## **Judith Butler – Gender as a performance**

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*This post was originally published on Apr 6th, 2018 as part of a larger work titled [“Gender: Flip the script”][flip-the-script-post]*

[Judith Butler](https://vcresearch.berkeley.edu/faculty/judith-butler)[1](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/09/judith-butler.html#fn:judith-creds) builds off of previous research by Feminist Philosopher Simone De Beauvior, to build a theory of gender as a flexible and changing expression of the self, as opposed to a stable identity.

## **An ongoing performance**

In her model, our experience of gender as a stable identity is an illusion produced by repeated actions. Instead of being a stable part of someone identity, she argues that is more useful to view gender as an expression of self that changes.

gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts.

*(Butler, Gender trouble: Subjects of sex/gender/desire, pp214)*

The construction of gender (the act of performing a gender role) is used to communicate with the people around us. Our bodies (a politically and socially regulated medium) are the essential prop we use to convey our gender. We use gender expression in order to signify our position in a gender hierachy and the roles that we take on.

## **“Natural” gender**

As a society, we enforce these ideas regularly, often ridiculing or violently disciplining people who don’t conform to the binary (man or woman) expectations of Western society. One doesn’t need to look far to see this; men who act too feminine are often ridiculed and attacked, as are women who act too “manly”.

Discrete genders are part of what “humanizes” individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right.

(Butler, Gender trouble: Subjects of sex/gender/desire, pp213)

Since it is essential to our safety and position in society, the performance of gender must be consistent and repeated. Our self-surveillance[2](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/09/judith-butler.html#fn:self-surveillance) and enforcement ensures both its consistency and apparent naturalism[3](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/09/judith-butler.html#fn:define-naturalism) (biological-ness).

Gender is […] a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions — and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction “compels” our belief in its necessity and naturalness.

*(Butler, Gender trouble: Subjects of sex/gender/desire, pp213)*

The enforcement of gender, combined with the unconscious (or intentional) self-policing of our gender expressions lead to the regular, rigid, and predictable expressions of gender that make it seem biological, or as Butler often says ‘essential’.

**Recap**: The perception of a concrete and objective gender reality is created by the constructed story of gender that we perform, combined with the ways that it is naturalized[3](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/09/judith-butler.html#fn:define-naturalism) and enforced by those around us.

## **What about “Born this way”?**

Whether or not gender is a biological phenomenon or a societal/personal one should not determine how we treat each other. Peoples personal realities and subjective experiences are real for them, and we should listen and do our best to understand each other regardless of our ability to explain or relate to those experiences within our own personal realities.

## **Book Reference**

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire.*

1. Butler is a [Fellow of the British Academy](https://www.britac.ac.uk/) and a professor in the Department of Comparative Literature and the Program of Critical Theory at the University of California, Berkeley. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/09/judith-butler.html#fnref:judith-creds)
2. Self surveillance is the act of monitoring and adjusting our own behaviour due to the possibility that another person might be watching.  
     
    This is demonstrated in the architectural design of the [Panopticon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panopticon#Criticism_and_use_as_metaphor), which can be used as a metaphor for the self-consciousness of our current society. [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/09/judith-butler.html#fnref:self-surveillance)
3. Naturalism in this case is referring to metaphysical naturalism, which is the argument that a trait [“related to consciousness and the mind are reducible to, or supervene upon, nature.”](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Naturalism_(philosophy)) In this case we are making a distinction between a biological trait (nature) and a sociological one (nurture). [↩](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/09/judith-butler.html#fnref:define-naturalism) [↩2](http://127.0.0.1:4000/2020/08/09/judith-butler.html#fnref:define-naturalism:1)