely dissimilar to how the phallus reveals itself to be constitutive of its own genealogy (Butler, 1999, p.60). Concealing its genealogy, the law establishes its authority performatively. As Butler writes, responding to an imaginary interjection -

Those who disagree with me tend to claim, with some exasperation, "But it is the law!" But what is the status of such an utterance? "It is the law!" becomes the utterance that performatively attributes the very force to the law that law itself is said to exercise. "It is the law" is thus a sign of allegiance to the law, a sign of the desire for the law to be the indisputable law, a theological impulse within the theory of psychoanalysis that seeks to put out of play any criticism of the symbolic father, the law of psychoanalysis itself. Thus the status given to the law is precisely the status given to the phallus, the symbolic place of the father, the indisputable and incontestable. The theory exposes its own tautological defense. (Butler, 1993, p.21)

It is through this performative function that the law, and the symbolic which is structured by it, is catapulted into an "incontestable" position. Itself produced within a cultural landscape of heterosexual kinship system, it establishes itself as the origin of culture and kinship.

For Lacan, sexuality and desire are produced within the linguistic structure of the symbolic, which in a way obviates the essentialist understanding of sex by locating their origin outside the immediate contours of the body. But while it apparently undermines the self-referentiality and immediacy of sex, the institution of the symbolic and the law (as prehistoric origin of culture) gives

it a distant but locatable origin. Since the symbolic is argued to be the prehistoric origin of culture, it remains above the contingent formations of the culture such that it legitimizes certain forms of sexual possibilities while foreclosing others. The immutable domain of the symbolic squarely puts an end to the different sexual-morphological possibilities, the possibility of different economies of kinship and of realizing different forms of desires. And it is this immutability that Butler contests.

Butler's intervention in the Lacanian understanding of the body and subjectivity is that it unravels the textual mechanisms and rhetorical devices which establish the law as intractable. What Lacan takes to be the origin of culture is itself produced within the cultural norms and kinship systems aligned to heterosexuality. Thus, instead of being the origin of kinship and culture, the law, the domain of the symbolic emerges as the validating agency produced within the matrix of heteronormativity. As our reading of Butler's interrogation of the Lacanian framework argued, the symbolic and the law, not unlike their governing signifier, become constitutive of the genealogy of their own production. Thus, the symbolic and its laws appear to be something other than self-referential. They cannot be held to be the grounding point of culture and kinship. And as the law and plane of its codification (the symbolic) secure their status and enforceability through continuous citational practices as Butler highlights following Derrida (Butler, 1993, p.71), the binding framework of presence that this origin narrative claimed to manifest, becomes undone. The origin appears to have come into being through the working of a referential system which irreducibly defers it. It appears to be deferred from itself, and only through this process of deferral and differing, through the "textual knots" of the narrative, that it can come into being and performatively establish itself as the groundless ground of all significatory possibilities. Thus, the purported origin in the Lacanian schema does not exist purely as itself, rather comes into being through processes which are then concealed by the performative enactment that attempts to establish it at the origin. To talk about it would thus entail considering the complicated "genealogy" of its production. Genealogy, in the strict sense, is a misnomer here, since to some extent it is a determination of presence, whereas this origin narrative - put under scrutiny - forever defers its original location. To find an origin story, one must have a place outside this putative origin. However, as showcased in our discussion, this outside must be nothing but an impossibility.

As our reading intends to suggest, Lacan's is a manifestation of an imperative to tell the metahistory of the founding moment of the subject (Butler, 1999, p.85). Since the law, the

supposed origin of the heteronormative sexual economy is itself constituted within a heteronormative framework, it appears that the analytic understanding that deliberates how sexual identities and zones of pleasure get “fixed” becomes possible only within the presupposition of the universality of heterosexuality. Thus, there is no natural trajectory of desire and sexual positions, and heterosexual desires cannot be understood as “original” desires. Instead, they must be regarded as the result of a long chain of processes that, through performative functions, conceals the trajectory of their development. Abjection, exclusion, and delegitimization of certain sexual morphologies and performative elevation of some others are constitutive of these “original” desires. There is no prior, pure, original desire before the operation of the law; rather, the law itself is produced within the dominant narrative of heterosexuality. Interpreted thus, the conceptual contours that psychoanalysis seeks to secure as its foundation fails to retain its self-referentiality. The ontology of sex, within such reading, appears to be ek-static.

The discussion in this chapter on Butler’s engagement with psychoanalysis explicated how the ontology of sex and gender, encountered within the framework of psychoanalysis, proves to move beyond the analytic of self-referentiality and beyond the ambit of being as presence. Rather, in Butler’s reading of Freud and Lacan, the components of sexuated and gendered morphology appear to have been produced within a network of unceasing signification without recourse to any ungrounded ground which could put a stop to the play of signification as regards the identificatory marks of sex and gender. Thus, Butler’s engagement with Lacan, along with Freud, establishes how the ontology of both gender and sex appears to be ek-static in nature.

But what is the mode of this differing-deferral that produces the sexuated and gendered subjects? How does the domain of the other figure within this ek-static ontology of the subject? The following chapter would approach these questions following Butler’s engagement with Levinas and Hegel.

Chapter 5

Judith Butler's Reading of Levinas and Hegel: Being and Originary Relationality

As already argued in the introductory section of the chapter on Butler's engagement with psychoanalysis, in Western philosophy, especially since Descartes, the subject has been understood to be based on the principle of full presence and self-referentiality. Even when it is regarded as product of a set of processes, the presupposition of an origin determined as self-referentiality and self-presence always remains on the horizon. If the subject in modernity is defined by the ontological model of what Macpherson called "possessive individualism"¹³⁸ where the individual is conceptualized to be a bounded entity whose essence lies in the capacity to exercise proprietary relation to her being, body, and the world, then Butler's formulations on ontology clearly puts into question such unitary, univocal, and individuated notion of the subject.¹³⁹ For MacPherson, possession of property was definitive of an individual, i.e., one cannot be regarded an individual if she does not possess property. Now, following Butler's cue, if we interpret the notion of property in the broader sense, then we can infer that the notion of subject, regarded thus, consists in the full possession of all the dimensions of one's existence including one's body and social-political interactions it finds itself to be mired in. It has a proprietorial relation with its body,¹⁴⁰ and the social relations it enters into are premised on this proprietorial notion of free will. It is independent

¹³⁸ "The assumptions which comprise possessive individualism may be summarized in the following...propositions. (i) What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the wills of others. (ii) Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those relations which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest. (iii) The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society...Thus : since the freedom, and therefore the humanity, of the individual depend on his freedom to enter into self-interested relations with other individuals, and since his ability to enter into such relations depends on his having exclusive control of (rights in) his own person and capacities, and since proprietorship is the generalized form of such exclusive control, the individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities." (Macpherson, 1962, p.263)

¹³⁹ Butler also invokes to Macpherson's idea of "possessive individual" in their discussion with Athena Athnasiou while discussing how property has been equated with the definition of the human subject (Butler & Athnasiou, 2012, p.7).

¹⁴⁰ This is a point that Ed Cohen makes in his Brilliant work *A Body Worth Defending: Immunity, Biopolitics, and the Apotheosis of the Modern Body* where he argues how the political concept of immunity was made to fit within the domain of the body (Cohen, 2009).

of everything and exists prior to the relations it partakes in. Understood in this manner, an ontological inquiry does not need to cross the immediate contours of the embodied subject. Such an understanding of possessive individualism, I contend, tallies with what we have been referring to as full presence or self-presence, where property implies the sense of propriety, *proper*-ty, and appropriation. As Das, reading Derrida, argues, “Ontology issues the problem of *being proper*”, which means being “adequate to the name that marks *being* - to inhabit the space cleared by a name, within a name, marked by a name” (Das, 2010, p.112). Before appropriation into the domain of the proper, of *proper*-ty as a relation formed within the domain of that which is proper to the name, there can be no claim to being. And here, the *proper* figures as full presence, independent of all relations.

This understanding of the subject has a threefold implication. First, the subject emerges as a bounded entity; second, as the subject comes into being in an embodied manner, the body becomes both the precondition and the undecidable limit of the subject; third, and this is built upon the previous implications, the subject’s ontology is comes to be defined by its unity, its full presence, its relation of identity to itself. Understood thus, the subject emerges as an sovereign, agential actant. With its boundedness and sovereignty, it manifests a structure of presence and self-referentiality. But does the embodied subject bear a relation of absolute proximity to itself? Is it indeed a bounded and sovereign being forged on the basis of proprietary relation to its self? Or, does it exhibit a ek-static structure? Butler’s theorization pushes us toward a notion of the subject where being resides not within the domain of the proper or within the bounded entity definitive of the modern subject, and this allows us to conceive of its mode of being as one of displacement and dispossession, of a being-outside-itself. And Butler’s reading of Levinas and Hegel becomes formative of this ek-static ontology.

In Butler’s framework, the possibility of determining the origin and the boundary of the subject in the ontological sense remains an impossible task since in their conceptualization, the other proves to be fundamentally constitutive of the subject. Thus, instead of being identical to itself, the subject, in Butler’s theorization, emerges as relational self differentiated within itself, a differentiation that Butler would sometimes call a “split” (Butler, 2000, p.24) that is originary in

nature prior to which there can be no subject as such.¹⁴¹ Conceptualized thus, it is argued to come into being by the movement of an originary displacement through its constitutive relation with the other, a movement that Butler calls “dispossession” that propels us towards thinking ontology through the frame of relationality. And such an understanding of being finds concrete formulation in and through Butler’s engagement with Levinas and Hegel.

Therefore, our task in this chapter would be to understand dispossession and relationality as modalities of Butler’s ek-static ontology by analysing their reading of Levinas and Hegel. Through this discussion, we would try to argue how both relationality and dispossession in Butler’s work do not follow from a predefined referent; rather, functioning in a catachrestic manner, both concepts make it possible to conceive a reimagination of ontology beyond the framework of presence. The first section of this chapter will look into Butler’s concept of relationality, followed by a section on Butler’s engagement with Levinas. And the last section will engage with Butler’s reading of Hegel.

The Ontological Framework of Relationality and Dispossession

It is crucial to remember that it is only with their writings in the context of the America’s “war on terrorism” that the concept of relationality was assigned a central role in Butler’s ontology. Even though the theme of relationality was already present as such in Butler’s early writings, as we observed in their development of non-substantial, ek-static ego through Freud, the concept starts to manifest explicitly at the heart of ontological inquiry with their texts on violence and war¹⁴² where grief and mourning became the mode for thinking relationality and dispossession in the ontological sense.

Despite the absence of explicit reference, Butler’s postulation on grief in the aftermath of loss seems to follow from their reading of Freud’s exegesis advanced in *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud,

¹⁴¹ Even though Butler does not use the word “originary”, I am calling it as such because, as we would establish through our interrogation of Butler’s exegesis, this splitting mentioned here does presuppose a prelapsarian unity or primordial existence prior to the act of splitting. Therefore, the subject, the “I” before the split, is purely figurative and does not have any ontological claim.

¹⁴² See *Precarious Life* (2004), *Frames of War* (2009), *Parting Ways* (2012b).

1957). Butler understands grief to be unsettling the idea of the detached, solipsistic subject. Against the conjecture that grief pushes one to a private corner of her psychological life, Butler argues that it exhibits a particular feature that, as I interpret it, seems to bear an ontological import. The experience of suffering a loss or dispossession in one or multiple of its different forms renders the subject “inscrutable” because it cannot understand why this loss turns out to be so impressionable. If, upon losing something, the subject loses its composure and is beside oneself in either rage or sorrow, then it appears that the autonomy and individuality it always presupposed was a mirage. Thus grief, the effect of losing something, shows that we were attached to this particular object at a constitutional level. Had there been no constitutive ties to it then why, upon losing the object, would the subject be rendered incapacitated with grief? Had the subject been truly autonomous and individuated, the loss could not have been so impressionable as to alter the texture of her subjectivity.¹⁴³ Why does it feel wounded upon the loss? Why does it lose command over itself?

If the loss of an object, an other, tends to have such an impact on the self, then it means that the subject was always already “impressionable”, “given over to the other” beyond control or prediction (Butler, 2004a, p.46). Hence, it is not that I exist here, constitutively isolated and insulated from the other, and the other stands over there at some distance from me; it is not that my relation to the other is surmised upon the pre-existence of these two entities - the self and the other. Instead, as it becomes most evident in the moment of grief or dispossession, we are in “thrall” to our relation with the other such that it might not always be simply explicable (Butler, 2004a, p.24). It might be beyond our conscious reach. As Butler puts it, the autonomy of the “I” is put into question when an account of its relation with the other is undertaken (Butler, 2004a, p.24).

Relationality, for Butler, must be understood in myriad forms. Just as the loss of a loved one can have a traumatic effect on the individual, other objects play an equally important role in constituting the embodied self. For instance, to sustain oneself, to have a living, certain preconditions must be met. When a child is born, it cannot do anything by itself. From nourishment, basic living conditions to healthcare facilities - the infant cannot survive without a network that fulfils these requirements. The language within which the “subject” is subjected-

¹⁴³ See the Chapter on Freud. Also See *Mourning and Melancholia* (Freud 1957), *Psychic Life of Power* (butler, 1997).

subjectivated as a sexuated-gendered being,¹⁴⁴ and learns to think or expresses its needs and demands, is inherited from outside. It is not something that the subject possesses from the beginning. Rather, it *must* depend on the other for it. Also, as we observed in our previous chapter, sexuation and gendering too takes place through the demands placed by the “outside”, which both produces and subjugates the subject. This, too, is something without which the subject cannot become intelligible or recognizable.¹⁴⁵ And as Butler shows, these processes begin before the child is born (Butler, 1993, p.xvii). From the moment of its inception, the body and the embodied subject function within a set of interdependencies, without which life would be rendered impossible (Butler, 2015d, p.131).

But this is not exclusive to new-borns; rather, it is a structure that comprises others who are not identical to the “I”, and dependency on these others is necessary for sustaining life in general because recognizability and subjectivation, as explained by Butler, are not one-time processes but is reiterative in nature such that being a subject means to constantly reiterate (and thus reproduce) its conditions of possibility (See Butler, 1993, 1999). These are conditions without which life would cease to exist as such.¹⁴⁶ Butler extends this interdependence to the domain of the nonhuman as well, arguing that life does not depend only on the human other and its social-cultural-political institutions, but whether life would become possible or be rendered livable hinges on its environments, its interactions with the nonhuman agents.¹⁴⁷ Thus, the human does not appear to be “homo erectus” (Butler, 2015d, p.131) but stands as a being which, even before the moment of its instantiation, is mired in relations and networks of dependence that include both humans and nonhumans.

Thus, what Butler repeatedly calls “relation” is evidently different from the general deployment of the term in everyday usage. The general understanding of “relation” or

¹⁴⁴ For a detailed discussion, see the introductory chapter in *Bodies That Matter* (Butler, 1993)

¹⁴⁵ We are deploying the concept of recognition in the Hegelian sense.

¹⁴⁶ “Bodies do not come into the world as self-motoring agents; motor control is established through time; the body is entered into social life first and foremost under conditions of dependency, as a dependent being, which means that even the first moments of vocalization and movement are responding to a changing set of conditions for survival.” (Butler, 2015d, p.130)

¹⁴⁷ Butler’s reference to Haraway is telling in the sense that Haraway, in a number of her writings, explicates how to be human is to already become entangled (understood as it has been primarily theorized in Barad’s [Barad, 2007]) with the nonhuman. Butler makes a similar point, although not through Haraway this time, in *The force of Non Violence* (Butler, 2020).

“interdependence” presupposes (at least) two pre-existing self-present identities within which a relation, a form of dependence, is forged. However, this is not what Butler refers to when they deploy the term “relation”. For instance, while talking about the human’s dependence on the nonhuman and the animal, Butler claims, referring to Haraway, that this dependency is consubstantial with the existence of these two ontological categories. That is, there is no ontological human or ontological animal (nonhuman) prior to their relation of difference and dependence. Rather, their dependence on each other is essential to their ontological claims. Thus, the ontological difference between them, which a metaphysical notion of the human or the animal would presuppose, emerges from their interrelation. If there is no human prior to its relation with the other (human, machine, animal), then the appearance of the human as an ontological category is constituted by these relations (Butler, 2015d, p.132); and vice versa, the other can lay ontological claim on the basis of its relation with the other others. Such a thesis of relationality which disrupts the logic of the self-present self-contained subject and implies a destabilization of “identitarian ontologies” (Butler, 2015d, p.68), cannot be addressed by the general notion of relation or relationality. Even though Butler does not mention this explicitly, their work allows us to arrive at the understanding that terms such as relation, relationality, and interdependence are catachrestic as they fail to capture the concepts they try to elaborate. In Butler’s oeuvre, these terms, when deployed in such contexts, should not be interpreted in isolation from its place of utterance. They become meaningful only when we read them in their field of operation. And as we observed, Butler’s exposition on relationality (and dependence) understands it as a critique of being as presence. As Butler writes, if “being” a subject becomes possible only within a mode of relationality, then it would mean that being has been given way to a “mode of relatedness” (Butler, 2012b, p.6). Thus -

Whether one claims that being should be rethought as a mode of relating or whether one insists that a mode of relating contests ontology is finally less important than the primacy of relationality for thinking about this problem. Moreover, the kind of relationality at stake is one that “interrupts” or challenges the unitary character of the subject, its self-sameness and its univocity. (Butler, 2012b, 6)

In this sense, relationally displaces ontology proper. It puts into question the basic premise of ontology as being as constant presence, since relationality in the sense that Butler deploys it disrupts the unitary constitution and the sovereign status of the subject. The subject is always what it is to the extent that it relates to the other, and the other locates itself as such only within a differential relation with the subject. Thus, neither the self nor other can be granted self-referentiality or full presence. Instead, they come into being through their “comportment” toward their others (Butler, 2004a, p.129), a movement that disproves the sovereign claims of the metaphysical notion of the subject. Regarded thus, a redescription of two concepts – being and relation(ality) - deployed by Butler would help us to better elaborate their ontological scheme.

First, as the relation is constitutive of the ontological distinction of the *relatas*, following Barad, it is better understood as an *intra-relation*. The dissatisfaction with the term “relationality” at times becomes evident in Butler’s writings as they explicitly voice the need to move toward a neologism to demarcate the operation that is referred to in their work under the banner of relationality.¹⁴⁸ Second, since relationality displaces being as presence but yet provides a frame that helps us to understand what it means to “be”, I argue that it is required of us to both displace and retain the term ontology. That is, on the one hand, we hold onto the general sense of ontology as the study of the structure of existence because despite being critical of ontology as such, reading Butler one gathers the sense that they never really leave the domain that inquires into the mode of being. As they insist, in the context of the body as the mode of reconceiving political and social alliance, that what is needed is a “new bodily ontology” (Butler, 2009, p.2) consisting of various modes of relationality. Such an ontology does not aim at providing accounts of fundamental structures where these are conceived as distinct and insulated entities. Rather, the ontology that Butler conceives of requires that each of the terms be regarded in terms of their constitutive exposure to socio-political intra-relations (Butler, 2009, p.2).¹⁴⁹ And on the other hand - and it

¹⁴⁸ “Despite my affinity for the term relationality, we may need other language to approach the issue that concerns us, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but also dispossessed by them as well.” (Butler, 2004a, p. 24)

¹⁴⁹ “to make broader social and political claims about rights of protection and entitlements to persistence and flourishing, we will first have to be supported by a new bodily ontology, one that implies the rethinking of precariousness, vulnerability, injurability, interdependency, exposure, bodily persistence, desire, work and the claims of language and social belonging. To refer to “ontology” in this regard is not to lay claim to a description of fundamental structures of being that are distinct from any and all social and political organization. On the contrary, none of these terms exist outside of their political organization and interpretation. *The “being” of the body to which this ontology refers is one that is always*

follows from this previous demand to form a new ontology – it insists on debunking the concept of ontology as determination of being as presence. Thus, even as Butler mounts a strong criticism of classical ontology, their inquiry into the structure of being remains an ontological endeavour. Thus, to convey this aporetic sense, we might prefer to understand Butler’s relational ontology, following a Derridian gesture, as ~~ontology~~. Henceforth, every mention of these two terms, namely, relationality and ontology would be understood as (intra)relationality and ~~ontology~~.

Understood thus, relationality presents a view where manifestations of being (the subject, the body, life etc.,) become possible only through its formative relation with the other (understood as both human and nonhuman). If without the other be-ing itself becomes inconceivable, then it disproves the liberal autonomous structure of the sovereign subject. As mentioned, the subject, in such circumstances, ceases to be self-referential, self-present, well bounded entity severed from all ties with the outside. Rather, from the moment of its inception and throughout its life, the embodied subject, the embodied living organism, must depend, in the constitutive sense, on a network of bodies, both human and nonhuman, machines, institutions, and socio-cultural norms which endow it with recognizability and intelligibility. The subject, the body as the living organism is “passionately attached”¹⁵⁰ to these conditions of possibility which iteratively sustain their be-ing. Thus, any reference to the mode of embodied existence must understand it as radically uncontained, or as spilling out of itself.

In the general sense, “spilling out” would have implied the existence of a self-referential, self-contained, and self-sufficient (id)entity prior to its spilling out of itself. However, as Butler shows, there can be no entity before its relationality, its constitutive dependencies, and its passionate attachments with what subjugates it and activates it as a subject. Hence, the spilling out does not presuppose a priorly bounded structure. Rather, it is in and through the act of spilling out that their be-ing becomes possible. Hence, there is no “proper” topos of being. It is always radically

given over to others, to norms, to social and political organizations that have developed historically in order to maximize precariousness for some and minimize precariousness for others. It is not possible first to define the ontology of the body and then to refer to the social significations the body assumes. Rather, to be a body is to be exposed to social crafting and form, and that is what makes the ontology of the body a social ontology. In other words, the body is exposed to socially and politically articulated forces as well as to claims of sociality-including language, work, and desire-that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing(emphasis added).” (Butler, 2009, p.2)

¹⁵⁰ “Passionate attachment” is a concept that Butler develops reading Hegel. We will be discussing this in detail in the section on Hegel.

spilling out of itself, and is ek-static from the very beginning without any prior stasis. Being always exceeds itself, its interiority is formed through its presence to an other. And it is through its constitutive “presence” to the other that the subject is dispossessed (Butler & Athnasiou, 2012, p.14). Dispossession is, therefore, the embodied subject’s constitutive relationality and bond to the other -

we are dispossessed of ourselves by virtue of some kind of contact with another, by virtue of being moved and even surprised or disconcerted by that encounter with alterity. The experience itself is not simply episodic, but can and does reveal one basis of relationality – we do not simply move ourselves, but are ourselves moved by what is outside us, by others, but also by whatever “outside” resides in us. (Butler & Athnasiou, 2012, p.3)

The subject’s “presence” to the other, its attachment to the norms of sociality, and its “injurious interpellations” (Butler & Athnasiou, 2012, p.15) within the matrix of cultural intelligibility strips of the self-sufficiency of the I, which is generally understood as a form of possession of the subject. Dispossession, therefore, disrupts the proprietorial relation that the subject has with itself, and this constitutes its mode of being. As Butler, taking the body as the locus, puts it -

The body is constituted through perspectives it cannot inhabit; someone else sees our face in a way that we cannot and hears our voice in a way that we cannot. We are in this sense bodily- always over there, yet here, and this dispossession marks the sociality to which we belong. Even as located beings, we are always elsewhere, constituted in a sociality that exceeds us. (Butler, 2015d, p.97)

At the heart of the being exists an exteriority out of the bounds of the *proper* of being. The provisionally inaugural moment of being is therefore invested by something other than its own self. Thus, being comes into being by virtue of its attachment to what is its other, and its mode of existence figures as ek-static where being is conjured through differential relations to things - human and nonhuman - other than itself. This formative relation with the other renders bodies,

subjects, and lives ek-static. It becomes present only by losing its proper place, by losing its possession of itself, by forfeiting its self-containment and sovereign control over itself. In this sense, it can be conjectured that ontology is not given but an achievement that nonetheless remains incomplete forever.

Relationality and dispossession - the dual framework for rethinking ontology - theoretically relies on Butler's reading of Hegel and Levinas. If Hegel allows Butler to think ontologically constitutive "passionate attachment" to the apparatuses of subjugation, then Butler's turn to Levinas forms another aspect of originary displacement where the "unwilled and 'unchosen'" (Butler, 2005, p.87) addresses by the other proves formative of being. To understand how Levinas and Hegel play a formative role in Butler's ek-static ontology, dividing the consequent discussions of this chapter into two sections, we would inquire into Butler's engagement with these two thinkers. While the latter section would look at Butler's engagement with Hegel, the former would attempt to understand how Butler's critical reading of Levinas becomes formative of their ek-static ontology.

Being-as-Other: Butler with Levinas

At the heart of Levinas's critique of the ontological tradition in the West lies the figure of the other. To understand how the figure(s) of the other mounts a strong repudiation of ontology, we first need to understand the operation of ontology and its relation to the other as theorized in the Western philosophical tradition.

Ontology, as we have already discussed in the first chapter, is the study of being as presence, or to be more precise, it determines being as constant presence. The question of being, although always implied, never became a subject of analysis in itself for two millennia, and to be revived, it had to wait for the eruption of what might be justly called the Heideggerian event in the history of philosophy. By establishing the difference between being as a manifest particularity and the being of beings, Heidegger specified that analysis of ontology must address the latter, i.e., the being of a being. For even though a discussion of specific beings operates within the order of inquiry into being, it fails to study the specificity of the being of beings, because those specificities under

scrutiny render being into a particular kind of being. In this sense, the study of being thus turned into an eidetic science where the inquiry into that particular being, adjudicated and analysed in terms of its particularities that made it into the being that it is, presupposed the full, prior existence of this being. But what the mode of its existence was, or what it means to *be*, remained out of the purview of philosophical expositions (Levinas, 1996a, p.16).

Heidegger's revival of ontology meant positing the meaning of what it means to be as *the* ontological question par excellence. And it is this modern formulation of the singular concept of being against which Levinas advances his own formulation of being. Even as Levinas places himself in contrast with Western philosophy's ontological trend in general, his own contribution to the domain of ontology - albeit through its repudiation and subsequent delineation of an alternative mode of inquiring into the meaning of being - is shaped by his critical relation to Heidegger's exposition on being.

Heidegger's ontological inquiry places being in a certain type of relationality instead of conceiving it as an in-itself.¹⁵¹ Locating the anthropos as the site of the inquiry into (Heidegger, 2010), Heidegger argues that the meaning of being consists of and is produced through its *thrownness* into the world. The worldly being, the *Dasein*, is the measure of being as such, and the meaning of being figures in terms of its transitivity. *Dasein* cannot be approached in its individuality because its mode of residing is not, strictly speaking, insular in nature. Rather, *Dasein* is always "in the openness" of the world. It always relates to the other through differential modes through which the meaning of existence is derived. We are "flung" into the finite world without any reason, without any essence (Wahl, 1949, p.13). Our existence is marked by finitude, but this finite existence is marked by the movement of a threefold "immanent" transcendence - toward the world, towards the future, and towards the people.¹⁵² In this sense, we are always already out of ourselves, we are beside our immediate contours (Wahl, 1949, p.15). And this is derived precisely from the understanding of the comportment of being. Being for *Dasein* is the

¹⁵¹ A simple relationality would presume the prior existence of the *relatas*. But deploying this general concept of relationality while describing Heidegger's ontological project would miss his postulations regarding the radical nature of being understood in terms of its entanglements. Thus, the coordinates of the general concept of relationality fail to capture the novelty and radicalism of Heidegger's concept of being. It is in this sense we have called it a "certain relationality" while outlining Heidegger's understanding of being.

¹⁵² Levinas argues that Heidegger's ontology is transcendental in this new sense (Levinas, 1996a, p.22).

understanding of being as existing in such a manner that it transcends itself and presents its existence as essentially ek-static (Levinas, 1996a, p.22). However, this understanding does not figure in the pure phenomenon of intellection but within the web of relations in and through which being understands itself. On this radical reworking of ontology that shifts from existents to the existence of existents by way of figuring existence as a being-in-the-world, Levinas writes -

To comprehend our situation in reality is not to define it but to find ourselves in an affective disposition. To comprehend being is to exist...To think is no longer to contemplate but to commit oneself, to be engulfed by that which one thinks, to be involved. This is the dramatic event of the being-in-the-world. (Levinas, 1996c, p.4)

However, the relations within which being understands its meaning becomes problematic for Levinas due to the ontological operation that Heidegger's notion of being performs. For Levinas, the philosophy of the West, which he often calls ontology, reduces the other to the "same" or the knowing subject (Levinas, 1969). What we called "the ontological function" resides in rendering an object into an object *for* consciousness, an object which becomes internalized into consciousness through representation. Thus, various forms of the not-I is subjected to reduction into the self or the knowing subject through assimilation (Critchley, 2014, pp.5-6).¹⁵³ For Levinas, the problematic aspect of Heidegger's fundamental ontology was tuned to this specific operation of ontology that effaces alterity.

For Heidegger, as Levinas reads him, existence, the mode of being as being-in-the-world, is thought as comprehension, as knowledge (Levinas, 1996c, p.5). The act of comprehension or of attaining knowledge is an act which seizes the object of knowledge and turns it into an object *for* itself. To delineate this act, Levinas uses the metaphor of grasping, and insists that the metaphor be taken literally. Grasping means seizing hold of something, thereby reducing its novelty, and assimilating it in the domain of knowledge where "an entity, being becomes the characteristic property of thought" (Levinas, 1989, p.76). By rendering the object (here, this object is being itself)

¹⁵³ Critchley here draws our attention to Sartre's apposite categorization of this characteristic move of philosophy qua ontology as 'digestive philosophy' (Critchley, 2014, p. 6)

of knowledge immanent to thought, the act of comprehension transforms it into an object-for-the-knower's consciousness. As Levinas puts it, the operation of *Auffassen* - which means understanding - is always already a *Fassen*, gripping, a seizing hold of, a possessing (Levinas, 1989, p.76). Levinas argues that knowledge seeks to establish a seamless coherence between the object and itself, and claims to adequately present the object in its full presence. Knowledge, understood thus as representation, becomes an adequate re-presentation of the object where nothing escapes its ambit. Whatever thought encounters and wants to comprehend is grasped to such an extent that nothing singular remains of this object. Levinas aptly calls this "a return to presence" (Levinas, 1989, p.77) where the object's cognition/perception within consciousness claims to manifest the object in its totality.

Heidegger's ontology is therefore synonymous with knowability, and to know, as we observed, is to represent where representation arguably manifests the other (than what I am) in its full presence. Representation determines the other in a non-reciprocal manner where the knowing self remains present to itself and where the other is presented *to* it. Levinas calls the "I", the subject, the *ur-* being or "the same" since in representation the opposition between this I and the other is obliterated as the singularity of the other is reduced to it. The identity of the "I", irrespective of the other, emerges in the aftermath of this obliteration (Levinas, 1969, p.126). As Levinas puts it, this propensity to comprehend a being means to move beyond it in order to regard it "upon the horizon of being" (Levinas, 1996c, p.8). This move by Heidegger, Levinas claims, puts him in alignment with the general structure of Western philosophy that always placed the other in relation to the self, where the other figured in terms of its ability to be comprehended which effectively erased its particularity within the domain of the universal.¹⁵⁴

The structure of comprehension in Heidegger's philosophical system, espoused most prominently in his magnum opus *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 2010), rests on universals that the work of comprehension undertakes. As Diane Perpich puts it by referring to Levinas's early work titled *Existence and Existents*, comprehension amounts to understanding by way of what is universal in that particular existent, and it is through our recourse to universals that the

¹⁵⁴ Levinas writes - "...comprehension, in Heidegger, rejoins the great tradition of Western philosophy: to comprehend the particular being is already to place oneself beyond the particular. To comprehend is to be related to the particular that only exists through knowledge, which is always knowledge of the universal" (Levinas, 1996c, p.7)

encountered existent becomes meaningful (Perpich, 2019, p.246). However, as we just discussed, comprehension through universals irons out and effaces that which exceeds its frame. Levinas thus argues that the encounter with the other within such a frame places her in a relation of linear equation with the life-world of the 'I', and the with-ness or sociality thus formed is forged on the basis of that which is perceived to be "common in the communion" (Levinas, 1978, p.94) with those others. In comprehension, the relation to beings is premised upon *Dasein* which effectively negates the particularity of these beings, a negation that Levinas calls violence. Comprehension thereby becomes mode of possession whereby a being is partially denied (Levinas, 1996c, p.5).

In such a setting, the encounter does not "face" the other as such. Instead, by making it familiar in terms of commonalities and universals, it puts the other alongside the "I" (Levinas, 1978, p.95) and forecloses the possibility of approaching the other beyond the horizon of this "I". Among the various axes of Levinas's critique of Heidegger, it is here that he puts Heidegger's ontological formulations into question by introducing the figure of the other as that which exceeds universality and its modes of manifestation.

Levinas introduces the other as wholly other. The relation with the other, prior to the with-ness forged through universals, exists outside mediation. The relationship with the other is a relation of standing face-to-face with the other "without intermediary, without mediations" (Levinas, 1978, p.95; Perpich, 2019, p.247). As Derrida, in one of his early readings of Levinas, appositely notes, the relation with the wholly other simultaneously signifies absolute proximity and absolute distance (Derrida, 2001, p.112). The other is absolutely near because I do not regard him through universal and communion within a sociality, it is not required to present itself through something other than itself. What it is, if it *is*, is by virtue of its being nothing but itself. But at the same time, it is absolutely distant because in the absence of universality and sociality which codify and attribute meaning to our encounters, accessing this wholly other remains forever impossible in its possibility. Thus, the other cannot be fully (re)presented in the face-to-face relation. Rather, it remains as a presence that is other than full-presence that Derrida calls "a certain absence" because in its phenomenality, it is marked by nonphenomenality as well (Derrida, 2001, pp.112-113). Such qualification of absence and presence that marks the other does not work in the manner of metaphysical logical operations where presence pure exists by virtue of an antithetical relation with

absence. Instead, the presence of the other works through absence understood in terms of nonphenomenality within phenomenon.

The other, for Levinas, marks the limit of comprehensibility, for what is beyond comprehension is precisely the moment of the other. Certainly, there will be present a will to comprehend the other, but its presence, if it can be called presence at all, “overflows” the domain of comprehension (Levinas 1996c, p.10). The encounter with the other happens beyond the limit of comprehension. One approaches the other through certain concepts, including his life-world and history, but there are aspects that escape such conceptualization and exceed all categories and concepts. This remainder, that which evades perception, cognition, and possession (hence, negation) is that in which its singular being consists (Levinas, 1996c, p.9). The relationship with the other is “dis-inter-ested” (Levinas, 1982, p.52) whereby the sovereign acts of possession by the “I” is rendered impossible because the other does not reside in the domain of knowability, of comprehension. It cannot be made accessible through my own paradigm or my understanding of the other’s world. Rather, the other exists as the wholly other, whose nonphenomenal and nonphenomenalizable “presence” forbids my grasp over it. As Levinas writes in one of his early publications - “the Other is what I myself am not. The Other is this, not because the Other’s character, or physiognomy, or psychology, but because of the Other’s very alterity” (Levinas in Perpich, 2019, p.246).

Butler’s understanding of ontology relies to a great extent upon the constitutive role of the absolute other. Since the other remains nonphenomenalizable in its phenomenality, the “I” appears to be unable to assimilate it within its own structure. The relation between the two is based on the other’s irreducibility to the self and other others. The self does not germinate from within itself. Its formation is dependent upon the other’s call or address beyond and before which there can be no “I” as such. The subject’s inception is bound to what is outside itself. Even though the structure of description posits a self prior to its bond with the other is, this positing is merely a figuration or a convenient fiction. Owing to the grammatical structure of language, this descriptive account runs the risk of leading us to believe that the self exists prior to its primeval bond to the other. However, to assume such a position would be precisely to fall prey to the metaphysics of substance that necessarily posits a doer behind the deed. Butler, citing Nietzsche and Haar, categorically warns us of the danger of acceding to the lure of language and its grammatical structure that steers us to

presume that linguistic representation is always an adequate representation. And this, in turn, leads us to the conclusion that the structure of language is the structure of the world (Butler, 1999, p.28).¹⁵⁵ Hence, the natural predisposition to equate the subject-predicate or subject-object framework of our everyday language to the ontological structure of the world while deliberating on the scene of the subject's genesis must be resisted. The condition of the self, as Butler reads Levinas, is not that of an auto-affection that entails its pre-existence. Rather, its condition of production is the anarchically traumatic "affection by the other" (Butler, 2005, p.86).¹⁵⁶ This affection is anarchic because it lacks a determinate cause or origin (*arche*). Since this anarchic call/address from the other functions as the condition of the subject of locution, we cannot assume the subject's prior existence before this scene of address. In this sense, Levinas allows Butler to speculate the scene of the subject's emergence. Levinas calls this site "preontological", because at this stage, the actors have yet to achieve a status conducive to exercising an ontological claim.

As Butler elaborates, the phenomenal world becomes possible only after the preontological operation (Butler, 2005, p.86). If the other is constitutive of the "I" such that without it "I" itself cannot come into being, then the other becomes integral to the formation of the "I". Or rather, following Butler's cue one might claim that the internal space of the "self" is formed in and through the other. If on the one hand, it puts into question the "I"(inhabiting the inside, the interior space of my-self) – other (over there, outside me) dichotomy, it also places a radical "heterogeneity" at the site of the self's origin (Butler, 2012b, p.38). The constitutive (non)presence of the other conceived by Levinas interrupts the continuity and consistency of being as it places the other at the "heart of *myself* (emphasis added)" (Butler, 2012b, p.38). It becomes crucial to Butler as it renders impossible the idea of an autonomous, sovereign, self-contained, self-referential, self-sufficient, independent, coherent subject. Butler echoes this sentiment when they write –

¹⁵⁵ Butler cites Haar - "All psychological categories (the ego, the individual, the person) derive from the illusion of substantial identity. But this illusion goes back basically to a superstition that deceives not only common sense but also philosophers—namely, the belief in language and, more precisely, in the truth of grammatical categories. It was grammar (the structure of subject and predicate) that inspired Descartes' certainty that "I" is the subject of "think," whereas it is rather the thoughts that come to "me": at bottom, faith in grammar simply conveys the will to be the "cause" of one's thoughts. The subject, the self, the individual, are just so many false concepts, since they transform into substances fictitious unities having at the start only a linguistic reality." (Butler, 1999, p.28)

¹⁵⁶ "The condition, or non-condition, of the Self is not originally an auto-affection presupposing the Ego but is precisely an affection by the Other, an anarchic traumatism" (Levinas, as cited in Butler, 2005, p. 86)

I want to suggest that the Levinasian “interruption” by the other, the way in which the ontology of the self is constituted on the basis of the prior eruption of the other at the heart of myself, implies a critique of the autonomous subject...In Levinas’s view, there is a heterogeneity that is prior to my being and that constantly decenters the autonomous subject I appear to be. It also permanently complicates the question of location: where do “I” begin and end, and what are the locatable parameters of “the Other”? (Butler, 2012b, p.38)

As becomes evident from the discussion above, interruption does not address a preconstituted self which it then interrupts. Rather, the rhetoric of interruption in Butler’s elaboration must be understood to function performatively. It establishes and brings into being what it appears to depict. Hence, the self and the other cannot be regarded as pre-existing referents that are then subjected to interruptive operation. Interruption is consubstantial with the aforementioned referents. Hence, the mechanism of interruption is originary through which the self is inaugurated and interpellated into the domain of ontology.

As ontology is dependent on understanding being as constant presence (of the same), what Butler interprets as the Levinasian interruption renders the subject originary out of itself. Interpreted thus, the self does not exist before its heterogeneous (intra)relation with the other. And if the self is constitutively reliant on the other, then what brings it into being is precisely what undoes its full presence, self-referentiality and other analogous traits associated with the liberal conceptualization of the subject. Dispossession, one of Butler’s frames for approaching ontology appears to be, as I read them, both relying on and diffractively¹⁵⁷ harmonious with what they understand as the Levinasian interruption. As Butler writes in two different texts -

If we are, for instance, “present” to one another, we may be dispossessed by that very presence. (Butler & Athnassiou, 2012, p13)

¹⁵⁷ Here, I use the term diffraction in the new materialist sense as argued by Haraway (2018) and Barad (2007).

the very "I" is called into question by its relation to the Other...I am gripped and undone by these very relations...We're undone by each other. (Butler, 2004a, 23)

Levinas's import for the frame of Butler's ontology lies precisely in this undoing, at the ontological level, of the self. Yet, this undoing does not translate into the dissolution of the subject altogether, but it provides an occasion for rethinking the political and the ethical together where every action of the subject must take into account how its own existence is implicated in and implicates the other without which it cannot exist. This is the radical possibility that this ek-static ontology promises.

But what is the formal structure of the Levinasian Interruption? How does the other and its address operate in relation to the self¹⁵⁸ at the preontological level? The mode of its address to the preontological "self" is, as Levinas calls it, persecutory, and this primary persecution creates for the self a responsibility towards the other.¹⁵⁹ Following Butler's cue, let's look at a brief passage elaborating this sense of persecution in Levinas. In *Otherwise than Being* (Levinas, 1994), a text that Butler engages with to understand the mechanism of the self's inauguration, Levinas writes -

Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others: all this is the self, a defecting or defeat of the ego's identity. (Levinas, 1994, p.15)

While this claim might appear to be perplexing at first, Butler draws our attention to the deeper philosophical implication of this inaugural persecution.¹⁶⁰ Butler regards Levinas's predisposition to deploy the term "persecution" to be apposite because of the dynamic of this relation. In persecution, the one who is being persecuted, undergoes suffering without her own

¹⁵⁸ Once again, there can be no self at the preontological level. The use of the word "self" here is purely descriptive without ontological claim since our grammatical structure does not allow us to think at the preontological level.

¹⁵⁹ To see how Butler somewhat relates this understanding of Levinas with Nietzsche's postulation on the subject's retroactive emergence through bad conscience, see, among other, Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*, (Butler, 2005, p.86); and *Ethical Ambivalence* (Butler, 2000).

¹⁶⁰ It is inaugural because it brings the self into being.

will. The act of persecution renders this subject helpless in the face of it. The subject didn't ask for it, it came from elsewhere without her will or choice. While persecution, understood in the general sense, appears to originate within a network of existing asymmetric relations where a subject is persecuted because she did something that made the prosecuting authorities uncomfortable and made them feel the need to subdue her, persecution becomes absolute when it comes without justificatory ground.¹⁶¹ In the preontological scene, the self maintains a passivity in terms of its relation to the other who addresses her without any apparent cause. The preontological subject is "touched"¹⁶² by the other in her passivity. She did not choose it and did not fully understand it either. She is not responsible for this address coming from the other.¹⁶³ Thus, a "formation in passivity", a state of being subjected to other, being acted upon by the other constitute the subject's prehistory (Butler, 2005, p.87). Hence, as this "inaugurating impingement by the other" is "unwilled" and "unchosen" by the subject and as the subject is helpless in the face of being touched by the Other, persecution becomes the appropriate rhetoric for Levinas (Butler, 2005, pp.86-87). Thus, as Butler reads Levinas, persecution is an uninvited and uncalled-for openness towards the other. It is a primary and inaugural vulnerability of the pre-emergent subject in relation to alterity that Butler calls "the radical susceptibility subject to the impingement by the Other" (Butler, 2005, p.89).

Since an unwilled impingement by the other brings the subject into being, the other becomes constitutive of the subject, or as Butler puts it reading Levinas, the "I" is, from the beginning, beset by an alterity that displaces it at the scene of its inception. In other words, it is by being displaced from its proper place, that the subject comes into being. The relation of the other to the self is substitutive for Levinas precisely because the other puts the subject out of its proper place and places itself in its place, and the "I" is produced as an effect of this substitution. The

¹⁶¹ As Butler's works are marked by multiple references to Kafka, it might not be a stretch to refer to Kafka here once again to understand absolute persecution, for K's situation, from *The Trial* (Kafka, 1999), appears to be emblematic of persecution without mediation of origin or telos.

¹⁶² Levinas uses the metaphor of touch in a number of places. For instance - "Persecution is the precise moment where the subject is reached or touched without the mediation of the logos" (Levinas in Butler, 2005, p. 87)

¹⁶³ Conceiving an imaginary dialogue with their interlocutor, Butler has argued how the persecutory scene runs the risk of imparting the responsibility for persecution to the persecuted. However, following Butler, taking recourse to K's predicament in Kafka's trial where he is subjected to persecution without his doing anything, helps us to convey the sense that the model of persecution in Levinas does not translate into allocation of a guilt, crime, or any such act to the persecuted.

subject, now inaugurated into ontology, can find its place “in no other way than as this place already occupied by *another* (emphasis added)” (Butler, 2006, p.89). At the beginning, if there is a definitive beginning, Levinas thus stages an occupation, a siege, that brings the subject into being. Commenting on the ontological import of this primary occupation, Butler writes -

If something substitutes for me or takes my place, that means neither that it comes to exist where I once was, nor that I no longer am, nor that I have been resolved into nothingness by virtue of being replaced in some way. Rather, substitution implies that an *irreducible transitivity, substitution, which is no single act, is happening all the time* (OB, 117). Whereas “persecution” suggests that something acts on me from the outside, ‘substitution’ suggests that something takes my place or, better, is always in the process of taking my place. (Butler, 2005, pp.89-90)

But if the other occupies my place, and if it is through this occupation that *my* place is created, then the place is never “singularly possessed” by anyone (Butler, 2012b, p.62). Or rather, this event puts into question what it means to possess or to have a place at all. Thus, there is a certain disjointedness in this displacement, in this occupation. Something other than the subject places itself in the place of the subject, and the subject finds its place only in the site occupied by the other. Thus, the other is not outside me, not “over there” at some distance from myself, but by placing itself in my place and thereby creating my places, it constitutes me. It’s a peculiar form of constitution which, at the same time, disrupts my ontological continuity (Butler, 2005, p.60).

If finding itself as displaced and substituted by an alterity forms one aspect of the ek-statism of the subject, then another aspect of this ek-statism seems to consist in Butler’s understanding, even if not explicit, of Levinas’s dual idea of persecution and substitution as iterative functions.¹⁶⁴ Occupation and persecution as modes of address do not function as singular events that produce the subject comprehensively. Rather, these are reiterative in the sense that in order for the subject to be, the originary scene of persecution and substitution must keep repeating itself. Substitution is “happening all the time”(Levinas in Butler, 2005, p.90); therefore, it is never happening

¹⁶⁴ My discomfort expressed at the possibility of depicting a definitive origin of the subject at the end of the foregoing paragraph results from this iterability of the inaugural impingement.

completely. It never fully takes that place of that which it takes the place of. The subject is never entirely displaced, and if the subject can find itself only through its displacement, then it can never fully find itself. I am inclined to think that this provides a crucial perspective on the philosophical understanding of what Butler calls “formative opacity” of the subject to itself (Butler, 2005, p.20).

Similarly, if substitution is understood as a continuous process of something’s being in the process of taking the subject’s place, then substitution never fully substitutes. It is always in the process of, hence never fully in the place of (the subject’s place). Or perhaps, as observed earlier, there is no singular space for the subject to begin with. Therefore, the scene of persecution and the act of substitution by the other must keep reiterating itself. It is only in and through reiteration that the subject exists such.

What makes the dual mode of the other’s address - namely, persecution and substitution - crucial to our exegesis is that both these modes articulate a transitivity at the ontological level. The absence of a singular space for either the subject or the other, and the understanding of the topos of the subject to be originating from the occupation by the other implies that there is a certain heterogeneity at the origin. Under such circumstances, the subject does not remain self-same, unaltered in its individuality. Rather, at the origin, the subject emerges as always already bound to the other. It is a bond that is contemporaneous with the emergence of the subject. As Butler asserts, if substitution conveys a sense of transitivity between the subject and the other, if it implies a comportment of the self towards the other, then it means that the topos of the subject is always already interrupted by the other, and this interruption binds the self, at its origin, with the other (Butler, 2005, p.63).

Analogously, if the subject emerges as a result of persecution, then the persecuting agency seems to be constitutively riveted to the emergent subject such that conceiving of the subject is rendered impossible without this persecuting alterity (Butler, 2005, p.62). Thus, persecution and substitution, as Butler argues, problematize the “proper” of the subject, rendering its being comported toward what is beyond itself, a manoeuvre that disrupts the sovereign self-presence that the metaphysical understanding of the ontology of the subject presupposes. Instead, the subject emerges as originally ek-static that comes into its place through an ever-recurring cohabitation, transitivity, and comportment toward what exceeds (and in its excess construes) it.

Establishing persecution and substitution as the two modes of the other's relation to the self, Butler's reading of Levinas proceeds to elaborate on the identity of the other and the location of its encounter with the pre-emergent subject. Who is the other? How and where does one encounter the other? To go back to Levinas, one meets the other, as mentioned earlier, in a face-to-face relation beyond the mediation of "the third".¹⁶⁵ In Levinas's later work, the figure of the face is presented as the paradigm for thinking about the intimate and, at the same time, distant encounter with the other. But what is the meaning of the face?

In a sense, the face exceeds meaning. As Levinas argues, the face is a "signification without context" (Levinas, 1982, p.86). Conceived of in terms of the face, the other loses all immediate signification. The face implies "meaning by itself", neither governed nor saturated by the immediate context within which we encounter it. One can be a number of things, one can bear the inscription of numerous concepts and categories, but none of them ever fully contains the face.¹⁶⁶ In this sense, one can say that there can be no phenomenology of the face. If vision appears to be synonymous with a signifiatory possession, the ultimate adequation of being with knowledge and the mode of rendering something fully present in the mode of comprehension, then the face cannot be seen as such.

As I read Levinas through Butler's lens, the conceptual status of the face appears to be harbouring some amount of ambiguity. Reading Levinas within Butler's conceptual frame, it is possible to isolate (at least) three moments of the face. First, the face appears as a modality of a relation with the other. This concept appears in Levinas's description of the asymmetric encounter with the other as a "face-to-face" situation/relation (Levinas, 1969). Second, the face comes across as that in the other which escapes and resists comprehension, eludes communion. In this sense, face signifies the other as the wholly other. Third - and this proceeds from the second moment - since the face comes to stand for the wholly other, it figures as wholly other in the strictest sense of the

¹⁶⁵ As Howard Caygill explains, Levinas calls the givenness of institutions through which the Other is given to us and through which we make sense of the other by perceiving something common between us as the "the third" (Caygill, 2002, p.65).

¹⁶⁶ "To be sure, most of the time the who is a what, We ask "Who is Mr. X?" and we answer: "He is the President of the State Council," or "He is Mr. So-and-so." The answer presents itself as a quiddity; it refers to a system of relations. To the question who? answers the non-qualifiable presence of an existent who presents himself without reference to anything, and yet distinguishes himself from every other existent. The question who? envisages a face. The notion of the face differs from every represented content." (Levinas, 1969, p.1969)

other in Levinas's work, especially the latter works (Levinas, 1969). However, the three expressions¹⁶⁷ do not posit a contradiction at the heart of the (non)concept of the face as, if read closely, it appears that the third sense can only materialize itself on the basis of the other two, and other two, in turn, anticipates the later. The face, thus, can signify both a modality of relation that defies the trope of assimilation and thereby allows one to be affected by alterity and the unassimilable wholly other which resists comprehension and disrupts the authority/command of the same.

But what is the mode of this disruption? Additionally, if the face is nonphenomenalizable and incomprehensible, or to be more precise, if the face emblemizes the resistance to comprehension, then how do we approach it? Moreover, if one looks at the face, as Levinas's (im)possible pursuit of alterity requires us to do, then what do we see? Butler draws our attention to this strange predicament of approaching the face in Levinas's work by referring to a striking instance of the instantiation of the face. Here, Butler reproduces Levinas's allusion to the face by way of referring to Levinas' paraphrasing of Vasily Grossman's novel *Life and Fate* (Grossman, n.d.). Levinas's paraphrase touches on the section¹⁶⁸ where Yevgenia has gone to Lubyanka and is awaiting her turn in a queue at the NKVD quarters to inquire about Kyrmov. Standing in the queue, she looks at the people in front of her. They are the relatives of other political detainees. Standing there, only the backs of those in front are visible to her, and looking at them she reflects that she has never thought that human backs could be "so expressive" and so able to convey emotions incisively (Grossman, n.d.). Describing Yevgenia's out-of-joint perception of the human back, Levinas writes that those backs and necks, with a "particular way of craning" seemed to "cry, sob, and scream" (Levinas, as cited in Butler, 2004a, p.133). This is how the face figures in Levinas's work. However, it goes without saying that neither is this the exclusive definition of the face, nor does this figuration gets reproduced in the case of other references to the face in Levinas's work.

¹⁶⁷ In Levinas's work, expression is at times equated with the face. However, here the word expression has been used in the general sense and should not be read as denoting the Levinasian connotation of the word.

¹⁶⁸ "Yevgenia had never realized that the human back could be so expressive, could so vividly reflect a person's state of mind. People had a particular way of craning their necks as they came up to the window; their backs, with their raised, tensed shoulders, seemed to be crying, to be sobbing and screaming." (*Life and Fate*, Vasily Grossman, Epub version, page number 1353, Part 3, Chapter 23)

Rather, one needs to understand this figuration in two senses from which two conclusions can be drawn.

First, Levinas's remarks here constitute a descriptive account of face, an account that, properly speaking, remains impossible as face demarcates the wholly other, the nonphenomenalizable, the inassimilable, beyond and before comprehension. Hence, the figuration of the face in the articulation of vulnerability expressed through a particular depiction of the human back needs to be regarded as a figuration in the literal sense. It is a figure, and hence not the face in its full presence. Rather, this figuration *supplements*, in the Derridian sense of the word, the face. I understand Butler to be conveying this sense when they write that the face can "never be named properly at all" (Butler, 2012b, p.56). And second, proceeding along this line of argument, one needs to understand that there can be no face without this figuration either. The face can only be thought of when the metaphor of the back is deployed. The face, therefore, remains as an (im)possible articulation. The deployment of a multitude of metaphors and figures for it suggests precisely this inarticulability and incomprehensibility. Levinas's paraphrasing of Grossman's novel, I contend, functions as one of the nodes in the network of rhetorical devices deployed to anticipate¹⁶⁹ the face. With these two clarifications, let us proceed to discuss the specific figuration Levinas borrowed from Grossman.

As Butler notes, and this seems to be consonant with the two clarifications we just provided, the face, in Levinas, is catachrestic. It is to be "found" in the back, in the neck, in their craning posture. However, it is not the face as such (Butler, 2004a, p.133). But then again, the face is not without them as well. One cannot comprehend the face as such, but its presence is felt in its incomprehensibility. Hence, the only way to "understand" the face is to understand the rhetorical devices as catachrestic. Even though the face cannot be represented as such, it nonetheless articulates vulnerability, pain, and suffering. It appears to sob in pain, and scream in extreme agony "as if they were a face, or rather a face with a mouth, a throat, from which vocalizations emerge" (Butler, 2004a, p.133), but the use of the word "vocalization" is merely nominal as the articulation of pain and suffering does not really reach the level of speech. And even if it does, it remains as a

¹⁶⁹ I am calling these rhetorical devices anticipatory because as Levinas maintains, and as becomes clear from Butler's exposition, the face is messianic.

speech that is not a speech at all, at least not in the general sense of the word. As Butler writes, this speech does not emerge from a mouth. It is the articulation of the face, or to be precise, this articulation is the face; the face appears as articulation, as the vocalization of that which is not reducible to what the mouth is incapable of uttering (Butler, 2004a, 132-133). By way of addressing itself to the other (i.e., the preemergent subject), this non-vocal vocalization becomes a command. But this commandment comes with the invocation of a murderous impulse as well. As Levinas writes -

The Other is the sole being I can wish to kill. I can wish. And yet this power is quite the contrary of power. The triumph of this power is its defeat as power. At the very moment when my power to kill realizes itself, the other has escaped me I have not looked at him in the face, I have not encountered his face. The temptation of total negation ... this is the presence of the face. To be in relation with the other face to face is to be unable to kill. It is also the situation of discourse. (Levinas, as cited in Butler, 2004a, p.138)

This statement, reproduced from Levinas's *Is Ontology Fundamental* (Levinas, 1996c), comes after Levinas's explanation on how the other cannot be possessed or comprehended by the "I". As already discussed, one encounters the other within a given historical framework and a network of universal concepts. However, these concepts and frameworks reduce the otherness of this other, a reduction that Levinas calls negation. That is, comprehension eliminates the singularity of the other. But there remains in the other certain aspects, unquantifiable and unqualifiable, which cannot be comprehended or categorized since they are beyond and before all languages and modes of comprehension. This is what constitutes the wholly other for Levinas, and by virtue of this, it cannot be negated. Hence, to possess or make this wholly other amenable to the "I" is to negate it comprehensively,¹⁷⁰ to kill it. As this wholly other figures in the face, a total negation would mean the failure to regard the face. The ontological framework functions by reducing alterity to the same where encounter with the other would always imply a primary desire

¹⁷⁰ The word "Comprehensively" bears a dual signification. First, it harbours the Levinasian understanding of comprehension, and second, it carries a sense of totality and finality.

to negate alterity by trying to comprehend it through categories, histories, and narratives. It is in this respect that being encountered by the face elicits a wish to kill, i.e., negate the other because its negation is possible only as a total negation - as murder (Levinas, 1996c, p.9).

But as Butler suggests, if the invocation of murderous violence forms one aspect of the face, then another would be an inability to kill, a call to peace. Immediately after reference to Grossman in his attempt to depict the face, Levinas describes the face in this manner - "the face as extreme precariousness of the other. Peace as awakes to the precariousness of the other" (Butler, 2009, p.134). Framed in the structure of similes devoid of any "commitment to the order of being" (Butler, 2004a, p.134), it suggests that the face articulates its own vulnerability, and placed in the context of our foregoing discussion, it appears that the command to refrain from killing must arise from this articulation of the precarity of the face. One must respond to this command that proclaims "thou shall not kill". The call to nonviolence does not derive from any consequentialist or deontological position, claims Butler. The subject is subjectivated through the address of the other. Therefore the other is always already placed "at the heart of the ipseity of the subject" (Butler, 2012b, 60), and we must refrain from inflicting violence on the other because we owe the other for our existence, and it is this "primary and unwilled relation" to the other that commands us to refrain from responding violently towards it. At times, this task may seem immensely difficult, especially when it comes to the question of self-preservation. But the commandment of the face, or rather the commandment as the face, the face as saying "thou shall not kill" still exerts its authority. In such instances, nonviolence on the part of the subject does not follow from some abstract belief in peace. Rather, as Levinas explicates following the biblical narrative of Esau and Jacob, nonviolence follows from a violent contradiction within the subject (and the Other) where one must violently oppose one's desire to kill (Butler, 2012b, pp.58-59).¹⁷¹

Butler draws our attention to the fact that according to Levinas, this inability to kill is also "the situation of discourse" (Butler, 2004a, p.138). Commenting on this, Butler makes clear that the linking of the commandment of the face to the question of discourse is not tangential to Levinas. As already observed, the face makes an ethical demand upon me. But in what sense can

¹⁷¹ Butler makes the same point in *Ethical Ambivalence*, arguing that "there is no becoming ethical save a certain violence" (Butler, 2000, p.26).

discourse be said to bear a similar relation to the subject? As Butler argues, prior to our entry into language and the subsequent subjectivation into language, we must be addressed by the other. Thus, in a sense, the other comes before me, and it is through the address of the other that I am rendered to “assume” language. Thus, the absence of the other would signify the death of language, since language - which is always already writing - cannot *be* without reiteration. In the absence of the other, how would an iteration become possible? Hence, the death of the other would also imply the death of language. As I interpret it, Butler’s reading of Levinas’s remark on *face-to-face-as-the-situation-of-discourse* seems to resonate with the Derridian understanding of writing and language (Derrida, 1988).

Also, following Butler, if we move away from the immediate Levinasian context and look at the statement discussed above in light of the Foucauldian understanding of discourse, we see emerging another dimension for drawing a parallel between the face and the discourse. Just as the face inaugurates the subject by subjecting it to an inaugural violence and formatively binds itself to it, discourse too, exists before one’s subjectivation. Without the discursive interpellation, there can be no subject. And whatever the subject articulates, it articulates through that discursive framework. Thus, through its relation to discourse, the subject remains forever distant from itself. Its giving account of itself becomes possible through something that is not immediately or fully present to her. Approaching discourse in this manner provides another interpretive model for approaching Levinas’s parallelism between the face-to-face relation and discourse.

The responsibility toward the other and the will to refrain from violence in order to preserve its life comes from my debt toward the other. But also, as the other is always already “in” me, violence to the other would translate into violence towards my own condition of living. Violence towards the other can be translated into violence against the condition of one’s emergence and one’s existence, conditions which I share with the other. The impetus to not eliminate the other thus becomes functional in this respect as well. It does not come from the instinct of self-preservation, but from the understanding a differentially shared ground.

Thus, our discussion elaborates on how the other emerges as integral to the self and how its emergence is constitutively premised on the other. This primeval relationality to the other establishes a radical “unfreedom” (Butler, 2012b, 43) at the heart of the subject, and allows us to understand the being of the self, the subject to be implicated in and implicating the other. Terms

such as “relation”, and “interdependency” acquire new hermeneutic features that obviate the possibility of thinking the subject as sovereign, self-referential, self-contained, and self-sufficient, and open the horizon of thought towards conceiving it as originally bound to and comported towards the other. Without fulfilling this primary condition of relationality, the subject’s emergence and the existence of the subject would remain unviable.

Understanding the Hegelian “Sense”: Butler with Hegel

The general understanding regarding the periodization of Judith Butler’s work often tends to posit her post-9/11 writings as manifesting an ethical turn in the context of her oeuvre (Schippers, 2014). The writings of this period, starting from around 2001 if we were to accept the periodization above, revolve around contemporary figures of philosophy and critical theory such as Levinas, Adorno, Laplanche, and Benjamin, among others. Apart from this contemporary cast of theorists, Hegel is another figure who exerts a veritable amount of critical charge in shaping Butler’s ethical paradigm. However, starting from the premise that places Hegel as a source for Butler’s ethico-political cartography in their post-9/11 writings runs into at least two major problems.

First, such a premise limits the import of the Hegelian framework only within the ethical paradigm as it regards the role of Hegel in Butler’s work as a functionary providing a theoretical basis primarily for Butler’s ethical project. Second, and this correlates with the first, it assumes that questions concerning the ethical figures only in Butler’s later writings. Even though this second point helps to delineate a neat classification of Butler’s works over the last three and a half decades, it fails to consider the ethical valence of Butler’s early works. Also, if we pay attention to Butler’s intellectual lineage and the mode of her theorization in the context of continental philosophy in general, compartmentalization of the ethical as distinct from epistemology, ontology, and politics appears unsustainable. If attending to the query regarding Butler’s motivation for reading Hegel seems to be unnecessary and impossible given that it would drag us to embark on an unproductive adventure to understand the writer’s intention and subsequently compel us to deliberate upon whether these intentions were justly fulfilled in their writings, responding to the question of whether ethics function as the primary framework for Butler’s reading of Hegel might not be

unimportant or altogether impossible. However, this is not something the current project intends to take up as its task. Instead, of interest to us is that aspect of Butler's reading of Hegel which risks getting eclipsed by a compartmentalized focus on the ethical. This aspect is that of ontology, and the ethical charge of Butler's interpretation of Hegel is *entangled*¹⁷² with this ontology.

Butler's engagement with Hegel begins with their first book-length work that investigates the role of desire in Hegel's phenomenology and its 20th-century reception in France. Even though this early work focuses on a very particular section of Hegel's body of work, the insights drawn from that engagement remained one of the critical components in Butler's later works as well. their theorization of the materiality of the body, the performativity of gender, and the ideation of the universal as a domain subject to contestations and resignification tends to go back, at least in some way, to their reading of Hegel. As Butler themselves mentions in the preface to the second edition of their treatise on Hegel, "in a sense" all their works remain within a "certain set" of Hegelian questions (Butler, 2012a, p. xx). Thus, on the one hand, Butler's reading of Hegel is an interested one that attempts to deal with a particular set of questions. On the other hand, this interested reading of Hegel shapes Butler's formulations in later works.

But what is this "sense" in which Butler understands her works to be dwelling within the Hegelian plane? What are the questions that guide their engagement with Hegel? To Butler, this "sense" and these "questions" concern the role of alterity and relationality in ontology, and Hegel's development of the concept of recognition becomes the primary axis of that. As will be discussed in this section, the relation to alterity does not proceed from a predefined subject. Neither is recognition an action where one self-present subject grants recognition to another self-present subject. On the contrary, before its relation with alterity, as Butler develops the ontological frame through their reading of Hegel, there can be no subject as such. Recognition, in this reading, stages the emergence of this subject, rendering its ontology ek-static where being is forever beyond and beside itself.

¹⁷² The word entanglement has been deployed here in the sense it has been developed in Karen Barad's reading of Niels Bohr where entanglement is understood as ontological inseparability of agents or agencies involved in a particular scene where these agents do not pre-exist their relation and where this relation actively, albeit provisionally, produces these entities. (Barad, 2007)

It is not that these aspects were already present in Hegel's framework, and neither is it the case that Butler's engagement focuses on a mere repetition of the same. Repeating Hegel's dominant interpretations would have moved us to a metaphysical understanding of ontology governed by totality and the discourse of presence since the Hegelian system often appears to be subjected to such an interpretation (Heidegger, 2002). Rather, Butler's reading of Hegel actively produces through engagement with his work such a concept of ontology where being is provisionally defined by its originary relation with the other.

This is not to claim that Butler was the first to approach the Hegelian totality through the lens of relationality. Rather, the point is twofold. First, even if Butler's examination of Hegel's theory is influenced by and resonates with some other Hegel scholars,¹⁷³ they arrive at the site of her position on Hegel based on *her* engagement with the philosopher. Second, Just as Hegel's writings do not allow it to be approached as a narrative structure where narrative passively conveys the central propositions of the text, Butler's reading of Hegel moves in a similar manner where instead of finding themselves in the form of propositions, the ontological insights generated through their reading of Hegel is enacted in critical engagement with Hegel's writing.

As we have already mentioned, the presence of Hegel as an ethical figure in Butler's work follows from the ontological frame that Butler's reading generates through their reading of his works. But as the current project is tasked with charting out the ontological paradigm of Butler and the questions of how this paradigm is forged through their reading of a number of continental philosophers, our focus in this section, like our previous discourses, would focus only on the ontological aspects that Butler formulates through engaging with Hegel's work. Even though the questions of the ethical inevitably emerge from this ontology, from a methodological perspective we will have to focus solely on ontology. The current project does not intend to argue that ethics is secondary or comes as a derivative discourse.¹⁷⁴ Even if ethics proves to be the natural correlate of Butler's ek-static ontology based on their inquiry of Hegel, the current project does not include a detailed discussion of this domain and attends only to the questions of ontological import.

¹⁷³ To give an example, in their treatise on Hegel (Butler, 2012a), they remains critical of one of the major 20th century Hegel scholar, but their own position on Hegel seem to be in a productive dialogue with Hyppolite.

¹⁷⁴ As briefly hinted at page (mention the first page of this section).

Butler's Reading of Hegel: Toward an Ek-static Ontology

Butler's approach to Hegel is parasitic. The insights their engagement generates do not come from a transcendent reading of Hegel's texts where the general goal is to excavate propositions from the text. It does not set out to find referents and propositions that transcend the body of the text, but in a Hegelian vein, generates insights through an immanent reading of Hegel. Hence, to understand Butler's reading of Hegel which leads toward developing ontology as originally ek-static, it is required that we focus on the narrative and textual strategies of Hegel's work. The ontological insights that Butler formulates by engaging with Hegel depend on the understanding of Hegel's textual strategies and the manner in which they investigate certain Hegelian concepts that result in the formation of an ek-static ontology. Hence, this discussion would begin by focusing on Hegel's narrative techniques that Butler elaborates on, and from there it would proceed towards understanding the ontological structure of Hegel's emergent subject.

Before beginning the discussion, we need to give a disclaimer. Even though we have referred to Hegel's works in the plural, our focus here would be primarily on his magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel, 1977). However, it does not imply that the narrative framework deployed in phenomenology is exclusive only to this work. Rather, this framework can be seen to manifest itself in a number of Hegel's works. But as our focus is solely on Butler's engagement with Hegel, and as this engagement primarily involves their reading of *Phenomenology*, our discussion of Butler's investigation of certain aspects of the Hegelian paradigm would be based exclusively on the *Phenomenology of spirit* (Hegel, 1977). With this disclaimer in place, let us now turn to Hegel's textual strategies.

To Butler, what appears to be the crucial point of Hegel's argumentation is its defiance of the "ontological assumptions of linear reading" (Butler, 2012a, p.18). As discussed earlier in this project, the ontological assumption of linear reading is typical of what Butler calls the "metaphysics of substance" (Butler, 1999, pp.27-28) which relies on the uncritical belief that grammatical composition reflects the general structure of being. The presence of transitive in the proposition "A is B" assumes a prior self-presence of A, with the predicate B providing a commentary on A, enriching or clarifying it in a certain sense. Such a statement becomes possible only on the basis of the presupposition that no matter what B does to the status of A, A exists in itself as a fully self-

referential, self-contained, self-sufficient existent beyond and before anything and everything that might befall it. It implies that A maintains a sovereign existence and a self-referential, self-present ontological status, and B maintains a relation of absolute exteriority to the ontological totality of A. This is what an ontological pull of linear reading entails, and it is this pull that Hegel's narrative, Butler elucidates, actively circumvents by placing the structure of being in a particular motion that renders ontological claims determined by presence impossible. What does the textual structure of *Phenomenology* look like?

Let's assume that A is a moment in the genesis of the emergent subject of Hegel. At first, A appears to itself and to us as being certain of itself as a "true self certainty" (Hegel, 1977, p.109). In ontological terms, it means that its being is completely independent, sovereign, and determined by nothing other than itself. In the Hegelian parlance, such a presentation of A presents it as an undifferentiated and unmediated entity. But it soon emerges that what A claimed it was *for-itself* fails to capture its true essence. That is, the representation of A is inadequate either because certain issues emerging from its onto-epistemic claims cannot be justly addressed from its own theoretical premise. Or, the representation is inadequate because upon close inspection of itself and its condition of possibility, A arrives at the realization that what it assumed to be certain of cannot be sustained in the last analysis. Thus, what A assumed to be its true essence was merely an appearance and is far from its true meaning. However, this disillusionment does not develop from issues, concerns, or questions coming from outside. Rather, what destabilizes A's self-certainty and sovereignty develops immanently from its own presuppositions and undertakings. This destabilization results in the emergence of a revised version of A where this version appears to have addressed those previous issues. But the moment A believes itself to have attained a ground of stability, once again it undergoes a similar phase of crisis, and once again, it revises itself. Such is the narrative structure of Hegel's work that refuses to grant ontological stability to the subject (represented as A in the last paragraph).

As Butler notes, in the Hegelian framework it is not that something established in the previous paragraph or section comes undone in the next, for such a narrative structure would presume that prior to its undoing, the entity had some amount of ontological integrity determined in terms of presence. Instead, the radical nature of Hegel's narrative strategy lies in its immanent structure. That is, in one paragraph Hegel enacts a proposition in the form of a sentence or

sentences, but instead of corroborating or strengthening this enacted proposition, the subsequent sections make a gesture that begins to destabilize it. But even though this destabilizing element appears to be coming from a location other than that of the enacted proposition, it actually arises from the premise or clauses of the same proposition that it then destabilizes. In a sense, what was outside was inside all along. But in order to understand this, A needs to relinquish its previous self and reinvent itself so that it can understand the outside as constitutive of its own being.

Highlighting this, Butler writes that after advancing a proposition -

...a certain turn takes place—sometimes it is within a subordinate clause, or sometimes it takes place through a shift in tone or modulation of voice. At such a point, we see that the original point of view...has slowly been called into question. For that particular claim to be called into question is not quite the same as exposing a basic corrosion within the propositional or the declarative sequence, and yet something of the confidence of the initial sequence is rattled by what comes next. And what has come next actually seems to follow from what came before, which means that the seeds of unrest—what Hegel time and again called *Unruhe*—were there from the start; they were simply unseen or set aside at the beginning of the exposition. So this unsettling happens, but neither as the sudden outbreak of nihilism nor as the violent renunciation of what came before. (Butler, 2012a, 92)

Following Butler's lead, we can say that in ontological terms, the movement of Hegel's text places being within a temporality such that its ontological integrity is forever differed and deferred from itself. It is not how it presents itself, for its presence always already exceeds itself. It is in this light that we need to understand what Butler refers to as the belated and failed capture of the referent (Butler, 2012a). Belatedness does not signify the prior self-sufficient presence of the referent, and the scene of reference necessarily results in failure not because of its inability to fully re-present the self-present referent, for such an understanding can operate only on the basis of presupposing a primordial ontological totality of the referent.

Additionally, the deployment of the word "capture" also tends to imply a relation of externality between two components - that which is captured, and that which captures. But Butler's reading of Hegel does not regard the Hegelian subject to be operating in such a

metaphysical manner. Rather, its “capture” in the act of reference necessarily fails and the act of capturing is always belated because this act renders the subject under consideration radically other to itself. To simplify, the referent was claimed to be something, but the act of making this claim renders the referent something other than what that claim represented. And this is the general structure of Hegel’s referential scene, where the referent is always other to itself. In other words, the referent *is* only to the extent that it is other to itself. Hence, belated and failed capture of the referent, as Butler reads Hegel, speaks not of the metaphysical structure of the referent but rather of the ek-static nature of its being - if it can be called “being” at all.

As Hegel notes in the introductory section of *Phenomenology*, his project aims to understand the movement of natural consciousness moving toward finding the true knowledge of itself in a manner where it encounters obstacles such that those obstacles appear to be a way of attaining increasingly “purer” understanding of itself, and through this experience it finds the absolute truth about itself (Hegel, 1977, p.49). Even though at the beginning of each phase these obstacles appear to be external to the emergent subject, in the end, they are reconstituted as part of the “immanent dynamic” of the subject itself, and this reconstitution works through the mechanism of what Hegel calls *Aufgehoben* (Butler, 2012a, pp.6-7). It is here that the importance of Hegel’s narrative strategy becomes important because the dyadic relation in which the emergent subject of phenomenology finds itself never presupposes any ontological totality on the part of the *relatas*. Rather, what the emergent subject encounters along the path of its “self-discovery” seems to emerge from the internal necessity of the structure of the subject itself. Even though the subject was unaware of it, what it encountered outside has always been constitutive of it. Hence, the previous understanding of the subject crumbles as it becomes “increasingly aware of its own interrelatedness” with what it had earlier considered itself independent of (Butler, 2021, p.44).

The emergent subject of *Phenomenology*, notes Butler, cannot know itself immediately but needs to be mediated through alterity to understand itself. Butler calls this the “irony” of the structure of Hegel’s subject because it needs mediation to truly know itself, and it comes to “know itself *as* the very structure of mediation” (Butler, 2012a, pp.6-7). Hence, knowing itself effectively means knowing itself outside its own self, by becoming mediated through something and becoming other to itself. Thus, the subject appears as a “reflexive structure” without which there

can be no subject at all (Butler, 2012a, pp.6-7). In this sense, it can be said that Hegel's emerging subject, as Butler reads Hegel, is forever outside itself.

It would be a fallacy to consider this subject in terms of an individualist metaphysics which understands its structure to be governed by immediacy, self-presence, and self-sufficiency. Rather, to know the subject within the Hegelian framework, one must find the subject's relational paradigm that constitutes it. Thus, the traditional binary framework of being/knowing cannot be the proper frame to understand it since such a framework can operate only on the basis of the assumption that the object of knowledge is already present to itself, and that the task of knowing is to capture this presence adequately. But Hegel's emergent subject stands in variance with such a framework that understands being in terms of the constant presence of self-sameness. Instead, in Butler's reading, the Hegelian subject always remains in a relation of differing and deferral to itself, not because its existence exceeds its representation but because from its very inception, it is never fully present to itself. The fact that the Hegelian subject is understood as a journey where the subject discovers itself through its relation to others does not imply a prior givenness of the subject. Instead, self-discovery means that the subject, through its encounter with alterity and reconstituting it as immanent to itself, is produced anew through each such encounters. This is what Butler asserts when they write–

whatever self emerges in the course of the Phenomenology of the Spirit is always at a temporal remove from its former appearance; it is transformed through its encounter with alterity, not in order to return to itself, but to become a self it never was. Difference casts it forth into an irreversible future. To be a self is, on these terms, to be at a distance from who one is, not to enjoy the prerogative of self-identity (what Hegel calls self-certainty), but to be cast, always, outside oneself, Other to oneself. (Butler, 2004b, 148)

This, argues Butler in a polemic against Jessica Benjamin's reading of Hegel, cannot be described through the metaphor of inclusion as Benjamin tends to do in her work, for there can be no self before its exposure to the alterity. The self *is* its encounter with alterity, hence, "inclusion" or "incorporation" would be failed metaphors for this ek-static existence (Butler, 2004b, p.150). Thus, to Butler, the Hegelian subject is not a self-identical subject that moves from one ontological

location to another. Rather, “it [the subject] *is* its travels, and *is* every place in which it finds itself” (Butler, 2012a, p.8).¹⁷⁵

Reading Butler closely, one might argue in a Hegelian vein that the subject can never really find itself, since at the moment of its “self-discovery” it discovers that it is not what it thought itself to be. Hence, the subject’s being is precisely the moment of its negation. Addressing this aspect, Butler calls the Hegelian subject a “rhetorical agency” as it is always more than what it knows itself to be and becomes increasingly aware of its own structure by reading itself rhetorically, i.e., by “reading the meanings it unwittingly *enacts* against those it explicitly *intends*” (Butler, 2012a, p.31). The rhetorical structure, therefore, implies that the subject is always beyond itself, and it is towards this “beyond” that the subject advances.¹⁷⁶

However, this being as being-beyond or being-as-more-than does not emerge ex-nihilo. Rather, typical of Hegelian style, this “forging ahead” of the emergent subject takes place through its relation to alterity. Alterity, with respect to the emergent subject, would simply mean what is other to itself. Otherness implies that which the emergent subject is not. The existence of alterity signifies that the emergent subject is lacking something, and this jeopardizes its claim to universality. This lack, the state of *being-not* is understood by Hegel as negative. However, the emergent subject always seeks to lay claim to universality, and it can be done only if the sovereignty of the object is annulled and is subsequently reconceived as dependent on the emergent subject.

¹⁷⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy echoes a similar sentiment when commenting on the Hegelian subject he writes “The subject is what it does. It is its act...” (Nancy, 2002, p.5).

¹⁷⁶ Even though Butler understands the Hegelian subject to be radically ek-static, their own writing at times deploys certain metaphors that tend to verge on collapsing into the metaphysical structure of presence. Much like what Butler comments on the rhetorical structure of the Hegelian subject, Butler’s own statement tends to unwittingly enact certain meanings which they intend to criticise explicitly. For example, while commenting on how the subject achieves more comprehensive understanding of itself by reading itself in a rhetorical manner, Butler uses the metaphor of recovery - “As a rhetorical agency, the Hegelian subject always knows more than it thinks it knows, and by reading itself rhetorically, i.e., reading the meanings it unwittingly enacts against those it explicitly intends, it recovers ever greater dimensions of its own identity” (Butler, 2012a, p.31). Recovery, in the general sense, assumes that there is already a presence that is recovered by the newly developed features of the subject. But that is not the case. The Hegelian subjects bends the classical notion of temporality. The subject is already there in one sense, but at the same time it is not there as such, it has yet to emerge through the immanent potential of reflective forms of life. The subject *is*, and the subject is also *yet to come*. However, the subject as yet-to-come would not be a mere extended or enhanced version of the previously existing subject, but it would provide an occasion for a radical restructuring of the erstwhile subject. Therefore, these two poles of temporality, which exist at the same time, go against the classical, linear notion of time; therefore, the word “recover” poses certain difficulties.

Thus, the object is both cancelled and preserved. This movement with regard to alterity is broadly understood as *Aufhebung* or negation. Negative and negation play a crucial role in Hegel's system. It would not be wrong to understand Hegel's emergent subject as the progressive manifestation of the "labour of the negative" (Butler, 2012a, p.41).

Hegel's phenomenology attempts to understand how the journeying subject starts from the simplest and most immediate form of consciousness that he calls "sense-certainty" and proceeds towards the absolute (Houlgate, 2013, p.31). Initially, it assumes sense-certainty to be the foundation of presuppositionless knowledge. It believes that things can be known in their immediacy and that nothing else is required to gain knowledge of it. However, the statements that establish sense-certainty as the true abstraction enact something other than its explicit intentions as it soon emerges that its claims cannot be fulfilled from within its own theoretical premise. From here, the journey of the emergent subject's self-discovery leads it to what Hegel calls "perception", and upon realizing the inability of this new framework to satisfy what it seeks, it proceeds towards an increasingly comprehensive knowledge of itself through what Hegel calls "Force" (Hegel, 1977, pp.58-103). This movement is set in motion through the work of the negative. Whenever the emergent subject comes to the understanding that it is not universal and that it lacks something, it creates a movement within the subject. Prior to the self-reflection of its own premise in relation to the encountered object, consciousness took itself to be the true abstraction, to be fully self-sufficient and independent. But the moment it engages in self-reflection, the presence of the other destabilizes its universality and subsequently leads the subject to reconceive itself.

However, it does not mean that the newly emerged comprehensive subject completely annuls its previous manifestation. On the contrary, its previous manifestation remains within the rejuvenated subject through its cancellation. Every experience of lack, every experience of *being-not* demarcates the subject in a certain manner. In its various stages of self-knowledge, the emergent subject finds that whatever it took to be certain was insufficient, and from there it moves towards altering its structure such that those insufficiencies can be overcome. But despite this, none of the earlier modes of insufficient being or knowing is entirely annulled. Instead, insufficiency proves essential for further knowledge, allowing the subject to become more comprehensive by overcoming its previous deficiencies (Butler, 2021, p.44). In this sense, the previous stage of *being-not* is preserved within the newly emerged being. This is why this movement that Hegel calls

Aufhebung implies a dual function - cancellation and preservation. This movement is repeated again and again, and every such experience revises the structure of the subject. Hence, the negative appears as productive for Hegel's emergent subject.

Simply put, I know that the thing or object that I want to know, or the knowledge I want to attain, is not present within my own being. It is located somewhere outside the contour of my immediate existence. In terms of the being that I am, my relation to this object is one of negativity, something that is not present within my being. But there exists another side to this negativity. The fact that the object I encounter is not in me also implies that I am not that object either, leading to another conclusion that my existence is determined by this *being-not*, i.e., the negative. Thus, this state of *being-not* already places the self in a positive relation to negativity. Negation is a positive act in this sense.¹⁷⁷ The self always poses itself as a determination that sets the limit to itself, and this limit becomes definitive of its being. In order to be, the self must be posited in opposition to other beings. Now, if a being is defined by its status of not being some other being, then this other being becomes constitutive of the determinate identity of the former being. This particular being is then defined "by virtue of the specific ways they are not other things" (Butler & Malabou, 2011, p.625). For instance, Hegel begins his discussion of the *Thing* by noting its independence and self-sufficiency. In ontological terms, the structure of the being of the *Thing* initially appears to be governed by presence since it is a self-referential and bounded entity contained within its own determinate conceptual contour. But if it is independent and fully present to itself by virtue of its relation of non-dependence on other beings, then this very statement of being *in*-dependent of others implies that it needs the presence of others in order to be independent. Therefore, these others that stand in a relation of negativity to its independence become integral to its independence.¹⁷⁸ Negativity thus proves to be productive of the Hegelian self. In ontological terms,

¹⁷⁷ Hyppolite stresses the positive aspect of negation which leads us towards a new position. And it is through this mechanism that the subject becomes more capable and comprehensive. Echoing Hegel, Hyppolite calls this the "disquiet of the self" which leads it to constantly become something other than itself, preventing a simple relation of identity to itself. The Hegelian self, argues Hyppolite, "never coincides with itself, for it is always other in order to be itself" (Hyppolite, 1974, p.150)

¹⁷⁸ "This determinateness, which constitutes the essential character of the Thing and distinguishes it from all others, is now defined in such a way that the Thing is thereby in opposition to other things, but is supposed to preserve its independence in this opposition. But it is only a Thing or a One that exists on its own account, in so far as it does not stand in this relation to others; for this relation establishes rather its continuity with others, and for it to be connected with others is to cease to exist on its own account." (Hegel, 1977, p.75)

it destabilizes the framework of presence, because, as Butler observes, no matter how “determinate” (i.e. stable and identical to itself) this being becomes, it loses that determination when it regards the fact that its stability and self-sameness comes from its relation to other beings (Butler & Malabou, 2011, p.626). In this sense, a relation to alterity remains fundamental from the early moments of the emergence of the self.

What emerges from this is that the ontological structure of the emergent subject of Hegel’s phenomenology is reflexive. It can know itself by going outside itself, it needs to find itself by finding its own self reflected in and by something which is other to it. Reflection here is not similar to how this word is used in regular discussion, where reflection figures a passive function. Instead, as Butler claims, for Hegel reflection always presupposes an ontological relatedness (Butler, 2012a, p.8) which constitutes the Hegelian subject. The subject which seeks reflection outside itself is not identical to the subject which is affirmed by that reflection since reflection significantly alters the subject. That is, a different structure emerges everytime the emergent subject engages with the negative in the act of reflection. Therefore, the relation between what the subject *was* to what the subject *is* now, cannot be that of an identity. As I read it, the relation is one of difference. To quote Butler -

the subject that encounters an object or Other, or some feature of the world as external and ontologically disparate, is not identical with the subject that discovers itself reflected in and by those ostensibly external phenomena. In other words, before mediated self-reflection is achieved, the subject knows itself to be a more limited, less autonomous being than it potentially is. In discovering that reflection is possible, and that every reflection reveals a relation constitutive of the subject, a way in which it is integrally related to the world that it previously did not understand, the subject thus cultivates a more expanded conception of its place. (Butler, 2012a, p.7)

This reflexivity of the subject is what Hegel calls *desire*. It articulates the reflexive structure of being and experience, implying that the subject is other to itself. The stage of being outside of or other to itself is when the subject understands itself as a being conscious of its onto-epistemic needs, i.e. it emerges as self-consciousness (Butler, 2004b, p.149). Thus, for Hegel, desire appears as

the “principle of self-consciousness” (Butler, 2012a, p.7). That is, self-consciousness can *be* only to the extent that it negates, in the sense of *Aufhebung*, the alterity it encounters, and through this it becomes other to itself and expands itself. The assertion that desire is the principle of self-consciousness has immense ontological import.

Desire, as mentioned, is a negating activity. As the “sensuous expression” of self-consciousness (Butler, 2012a, p.33), desire operates by negating objects that oppose the monopoly of the emergent subject which, at this stage, appears as self-consciousness. When it encounters another object, it is consumed by the feeling that it is not absolute. Whereas earlier it understood itself to be universal, it now comes to see that there exists things other than itself, an experience that destabilizes its universality and lays bare its “ontological limitations” (Butler, 2012a, p.34). However, a paradox appears at the heart of the movement of desire.

As Butler notes, desire appears to function in two opposing ways. Upon encountering alterity, it attempts to negate it, and in this movement the subject gets enthralled with the alterity. Thus, on the hand hand, this encounter with the other gives rise to the possibility of the subject’s losing itself. But on the other hand, when the subject attempts to re-establish its claim to universality by negating this object, it loses alterity (Butler, 2012a, p.34). This paradox is overridden in desire’s new thematization when it comes to understand the sensuous world as constitutive of itself (Butler, 2012a, pp.34-35; Hegel, 1977, p.105). Thus, the relation between Hegel’s emerging subject and the sensuous world - which Hegel calls *life* at this stage - appears to be a binding one because even though the emergent subject in the mode of self-consciousness performs negation of worldly (living) objects it encounters, the existence of these objects proves necessary for the existence of self-consciousness itself.¹⁷⁹ If self-consciousness is desire in general, and if desire reconceives these objects, i.e. alterity, and thereby is constitutively bound to these objects, then

¹⁷⁹ “self-consciousness is...certain of itself only by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life; self-consciousness is Desire. Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that this nothingness is for it the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a true certainty, a certainty which has become explicit for self-consciousness itself in an objective manner. In this satisfaction, however, experience makes it aware that the object has its own independence. Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification, are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other : in order that this supersession can take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness, by its negative relation to the object, is unable to supersede it; it is really because of that relation that it produces the object again, and the desire as well. It is in fact something other than self-consciousness that is the essence of Desire...” (Hegel, 1977, p.109)

alterity proves to be formative of desire/self-consciousness itself(Butler, 2012a, 35). Commenting on this, Butler writes -

self-consciousness now knows itself as an agency of destruction. Its certainty of itself is, of course, dependent on that object that once was and now no longer is. In effect, a destructive agent has no identity without a world to be destroyed... (Butler, 2012a, p.37)

In this sense, desire as the structure of self-consciousness renders the ontology of the Hegelian subject explicitly *ek-static* where alterity proves to be constitutive of the subject.

It is within such a process that Hegel's emergent subject encounters another entity just like itself. That is, it faces another self-consciousness. Even though prior to this self-consciousness was encountering lifeless things and only at this stage encounters another consciousness like itself, it does not imply that this new self-consciousness emerges on the scene *ex-nihilo*. Rather, even though the formal encounter occurs much later in the journey of Hegel's "travelling metaphysician" (Butler, 2012a, p.44), its emergence is the manifestation into "explicit reality" of what was present earlier in a nascent or implicit form (Butler, 2012a, p.47). In the ontogenesis of Hegel's emergent subject, it was implicitly present as a *mere being* when the emergent subject appeared in the form of self-certainty; as a concrete *thing* in perception, and as *force* in understanding (Hegel, 1977, p.104). And it's through their constitutive *aufhebung* that the subject ends up in reconceiving the other as another being like itself, i.e., as another self-consciousness. Thus, it would be a misreading of phenomenology if someone regards the emergence of the new self-consciousness as a sudden occurrence. Rather, from the beginning of its journey in sense-certainty, this other has always already been immanent to the structure and experience of the Hegelian subject. But whereas from sense-certainty to the moment prior to its encounter with another self-consciousness alterity appeared in the form of lifeless objects, at this stage, the primary self-consciousness realizes that if it is to maintain its sense of stability and universality, this alterity must be another self-conscious structure like itself. Let us elaborate.

To exist as itself, self-consciousness must negate whatever it encounters. Negation thus proves constitutive of self-consciousness because even if the appearance of alterity puts into question the absolute identity of self-consciousness, as a desiring being it (i.e., self-consciousness)

cannot retain its sense of being without relating to this alterity in the mode of negation. Without this, it would forfeit its own existence. Therefore, as Butler observes, self-consciousness proves to be an entity that “must relate itself to another being in order to become itself” (Butler, 2012a, p.44). Also, if self-consciousness cannot do away with alterity in any final sense, then alterity must emerge as unsurpassable. Even if it negates one form of alterity and asserts its identity, it would need another other to maintain its own self. Thus, self-consciousness is never free of its constitutive attachment to externality. It can never achieve a “static unity” with externality, and therefore remains “hopelessly beyond its own grasp” forever (Butler, 2012a, p.44). The identity of the being of the self is thus always other to itself. Such an ontological structure destabilizes the theorization of the structure of being in terms of presence since being, as Butler reads Hegel, is never identical or co-extensive to itself, but always remains in a metastable state where it lacks unity with itself and discovers its meaning in exteriority.

To proceed along the journey of self-consciousness, we have already observed that in order to *be*, it needs alterity. But despite the dependence on alterity, self-consciousness is “no less absolutely for itself” (Hegel, as cited in Butler, 2012a, p.40). Butler draws our attention to these two contradictory pulls manifest in self-consciousness. On the one hand, as a desiring being whose existence depends on negating the other, it needs the presence of the other. That is, in the last analysis, it cannot do away with the other. It might absorb this other or that other, but it cannot sustain itself without a general domain of alterity. But on the other hand, self-consciousness must establish itself as the only sovereign existence, as the true certainty that does not depend on anything else. Self-consciousness resolves these contradictory pulls through the realization that both these conditions can be satisfied only if alterity appears in the form of another being that is both independent and capable of negating itself, and such a being can be nothing but another being like itself, i.e., another self-consciousness (Hegel, 1977, pp.109-110; Butler, 2012a, pp.40-41). Therefore, this other self-consciousness comes out of the immanent necessity of the primary self-consciousness, but once it emerges, it poses certain problems for the initial self-consciousness. Hegel introduces this encounter by commenting -

Self-consciousness is faced by another self-consciousness; it has come out of itself. This has a two-fold significance: first, it has lost itself, for it finds itself as an other being; secondly, in

doing so it has superseded the other, for it does not see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self. (Butler, 2012a, p.47; Hegel, 1977, p.111)

Prior to the encounter with another being like itself, Hegel's emergent subject regarded the objects it encountered as pure negativity which, in the last instance, existed purely for itself. In its journey through/as constant revision of itself, self-consciousness considered these objects to be "essential moments" of its own constitution (Butler, 2012a, pp.45-46). However, in the section entitled lordship and bondage, this developmental structure breaks down when it comes face-to-face with another being like itself. The previous discussion, Butler notes, had established the "theoretical necessity" of the other since self-consciousness needed itself to be understood as a "self-determining" (Butler, 2012a, p.46) being that governed the stage that dramatized the "quixotic" (Butler, 1989, p.175) journey of Hegel's emergent subject. But in Lordship and Bondage, the other emerges in the form of an entity that bears uncanny similarity to the emergent subject. This being, i.e., another self-consciousness, appears to be a sovereign existence that, in-itself, exists for-itself, and is capable of self-negation and self-determination. Thus, the meeting with another self-consciousness renders "explicit" the "essential structure of the initial self-consciousness", and the discussion in lordship and bondage provides an experiential account of it (Butler, 2012a, p.46). Upon encountering another being like itself, the first impulse of the initial self-consciousness is to re-establish itself as the true universal by negating this other and reconceiving it as a constitutive moment of itself, like it did before. However, this impulse is foiled as the initial self-consciousness finds itself "consumed" by the other (Butler, 2012a, p.48). This is what is meant by Hegel's claim that self-consciousness comes out of itself upon facing another self-consciousness. Instead of being reflected by the other, the initial self-consciousness finds itself in a face-to-face relation with a being that is just like itself. The initial self-consciousness is here, but it is also over there. Butler reads this strange situation as a redoubling of self-consciousness that puts its identity into crisis -

How is it possible that this is "me" over there? And how can I account for this apparent distance between the "me" over there and the "I" who regards this me? At first it seems to be a question of comprehension, but it is hardly a dispassionate moment. If I have come "outside myself", then I am no longer localized, and this tells me something new about

who I am, my relation to space in particular. I am not a fully or exclusively bounded sort of being, since whatever I am, I have the capacity to appear elsewhere. I am a kind of being who is here and there, apparently at once... the problem is not simply that there is an unequivocally independent life over there, emphatically not - me. Rather, the problem, the offense, the scandal, is that the independent life over there is also me, and yet is not. (Butler & Malabou, 2011, pp.625-630)

Thus, the encounter with another self-consciousness results in a self-loss for the initial self-consciousness. In English translations, “Self-loss” or “coming-out-of-itself” function as English equivalents of the German phrase *ausser sich* in the original text of *Phenomenology*. *Ausser sich* denotes the act of the emergent subject’s coming out of itself (Butler, 2012a, p.48).¹⁸⁰ As Butler notes, for an entity whose project is to attain self-sufficiency and absolute unity with itself, *Ausser sich* poses a problem. It challenges such projects (Butler, 2012a, p.242), because, if the entity becomes ek-static, then how can it maintain its self-sameness? Seeing itself outside itself implies that the initial self-consciousness has been subjected to an occupation.

Self-consciousness, as we observed earlier, is capable of self-negation, and this aspect is definitive of it. From its previous experience, self-consciousness expected this new entity to behave like a passive object which, by letting itself emerge as a moment in the ontogenesis of the initial self-consciousness, would grant self-consciousness’s demand to be the true abstraction. However, the new entity is also capable of active negation which leads the initial self-consciousness to become aware of the fact that what it conceived to be singular is reproducible elsewhere. Now, the definition of any genus is premised upon a singular attribute, but if this exclusive attribute appears to be definitive of something else as well, then the genus thus defined loses its singularity. It is precisely such an experience that the initial self-consciousness undergoes in the scene of the encounter when finds itself to be outside itself.

¹⁸⁰ In his translation of *Phenomenology*, Terry Pinkard provides another elaboration of the German term *Ausser Sich*. He writes - “The term *außer sich* usually means “to be beside oneself” (to be swept up in rage, or hilarity, and so on); but Hegel also clearly wants to play on the literal meaning of the term, so that he is also saying “It has come outside of itself,” or self-consciousness exists as an “external object” to itself. The sentence also has the overtones of saying that “self-consciousness has come to be anxious about itself.”” (Hegel, 2008, p.109)

On the one hand, it is undergoing self-loss because it finds itself elsewhere in an independent being whose presence actively undermines its independence. On the other hand, even though it wants to proclaim absolute certainty for itself by *actively* negating the newly emerged self-consciousness, it cannot do that since the other is also a self-consciousness, and negating it would imply its own negation. (Butler, 2012a, pp.47-49). In this sense, the existence of the other, in the mode of self-consciousness, is both necessary and perilous for the initial self-consciousness. Thus, despite its intention to be autonomous and universal, self-consciousness comes to realize that “implicit in its own identity as a desiring being is the necessity of being claimed by another” (Butler, 2012, p.49). The state of being-claimed-by-another, Butler clarifies in her reading, is not merely a pathological fantasy where the self imagines itself to have been besieged by another. Rather, what it means is that in order to be itself, the self must undergo self-loss. Thus, at the heart of the structure of the being of self-consciousness exists an ambiguous relation with the other, which simultaneously secures and undermines self-consciousness (Butler, 2004b, pp.147-148).

What worsens the predicament of the initial self-consciousness is that, as briefly mentioned earlier, this other self-consciousness is also a principle of active negation. That is, just like the initial self-consciousness, the other self-consciousness also wills to actively negate its other (which, for it, is the initial self-consciousness) and establish its own universality. Now, if the other (i.e., the latter self-consciousness) mirrors the former self-consciousness in every way, then the other too is mired in a contradiction between ek-static and self-determining existence. For both of these entities, their relation to their respective others is both constitutive and self-annihilating. For the former self-consciousness, the initial moment of the encounter is marked by anxiety and rage, as the encounter poses a problem for its identity. The threat of losing itself compels it to proceed towards annulling the other self-consciousness since that is the only way the initial self-consciousness can once again become fully certain of its self-sufficiency (Butler, 2021, p.47). But as both the parties are identical to each other, the other self-consciousness also perceives its opposition (i.e., the initial self-consciousness) in a similar manner and proceeds to take action accordingly in order to secure its own identity. Hence, the encounter takes the shape of two identical entities standing against each other, and violence seems inevitable. But this imminent violence is ultimately averted because, in the end, both entities realize that to each, the other functions as a mediating term without which its own existence would be at stake (Hegel, 1977, p.184). As Butler notes, what leads the two self-

consciousnesses to refrain from destruction is the recognition that both entities are mutually bound to one another, and each of them can exist as long as they are recognized by the other. Butler writes -

it is at a moment of fundamental vulnerability that recognition becomes possible, and need becomes self-conscious. What recognition does at such a moment is, to be sure, to hold destruction in check. But what it also means is that the self is not its own, that it is given over to the Other in advance of any further relation, but in such a way that the Other does not own it either. And the ethical content of its relationship to the Other is to be found in this fundamental and reciprocal state of being “given over.” (Butler, 2004b, p.149)

A shared state of vulnerability becomes functional in preventing the destruction of the engaging entities, and by recognizing how each of them is necessary to the other’s existence, they learn to live in a form of harmony where neither risks annihilation.

As Butler notes, what becomes effective in the act of recognition is that both the self-consciousnesses come to realize that from the very beginning, they are given over to each other and that their very existence rests on this very fact of being given over to the other, of being claimed by the other. One conditions the other and vice versa. Destroying the other would, therefore, imply the destruction of one’s own condition of being. This recognition of mutual dependence proves essential for their existence, and in this sense, as Butler reads Hegel, a shared structure of mutual dependence forms their structure of being. At the beginning of the encounter, the two entities, perceiving themselves as sovereign, stood against each other. But the experience of the encounter leads them to take cognizance of their shared structure of relationality. This changes both entities as they realize the impossibility of existence without the other. Hence, in ontological terms, one’s existence is constitutively bound to the other. Framed thus, being, instead of being determined by presence, emerges as ek-static.

But there remains a problem with the last statement. Even though the initial self-consciousness is given over to the other and is argued to be related to alterity, does this encounter imply the prior presence of two self-referential, self-sufficient beings? Does the meeting and consequent life-death struggle between two conscious selves presuppose two fully present,

sovereign existents? Responses to these questions must be negative, because Butler's reading of Hegel emphasizes again and again on the fact that the relation to alterity is formative of being, and without satisfying this primary condition, existence would be impossible. Even though the scene of recognition lays bare the relational structure of self-consciousness, it does not imply the presence of self-sufficient ontological beings prior to this relation. Rather, the entities were always already constitutively implicated in one another.

In order to make this point, apart from their close textual engagement with phenomenology, Butler draws our attention to how Hegel's concept of recognition always emphasized the co-constitutivity of beings. The structure of recognition in the struggle between the self-consciousnesses does not operate in a Hobbesian manner presupposing the prior presence of pre-formed individuals (Butler, 2012a, p.242). On the contrary, Hegel approached the struggle for recognition based on the model of family. Instead of being destructive, struggle here provides the space for reconciling contesting interests of individual family members in order to serve the collective interest of the family. Thus, struggle in this sense vacates the metaphysical structure of individualism and reconceives individuals as "ein Glied eines Ganzen" (Butler, 2012a, p.242), - as a part of the whole where the ontology of the part cannot be defined in isolation from the whole. And the task of recognition is to discover, in/through the struggle, the "prior unifying ground" which was hitherto unknown (Butler, 2012a, p.243).

In phenomenology, the scene of recognition and the struggle between the two entities must be perceived in this manner. The entities always shared a mutual structure of relationality where each constituted and in turn were constituted by the other, and it is this prior relationality that they discover through the struggle for recognition. As Butler writes -

We cannot say simply that there is one subject over here who is self-conscious and then another over there who is self-conscious, since neither is self-conscious without encountering the other. It is the encounter that articulates self-consciousness, which is why self-consciousness is, by definition, social...And it is not really possible to say that one decides to destroy the other, and the other decides to defend him or herself. What is happening with the one is happening with the other – which is why this encounter cannot be understood as a sociological or psychological description simply. (Butler, 2021, p.45)

Thus, it cannot be said that self-consciousness exists prior to its redoubling into and subsequent conflict with another self-consciousness. The scene of the encounter can be regarded as a fiction staged to depict the ontological structure of self-consciousness. That is, in ontological terms, the encounter cannot be conceived of as struggle between two self-referential beings. There is no prior self that gets redoubled or split into two. Rather, self-consciousness is always already beyond itself, it can *be* to the extent that the other *is*. The struggle for recognition narrativizes this ontological condition of the self and renders its ontology ek-static where it makes sense of its being by virtue of finding itself as “ambiguously installed outside itself” (Butler, 2004b, p.50).

If we understand the self to pre-exist its relationality, then it would imply that this self is ontologically self-sufficient, and what engages in the struggle for recognition is this pre-formed, fully self-present, self-referential self. But such an understanding would fail to adequately capture the “ontological primacy of relationality” and the “necessary disunity of the self” (Butler, 1999, p.150). Read in this light, it makes sense as to why Butler, in their discussion of recognition, puts the word *relationality* within quotes (Butler, 2004b, 148). Relationality, in the general sense, presupposes the prior presence of its relata. Deploying the word “relation” or “relationality” in the general sense, therefore, implies the act of coming into a relation of two sovereign entities whose ontological status are determined in terms of presence. But as Butler reads Hegel, self-consciousness does not have any ontological claim prior to the act of recognition, and it comes into being only within the dyadic relation with the other. As Butler puts it, “the identity of the subject comes from elsewhere and is not generated from within” (Butler, 2021b, 35), which means that that the subject cannot be self-referential and that any act of reference must necessarily transcend the immediate conceptual contours of that subject. Thus, relationality, under such circumstances, would be a misnomer, for here, the relation pre-exists the relata, and this originary relation with alterity¹⁸¹ renders the emergent subject radically ek-static. It signifies that the movement of *ek-stasis* does not begin with a priorly stable subject, but it's only within the frame of *ek-stasis*, of being originally displaced out of itself, that the subject comes into being. It is only within the scene of

¹⁸¹ It needs to be kept in mind that even alterity is not fully present to itself because it is constitutively implicated in what is other to it.

dislocation, which might be read as a form of dispossession, that the subject assumes being. Hence, being does not pre-exist the relation it is involved in; rather, these relations, in the originary sense, are formative of being. Ontology, in this sense, inevitably proves to be ek-static in nature. Thus, for Butler, Hegel provides a framework for thinking the structure of being beyond the determination of presence. Through engaging with Hegel, Butler develops a concept of ek-static ontology that, instead of presupposing prior ontological integrity, regards being as produced in relation to alterity. The ek-static structure implies that being cannot be self-referential, self-sufficient, and sovereign in terms of its structural constitution. And as Butler's interpretation of Hegel suggests, ek-statism does not signify a primordial stage of stability but exhibits how ontology begins through an originary displacement, a coming out of itself, without which being is rendered impossible. Thus, even at its origin, being is already placed out of itself. Or to be precise, the origin comes into being through a process of displacement, and in this sense, being proves to be originarily ek-static.

Conclusion

The question of being has always been foundational to the history of philosophy, and ontology comprises the study of the structure of being-qua-being. However, philosophy in the West, since Aristotle, defined being or *ousia* as *parousia* which signifies constancy and presence. Interpreted thus, ontology, the doctrine of being, established being in terms of these two aspects. Constant presence implies a domain of pure, uncontaminated, undifferentiated self-presence. Figured as that which exists beyond and before all contingencies, it espoused a structure of self-referentiality. Such a notion of being played a formative role in the history of western philosophy where it manifested in various forms such as “eidos, arche, telos, energia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject), aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man” etc (Derrida, 2001, p.353).

However, is such a structure of being self-evident? Or, can being be theorized through a framework that would allow it to be conceived beyond presence? Speculating on this prospect, we developed the concept of originary ek-stasis. Ek-sasis, put simply, means being beside or outside itself. In this work, we traced the genealogy of the concept of ecstasy as it developed in the West. This concept was primarily derived from the field of theology. But apart from theology, this concept was also functional in non-theological philosophical literature. In both contexts, ecstasy signified a deviation from the normal functioning of the mind and the body. In essence, it conveyed a sense of displacement of one’s being in pursuit of divinity or higher knowledge. But despite its various usages, the common thread running through them was the sense of displacement. That is, it evoked a sense of being beside or outside itself.

However, when we interrogated the concept of ecstasy in ontological terms, two features emerged. First, ecstasy, as theorized in both ancient and modern philosophical-theological literature, presupposed presence within its structure. That is, ecstasy figured as a state that occurred to a priorly self-present, static being. So, even though the state of being ecstatic signified displacement, ultimately it proved reducible to the original state of being. In this sense, ecstasy figured as ontologically derivative. Second, the movement of ecstasy is a movement from stasis to displacement, which theoretically presupposes the possibility of retracing the original state of

stasis, of absolute proximity of the self to itself. Thus, in this sense, the conceptual contour of the concept of ecstasy appears to have been determined in terms of presence.

Judged from these two aspects, we established that the concept of ecstasy, even while espousing a sense of displacement, is ontologically derivative. In this sense, despite its appearance to the contrary, ecstasy emerges as a determination of presence and remains anchored to the classical ontological structure that understands being as *parousia*. Ecstasy, understood thus, is not originary or constitutional to being as such.

However, the concept of ecstasy took a different shape with the rise of existential philosophy, where, in some of its manifestations, it figured as ontologically fundamental to being. To understand this perspective, we looked at the works of Martin Heidegger whose theorization of ek-static temporality showcased one of the finest attempts to reconceive this concept beyond the determination of presence. But our close reading of Heidegger through Derrida revealed that despite his claims to the contrary, Heidegger's thesis of ek-static temporality remained tethered to a primary sense of presence. Therefore, Heidegger appears to have rendered ek-stasis derivative.

Moving ahead, to explore the possibility of framing ek-stasis beyond presence, we engaged with the works of Jacques Derrida, looking particularly at his deconstruction of speech/writing binary in the history of Western philosophy. Our engagement with Derrida discussed how the speech/writing dualism, which was premised on the basis of the binary economy of presence/absence, proves untenable because, upon close interrogation, it appears that speech, which was assumed to be a manifestation of presence, is ultimately produced within an economy of absence that is fundamentally irreducible to presence. And in the case of writing, Derrida's analysis shows that the kind of irreducible absence that writing is characterized by, is absolute and originary. And it is precisely such a structure of "irreducible absence" that governs the structure of speech as well. This is what Derrida calls *general text* or *language in general sense*. In ontological terms, as we argued in this work, the structure of the general text implies that displacement or absence is not reducible to presence or stasis as such. Rather, it signifies that being comes into being only by being displaced. Thus, instead of being secondary or derivative, displacement emerges as originary, constitutive of being as such. And if being, instead of being determined in terms of presence figures as originally displaced out of itself, then it radically alters ontology as such. It shows that being cannot be conceived in terms of *parousia* or constant presence. Rather,

being emerges and is sustained, albeit in a non-unitary and disjointed manner, in and thorough processes of displacement, dispossession, and dislocation. Such an understanding disarticulates the structure of self-referentiality and self-presence that classical ontology attributes to being. This is what we call *ek-static ontology*, and our engagement with Judith Butler's work proceeded within this frame of ek-static ontology.

Within the arena of continental philosophy, a number of philosophers in the past two decades have raised their concern that with the advent of constructionism in the '60s, ontological questions have taken a back seat. Influenced by the constructionist premise, various philosophical positions working on the questions pertaining to matter, nature, or the body have focused on representation and discursive formations at the expense of ontological concerns. They claim that instead of inquiring into matter as such (or nature, the body), the focus in constructionism has been on its linguistic-discursive representation. Thus, under constructionist influence, philosophical inquiries revolved around matter-as-representation instead of focusing on matter qua matter or being qua-being. Following this conviction, a number of philosophers in the past two decades undertook the task of retrieving the ontological questions of matter, nature, or real from the labyrinths of language and discourse. With "return to matter" as their clarion call and with a focus on ontology, this shift came to be known as material turn or continental realism, and new materialism figures as one of the key proponents of this term.

Engaging with the material turn remained crucial to this project for two reasons. First, by claiming that the proponents of material turn were effectuating a return to ontology, it de facto implied the question of ontology was absent in the works of their philosophical predecessors. And new materialism, a key proponent of this turn, regarded Judith Butler's work to be emblematic of the position that reduced matter to language-discourse and failed to address the question of ontology. Therefore, before undertaking the task of extricating the ontological framework latent in Butler's work, it was imperative to engage with new materialism and new materialist interlocutors of Butler. And this constituted the subject matter of our second and third chapters.

Before engaging directly with Butler's new materialist interlocutors, we needed to understand the ontological premise and operation of new materialism. To do this, we critically interrogated the works of Manuel DeLanda and Jane Bennett, two noted new materialists, and established through our exegesis that new materialism's call to recuperate matter from language

and discourse defacto understood matter/nature/real in a metaphysical sense. Their thesis and argumentation rendered matter a self-referential, self-present, self-referential, and irreducible presence. We argued that the new materialist understanding of matter (and other associated categories) operated within the classical ontological framework governed by presence which understands matter/nature/real as a manifestation of being as presence, and that their critical stance toward other philosophical positions comes from this ontological premise. Their reading of Judith Butler, too, is informed by such an ontological gesture.

To understand the new materialist polemic against Judith Butler on the grounds of ontology, we focused on the works of Vicki Kirby. Kirby's critique of Butler moves around the question of the material body. Locating Butler's work within the general premise of constructionism that operates on the basis of ontological essentialism of matter and culture, Kirby argues that by focusing primarily on the questions of the linguistic-discursive production of matter, Butler, despite their claim to address the material body, effectively ends up reducing the body to language and discourse. However, our close interrogation revealed a significant misinterpretation at the heart of Kirby's reading of Butler. When Butler takes up the category of matter - one of the primary manifestations of being determined as presence - in their work, they do not keep its metaphysical constitution, which frames it within the framework of self-referentiality and self-presence, intact. Matter does not hold its status of manifest givenness in Butler's work. In Butler's textual system, matter does not figure as the absolute irreducible irreducibility. Rather, the way Butler's textual system places matter in relation to culture shows that it cannot be understood as a manifestation of being as presence. We have referred to this as "textuality of categories" in Butler's work. This implies that the categories that Butler deploys in her work do not have a transcendent essence outside the textual economy they are placed within. Rather, their signification depends on their relation to the textual system it yields to. And the textual economy of Butler's work transvaluates the concept of matter and regards it as forever differed and deferred in terms of its being. Thus, in Butler's anasemic interrogation of matter and materiality, the question of the being (of the material body) ceases to remain within the metaphysical contours that classical ontology attributed to being. Rather, by arguing for the consubstantiality of matter and discourse, it hints toward a structure of being where it exceeds itself, and emerges only within this scene of excess. Understood thus, matter cannot be thought of in terms of self-referentiality

and irreducibility. Instead, understood to be produced iteratively and consubstantially with discourse, it ushers us toward thinking its mode of being through the framework of ek-stasis.

Moving ahead, we interrogated Butler's reading of four philosophers - Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hegel. Whereas to build their respective arguments, a vast array of critical literature generally focuses on specific themes of Butler's work such as the body, sex, gender, this work took a different path. Instead of taking focusing on the themes, it looked at how Butler's engagement with philosophical texts produced an ek-static account of ontology. Thus, the last two chapters began with a close analysis of the works of these aforementioned thinkers in order to achieve two goals. In the case of Freud & Lacan, we showed how a classical ontological framework governed their theoretical paradigm. For Levinas and Hegel, we looked at how their works provided an opportunity to theorize the framework of ontology in an ek-static manner. And we situated our analysis of Butler's reading of these philosophers against this context to highlight Butler's intervention.

Freud's theory of the development of the gendered character of the ego operated on the basis of two premises. The first one concerns his thesis on primary bisexuality which, despite his emphasis on understanding gender as a product of psychosexual processes, functioned as the ungrounded ground of Freud's theory of sexuality. And second, Freud's theorization of psychosexual development proceeded on the basis of the tripartite order consisting of the id, ego, and super-ego (or preconscious, conscious, and unconscious in the first topology). By engaging with Butler's reading of Freud's work, we showed that these two premises were governed by an ontological structure typical of classical ontology. That is, in Freud's formulation, the concept of gender and the orders of the psyche operated within a framework of presence. They functioned as domains characterized by irreducibility and self-referentiality. However, Butler's intervention lies in subjecting Freud's theorization to an anasemic analysis and showing how, under close scrutiny, the neat ontological continuity and harmony of the compartmentalized structure of Freud's topology breaks down. It shows how, instead of signifying a prior thereness demarcating interiority, the ego is produced in and through its attachment to the outside. The ego appears only within this phenomenon, before which there can be no interior/exterior division at all; and gender, which figured as irreducible in Freud's work, is shown to have a similar structure as Butler's reading established that the production of gender identity too is tied to its constitutive relation

with what it excludes. In this sense, gender identity and the gendered ego are rendered ontologically ek-static in Butler's reading of Freud.

Butler's engagement with Lacan followed a similar path. The Lacanian paradigm of gender and sexuality operated on the basis of his theorization of the symbolic and the phallus. Sexuation, through which a being assumes a position within language and becomes a subject, occurs within the being's relation with them. Thus, they function as the origin within the Lacanian schema. And it is this origin that anchors grants stability to sexual identity and firmly anchors sexuation within an ontological structure that privileges presence. Butler's intervention in the Lacanian paradigm consists of establishing how these origins are themselves produced within the signifactory network of Lacan's texts. That is, instead of being the origin, the ungrounded ground granting stability to identity, Butler shows that this purported origin is produced through a particular economy of signification and textual manoeuvres that Lacan's text enacts. Butler's analysis shows that the elevation of the phallus to the status of governing signifier takes place through processes of signification that Lacan's work attempts to foreclose. As it is established that phallus is produced within a differential network of a significatory chain, it cannot hold onto its status of self-referentiality within the symbolic. And this has immense implications for the sex/gender system that Lacan's framework espouses.

Symbolic is one of the fundamental components of Lacan's tripartite order. Symbolic function as the origin of signification, and one's entry into language and concomitant subjectivation is governed by the symbolic. In this sense, symbolic appears as a grounding site in Lacan's work. It plays a crucial role in the sexual economy, demarcating the limits of desire and governing the condition of livability. However, Butler's reading of Lacan establishes that in a manner similar to the genesis of phallus, the symbolic too, is produced through the textual knots of Lacan's work. It shows that the symbolic, in ontological sense, is temporally disjointed as its genealogy reveals it to have taken part in its own genesis, which it then erases. In this manner, Butler's intervention renders the Lacanian structure ontologically ek-static.

The last chapter of this work focused on Butler's reading of Levinas and Hegel. Levinas proves especially crucial for Butler's theory of relationality. Placing his critique against the ontological tradition, Levinas argued for theorizing being in terms of the other, in terms of exteriority. Butler, reading Levinas, understands relationality to be fundamental to the

constitution of the subject. Through their reading of Levinas, Butler argues for theorizing the subject in terms of its relationality to the other by arguing that the subject assumes being only by being unwillingly addressed by the other. And this places the relation with the other at the heart of the being of the subject. Relationality, in Butler's understanding precedes the *relatas*. Rather, the *relatas*, i.e., the subject or the human, emerge only in and through its relationality. Hence, strictly speaking, the concept of relationality that Butler espouses does not operate within the classical ontological frame. Relationality, understood as an originary operation in this manner, reconceives ontology of the subject and shows that instead of being a sovereign, self-referential identity, its mode of being is thoroughly ek-static.

Butler's reading of Hegel proceeds along a similar line of argument. Even though Hegel has often been interpreted as a philosopher whose system espoused unity and totality, Butler's reading shows that contrary to the general perception, Hegel's works provide openings for thinking the question of being beyond metaphysical closure. Hegel's concept of recognition proves crucial in this respect, and Butler's engagement with this concept shows that the subject, read through the Hegelian notion of recognition, moves beyond the ambit of presence and emerges as a relational being. And like Levinas, the concept of relation that Butler derives through their reading of Hegel emerges as originary, as formative of being. Thus, the subject, within Butler's reading of Hegel, unfolds as ek-static.

To recapitulate, being has historically been theorized in terms of self-referentiality and self-presence. However, Butler's engagement with the continental philosophical tradition shows that being, instead of being defined by presence, harbours a structure that is thoroughly ek-static. What implications such a conception of ek-static ontology has for other philosophical problems, ethics, and politics is a separate question, and maybe reflecting on that would be the impetus for another critical endeavour. But the current project, with its possibilities and limitation, concludes here.

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