

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

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Thesis synopsis

Since its inception, Western philosophy has considered being in terms of what Greek philosophers understood as *ousia*. When interrogated closely, it emerges that *ousia* signifies two elements in particular, constancy and presence, and combining these two aspects, it implies constant presence. Understood thus, being figures as a determination of constant and continuous presence. It signifies a self-present, self-referential, self-sufficient, undifferentiated, individuated, unaltered presence that alludes to nothing but itself.

Philosophy in the West has been premised on such a notion of being, and in the history of philosophy, it manifested in various forms such as essence, substance, existence, transcendentality, consciousness, God, man, sex, gender, matter, etc. Being-as-presence signifies something foundational that alludes to nothing but itself, something that is beyond and before all contingencies. Within philosophical endeavours, it functions as the ungrounded ground, an origin that grants stability to the philosophical system under question. 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, p.71). Such an understanding of being as presence is definitive of the classical ontological framework. Thus, every mention of ontology and every exercise of ontological inquiry presupposes such an understanding of being, and they exhibit, presuppose, or are driven by a nostalgia for this undifferentiated presence.

However, is such a structure of being self-evident? Or, can it be approached through a framework that would allow us to reconceive it beyond presence? Speculating on this aspect, the current project develops a framework that aims to theorize being beyond the hegemony of presence, and the concept of ecstasy or ek-stasis helps us to build such a framework. Even though the concept of ecstasy, originated in the theological tradition, remained tethered to a notion of irreducible presence and appeared to be derivative in the ontological sense, this work reformulates this concept as originary where being is understood to be inaugurated by being displaced outside of itself. And if being, instead of being determined in terms of presence figures as originary displaced, 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 through 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.

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, does not signify a self-sufficient, self-referential domain of pure presence but emerges to be always already exceeding itself. Thus, Butler unfolds how the various manifestations of being (the body, the subject, and other notions of being-as-presence) are always already dispossessed. The idea of being as being outside itself displaces the idea of an atomistic, metaphysical, self-referential ontological framework. Being is devoid of ontological claims in this general sense.

Butler's interest in ontological questions can be traced back to their earliest works (Butler, 1995, 2012). 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. 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 aspires 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.¹ Thus, being 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 do 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 proceeds in an organized manner. 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 subscribe 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

¹ See Barad, 2007.

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.

Plan of Chapters

This dissertation is divided into five chapters, each addressing separate but interconnected questions. The first chapter, titled "From Being-as-Presence to Being-as-Ekstatic: Towards a Radical Ontology of Ecstasy" 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 positions including poststructuralism² 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, titled "New Materialism and the Return to Matter: Resurgence of Being as Presence" 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 position 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, titled "The Textuality of Categories in Judith Butler's Theory of Matter and Materiality: Kirby

² A number of new materialist thinkers situate poststructuralism within the theoretical premise of constructionism.

Contra Butler” 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, 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. Second, Butler’s reconceptualization of matter – hitherto defined as a metonym for presence – renders it ek-static in an 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, titled “Sex/Gender Beyond the Metaphysics of Presence: Butler and Psychoanalysis” 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, titled “Judith Butler’s Reading of Levinas and Hegel: Being and Originary Relationality” 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, figure 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 unwilling 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.

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