

Performative Phenomenology: Phenomenological Aspects Unexplored in Judith Butler's Conception of the Body

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Abstract

To be embodied is ontologically a fact of life, but what about ‘embodied subjectivity?’ Is subjectivity an always already embodied phenomenon or a sociolinguistic construct that has an embodied existence? This article intends to critically examine this fundamental question through Judith Butler’s notion of performativity and the role of phenomenology in it. The body is a site of many philosophical problems, among which embodiment and subjectivity are regarded as a Pandora's box, especially after Judith Butler’s intervention and its aftermath. Sex and gender were once interchangeably used to denote the natural anatomical fact and its by-product respectively. Even today, they are yet to be defined by the legal systems. Especially in light of recent controversies surrounding transgender legislation in India, this ambiguity is more pronounced than ever, revealing the continuing tension between the power structures of science, law, and philosophy. This article does not aim to directly address these problems, but through exploring phenomenology and performative subjectivity, the enigma of the body is once again put into scrutiny.

Keywords: embodied subjectivity, sex, gender, performativity, Judith Butler, phenomenology, Body.

Introduction

Our existence as an embodied reality is defined by acts performed by the embodied self. Our day to day activities whether waking up, brushing our teeth or having a cup of tea and so on also have to be included in this category of acts. From the perspective of how consciousness is defined in phenomenology, these everyday acts are not fundamentally different from the act of performing gender or other positions of subtle or gross power. This is because of the intentional, situated and bodily nature of

consciousness that experiences itself through a chain of actions: “Consciousness is intentional in that it is always directed toward something in the world” (Husserl, 1913/1982). This understanding of the relation between the performance of concrete actions and consciousness defied the previous dualist understanding of consciousness in the Cartesian sense. For Descartes (1641/1996), the self was understood as a rational thinking substance (*res cogitans*), a separate rational entity that is not intrinsically connected to our bodily existence. Since being bodily is an unavoidable reality of oneself, of being conscious, the earlier Cartesian distinctions of a mind different from the body is no longer tenable.

Thus, for the self to act is not an action of neither the body nor the mind in the pre-phenomenological sense but a continuous acting of the embodied self. The self is a becoming rather than a teleological being. However, this embeddedness which is ‘neither the biological body nor the thinking mind’ becomes complicated once we step into the domain of gender theory. We will examine this further in this article. Let us look at Merleau-Ponty (2002). He observes this paradox in terms of how one could analyze all things in the world except the body itself. Because the body which is referred to here, the embodied self, is neither an object nor a subject. It cannot analyze itself as if it is another object in the world. Because ‘it’ is the very seat of our existence from which we analyze:

one’s own body teaches us a mode of unity that is not the subsumption under a law. Insofar as it is in front of me and offers its systematic variations for observation, the external object lends itself to a mental examination of its elements and it can, at least as a first approximation, be defined as the law of their variations. But I am not in front of my body, I am in my body, or rather I am my body. (p. 187)

Interestingly, Merleau-Ponty (2002) tries to do justice by defining the body as such: “The body cannot be compared to the physical object, but rather to the work of art” (p. 188). Now if one has to come to an

understanding of the nature of the body, beyond the descriptions of the objectivity of the biological body or an underexplained ‘subjectivity’ of the thinking mind, the comparison with a work of art is certainly more practical. It is practical because we don't expect a descriptive definition of a poem, music or work of art similar to a description of a chemical compound or medicine. Similarly, why should we try to understand the embodied experience of consciousness in the same way?

However, there are problems with such an abstract description like ‘work of art’. The complaints raised towards mystifying attitudes in philosophy when defining embeddedness are charged with ‘hiding’ certain predispositions in plain sight. Judith Butler is one such thinker who minutely goes to the extent to argue that there is a history of idealizing the body as the embodiment of consciousness that bypasses the impact of sexual difference. Butler argues that the phenomenological notion of embodied consciousness still preserves the body-mind binary unless we look at it in reverse. According to Butler, the invisible nucleus of language-matter binary continues under the guise of the phenomenological notion of body. The shadow of metaphysics looms over the understanding of embeddedness and Butler argues that it can only be questioned if we put the ontology of gender under critique.

Performativity and Embodied Subjectivity

Butler's concern is not just that ‘embodied consciousness’ hides the binary of sexual difference in order to propagate a universal denomination of the body as masculine. In fact, she delves deep into the constructed nature of both masculinity and femininity in order to excavate the relevance of how acts affect embodiment through subjectivity, or more precisely, through ‘gender’. She invites our attention to how ‘gender’ remains the most untouched, unexplained but most concrete and primary forms of identification.

Thus, Butler turns the table of discussion from embodied consciousness to embodied subjectivity through a series of inquiries on the

constructedness of gender. Surprisingly, to this end, one of Butler's points of interest lies in the deconstruction of how we traditionally understood feminism. Specifically, how feminism is conceived by the existential and psychoanalytic movements, namely the first and second-wave feminist thinkers. In short, Butler's grievance was that these thinkers argued for a feminine essence that they believed was undermined and repressed by patriarchy or masculinity. For Butler, any essence whether feminine or masculine is impossible. The feminist acceptance of sexual binaries or separate ontologies of male and female bodies would only further give power to the "imaginary morphology" or performative truth effect, which will permanently mark the body as either a dominant presence or subjugated absence within the discourse of sexuality:

Indeed, one ought to consider the futility of a political program which seeks radically to transform the social situation of women without first determining whether the category of woman is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation. In an understandable desire to forge bonds of solidarity, feminist discourse has often relied upon the category of woman as a universal presupposition of cultural experience which, in its universal status, provides a false ontological promise of eventual political solidarity. (Butler, 1988, p. 523)

To understand the above argument we need to see how Butler views embeddedness and subjectivity in detail. Butler views embeddedness from the perspective of Lacanian psychoanalysis to understand the investment of language in its formation. For Lacan (2006), the human child becomes a 'subject' through the loss of the primal experience of fullness and indivisibility associated with the "Real". For Lacan, the Real resists symbolization. The Real stage cannot be conceptually grasped because we cannot fully conceptualize its preconceptual existence through the apparatus of language. Thus upon inevitably losing the indivisibility of the original state, one becomes the subject through

identification and libidinal investment with its body image. It should be noted that Butler, like Lacan, does not say 'body', but 'body image'. The body image is a form of intelligibility associated with the body, whereas the 'pure' direct experience of the body is no more possible for the subject. In this sense, Butler departs from the phenomenological understanding of the body as immediate lived experience. Through Lacan, embodiment becomes irreducibly mediated by language, making direct bodily presence inaccessible except as the impossible horizon of the Real. Thus, Butler relocates the phenomenological question from immediate embodied consciousness to the performative constitution of embodied subjectivity. Butler argues that this body image is a 'morphological imaginary' that institutes the sex-gender identity.

These morphological imaginary changes or morphs itself to suit the image of the body in different socio-cultural scenarios. Butler problematizes the arbitrariness of the imaginary body and the banality with which this body is taken for granted. Traditionally, the body is understood as natural and *a priori* in philosophical, scientific and religious systems. The ambiguity underlying the Lacanian mirror stage and its deep relation with performative subjectivity in Butler could be identified from the following observation:

Lacan establishes the morphology of the body as a psychically invested projection, an idealization or "fiction" of the body as a totality and locus of control. Moreover, he suggests that this narcissistic and idealizing projection that establishes morphology constitutes the condition for the generation of objects and the cognition of other bodies. The morphological scheme established through the mirror stage constitutes precisely that reserve of morphe from which the contours of objects are produced; both objects and others come to appear only through the mediating grid of this projected or imaginary morphology. (Butler, 1993, p. 75)

See how Butler sees the body different from Merleau-Ponty's account. For Merleau-Ponty (2002), the 'self' and the 'body' cannot be distinguished: "I am in my body, or rather I am my body." (p. 187). Whereas, for Butler, the self-body unity, or embeddedness is a physically invested projection which assumes totality and control. This imaginary body could be understood as one of the predecessors of the 'regulatable body', discussed by Butler (1999). The regulatable body is the body that acquires a truth effect through repetition of a norm. The process of hiding the psychic formation in the imaginary stage by marking the body as a biological entity is done by giving it a notion of reality or substance, which Butler rightly calls a "metaphysics of substance". What we understand as sex and gender in scientific, religious, and popular culture discourses could be this metaphysics of substance inscribed over the regulatable body in the mirror stage.

Thus, the feminine essence or substance argued by feminist thinkers, which desired equality of femininity with masculinity, would only further reinforce the "metaphysics of substance". The teleological nature ascribed to bodies as active and passive, male and female, dominant and submissive and other forms of oppositions will perpetually create a divisive politics and truth effect regarding the body.

The reason for Butler's criticism as described above is due to the operation of the binary logic of dividing bodies into sexual divisions of masculine and feminine. For Butler, subjectivity is not what one is, but what one does. This 'doing' is performative because there is no prior self that performs gender. Rather, the repeated act retroactively constitutes the subject that appears to precede it. This is what Butler describes as gender performativity. Moreover, the embodied subject is always conditioned by punitive consequences of doing the correct gender. What is more interesting is that gender has no natural essence to it, similar to the doer or the subject that does it. This makes both the doing and doer stranded between the 'real' world of sociopolitical, moral and legal consequences and the actual quest for desire and satisfaction. The

implications of the gendered reality of embodied existence are true, but the truth is itself based on a metaphysical assumption.

Sex, Gender and Body in Butler

According to Butler, phenomenology has reached its limits when the question of the self was put into further scrutiny. For Butler, the most basic question is not whether the notion of self/body is a natural or biological reality or is it a cultural construct. It is a re-examination of what is already taken for granted in the self-gender relationship. On this issue Butler intervened in her own way that went in an altogether different path from the typical feminist philosophy of her predecessors. Butler (1999) argues:

In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy. The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether. The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism. (p. 17)

Butler analyses this problematic ontological division of mind and body from Plato to Foucault. Instead of attempting to create another school of feminist philosophy, Butler investigates the nature of subjectivity itself. This analysis finds fissures in the epistemological grounds of each of these thinkers to uncover the uncritical emphasis of either body as pure materiality or mind as pure linguistic.

The materiality of the body and the semiology of the mind are a complex zone of analysis for Butler. Butler discusses the phenomenological implication of the body-mind complex, understood as the matter-language complex under the lens of performativity. For Butler, language and materiality are intertwined in a way that does not allow complete

separation or fusion. Interestingly, Butler (1993) cites Merleau-Ponty's notion of the "flesh of the world" to elucidate the chiasmic relationship between language and materiality:

That referent, that abiding function of the world, is to persist as the horizon and the "that which" which makes its demand in and to language. Language and materiality are fully embedded in each other, chiasmic in their interdependence but never fully collapsed into one another, i.e., reduced to one another, and yet neither fully ever exceeds the other. Always already implicated in each other, always already exceeding one another, language and materiality are never fully identical nor fully different. (p. 69)

Butler shows how the performative intentionality operating through language shapes the body and finds its expression in feminist philosophy as the sex–gender binary. Philosophers, including feminist thinkers uncritically accept this sex-gender division, which creates a loop within which there is no real subversion but only perpetual submission to its episteme¹. The feminist acceptance of sex as bodily and natural and gender as psychological and cultural is a way of maintaining the same ontological distinction between soul and body, which invariably supports relations of "political and psychic subordination and hierarchy"².

This underlying binary operation animates governments and significant stakeholders like scientists and academicians. Furthermore, through centuries of performative repetition, it is internalized by each body, as a sedimentation of truth. It snowballs into a fixed identification with one's body image, or more specifically, one's 'gendered body'. For Butler (1999), 'body' and 'gender' are indistinguishable from each other:

Bodies cannot be said to have a signifiable existence prior to the mark of their gender; the question then emerges: To what extent does the body *come into being* in and through the mark(s) of gender? How do we reconceive the body no longer as a passive medium or instrument awaiting the enlivening capacity of a distinctly immaterial will? (p. 13).

Thus, for Butler, 'gender' is an amalgamation of metaphysics and historicity, of language and matter. Here, metaphysics and language function as overarching presences posing as transcendental truths, whereas history and matter remain subjugated absences. This produces a bodily essentialism that equates the biological body with 'sex.' The apparently unchangeable and neutral status of sex is, in reality, a culturally constructed truth effect, effectively concealed under the guise of 'nature'.

We must remember that gender is not a reality but an impossible reality because performativity is constitutive of failure. Butler (1999) says, "gender is an "act," as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of "the natural" that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status" (p. 187). We can see, for Butler, that "parody," "drag," and "masquerade" are performative practices that expose the ambiguity of privileged and naturalized ontologies of gender. Thus, no act could be excluded from its enacted status, especially anything that claims to be 'natural'.

Moreover, performative acts either naturalize or denaturalize what it is. Thus, we can say that performativity is the diagnosis of "constitutive failure" that inevitably takes place when something is 'enacted': "It is this constitutive failure of the performative, this slippage between discursive command and its appropriated effect, which provides the linguistic occasion and index for a consequential disobedience" (Butler, 1993, p. 122). Enactment contains the desire to become real or natural by excluding what it does not want to become. In the case of 'gender', its enactment presupposes a natural sex prior to it. The reality of gender is based on the imitative structure of sex. At the same time, the reality of sex imitates the assumed binaries of nature and culture, body and soul, worldly and transcendental. This conjures facticity or substance onto the surface of matter by retroactively positing a prior regulative authority or subjectivity through the very enactment itself.

Thus, performativity establishes that 'gender' produces an essentialism that appears biological (in the name of sex) but, in reality, is a culturally constructed truth effect³. Butler takes the often misunderstood and seemingly innocent meaning of 'sex' and 'gender'. She deconstructs it to reveal the layers of truth effects that hold them together as coherent entities. Despite the popular assumption, sex had nothing to do with anatomical differences of 'male' and 'female', rather, the actual intention that gave meaning to 'sex' was always 'gender'. Butler clarifies that what was understood as 'sex', which was thought to be a natural reality, was in fact the "corporeal style".

Butler (1988) uses the term "corporeal style" as a way of living, or doing the body. We already saw that body and gender are interchangeable in Butler. One does one's gender, but gender is not a style that is developed by an individual body. Rather, it is always a continuation of historically available ways of doing the body. This doing conditions the style. She subsumes the notions of sex and gender into the ambit of body and calls it the "corporeal style", an "act" which is both performative and intentional.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion shows that, in Butler, gender/body serves as the frontier of resistance and subversion rather than sublimation and transcendence. Butler does not discuss the possibility of alterity or transcendence via any aesthetic-phenomenal experience. Instead, she limits her vocabulary towards a political resistance-and-subversion, which clarifies her methodology that revolves around the concerns of the sociolinguistic domain.

We saw how Butler redeploys phenomenological tropes like 'embodiment' and 'intentionality' to reverse engineer its original grounds to suit a deconstructive approach towards phenomenology. Perhaps we could call it a 'Performative Phenomenology'. Repetition of bodies marked by an impossible identification to language creates a sense of

doer (doer as a sexed being). This act of performative gendering creates both the possibility and limitation of one's will. This will to act is neither free nor destined, or in other words, Butler's body intentionality (matter) is entwined with a doer-intentionality (language), which makes the body not a concrete truth as in traditional phenomenology but a truth effect.

Apart from this difference of truth and truth effect, Butler's methodological tactic resembles Merleau-Ponty's (2002) distinction of 'Habitual body' and 'Present body': "What enables us to centre our existence is also what prevents us from centring it completely, and the anonymity of our body is inseparably both freedom and servitude" (pp. 432-433).

For Butler, the phenomenology involved in knowledge production or textuality cannot be separated from both materiality and pure experience of consciousness. There cannot be pure intentionality without the mediation of language, and there cannot be pure semiotics devoid of bodily mediation. This model of 'difference' familiar to postmodernism, as opposed to the concept of 'equality' in modernism, calls for a new understanding of phenomenology after the new revelations of linguistic turn and psychoanalysis in its mutual affect, creating an interdisciplinary mode of understanding the body.

What I call "Performative Phenomenology" is a form of post-psychoanalytic and post-structural phenomenology in which the 'body is always a body of something'. This new form of intentionality emphasizes the performative relationship between the body and the cognitive 'thing' toward which it is directed. In this sense, Butler's account offers a parallel to the classical Husserlian formulation that: "consciousness is always consciousness of something. " (Husserl, 1913/1982)

In conclusion, for Butler, there is no lived body apart from a marked body. The advantage of understanding the body in this way is that dominant inscriptions can be subverted and re-inscribed in alternative ways. Performativity does not simply extend traditional phenomenology

or its feminist extension; rather, it reveals consciousness and gender as historically and discursively constructed. Thus, the notion of embodied subjectivity in the context of performativity is not about reclaiming an essence, whether feminine or masculine, but about deconstructing the very notion of the “naturalness” of any essence.

End Notes

1. We can see Butler clubbing Descartes, Sartre, Husserl and Simone de Beauvoir together to argue that they all subscribe to a common binarism of materiality and immateriality. See Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge, p.195.
2. For a detailed discussion on the relationship between matter and language, see Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"*. Routledge, pp. 67-69.
3. Butler investigates studies in molecular cell biology to show how gendered meanings function in bio-medical enquiries, which try to establish "sex" prior to "culture". See Butler, J. (1999). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge, pp. 135-141

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