An existentialist critique of Judith butler's concept of performativity

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Capstone Proposal

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5 June 2024

Abstract

This dissertation critiques Judith Butler's concept of performativity while utilizing the Philosophies of Paul Tillich and Simone de Beauvoir. By examining the intersections of gender, identity, and agency through these philosophical lenses, it offers a nuanced analysis of how societal norms and individual expressions interact. The study is structured into key sections, including an introduction to performativity and existentialism, detailed examinations of Tillich's and Beauvoir's philosophies, and a critical analysis of Butler's theories within these contexts. Key takeaways include Butler's challenge to traditional notions of gender, Tillich's emphasis on self-acceptance and authenticity, and Beauvoir's focus on agency and the social construction of identity. The findings reveal that while Butler's concept of performativity provides significant insights into the social construction of gender, incorporating existential perspectives from Tillich and Beauvoir offers a more comprehensive understanding of identity dynamics and provides a paradox to performativity. Through this exploration, the study aims to deepen our understanding of the complexities inherent in contemporary discussions of identity dynamics. By engaging with interdisciplinary perspectives, this research contributes to a more holistic approach to gender studies and philosophy, leading to continued dialogue and exploration in the field.

I. Introduction

In today's society, the quest for self-identity has become increasingly prevalent, notably observed in the growing number of individuals seeking to redefine their gender (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). This societal shift is driven by a heightened acknowledgment of individual identity and a desire for recognition within societal structures (How The Gender Identity Revolution Impacts Society, 2022). The concept of performativity, as elucidated by Judith Butler in "Gender Trouble," emerges as a significant framework challenging traditional notions of gender, identity, and power (Butler, 1991, p. XXii). Performativity posits that gender is a socially constructed identity maintained through norms and discourses rather than an inherent or stable identity (Butler, 1991). Subsequently, *this dissertation aims to interrogate the assumptions and implications of performativity, in its context of identifying as a particular gender, within contemporary discourse, drawing from the existential philosophies of Paul Tillich and Simone de Beauvoir.*

Existentialism, characterized by Oxford References as, emphasizes individual agency and responsibility in determining one's existence and provides a philosophical lens to critique Butler's concept of performativity (existentialism, Oxford Reference). Drawing from the existential philosophies of Paul Tillich and Simone de Beauvoir, this dissertation aims to interrogate the assumptions and implications of performativity within contemporary discourse. The philosophical analysis method was chosen due to its suitability for examining complex theoretical constructs and their implications for identity and agency.

This study contributes to the ongoing discourse on identity, freedom, and perspectives in contemporary academic circles. With the prevalence of subjective perspectives shaping individuals' perceptions and experiences, fundamental inquiries into the nature of truth and its interpretation have become imperative. This is because, as individuals increasingly view the world through their personal experiences and biases, it is essential to discern the objective truths underlying these subjective narratives. This societal shift challenges established beliefs and norms, prompting individuals to reassess their own perceptions and validate commonly accepted perspectives. The imperative for such inquiries is underscored by the need to navigate and appreciate how individuals interpret and experience the world, developing better understanding and communication among people ("What Is Subjective Perception? - Spiegato," 2023).

The intersection of existentialism and post-structuralism offers new insights into Judith Butler's concept of performativity, in which she asserts that gender is not a fixed or inherent identity but a sequence of actions performed and repeated within social contexts (Butler, 1991, p. XV). By examining performativity through an existentialist lens, scholars can unravel the interplay between social constructs and individual self-definition and the tension between freedom and constraint in shaping human experience. These new insights are substantiated by how existentialism emphasizes individual agency and authenticity, while post-structuralism highlights identity's fluidity and social constructs' impact. This interdisciplinary approach encourages a more nuanced understanding of identity formation and agency within diverse social contexts, acknowledging that identity is not a static attribute but a continuous performance shaped by internal desires and external pressures (Boucher & Deakin University, n.d.).

This dissertation will start by thoroughly introducing the philosophies of Judith Butler, Paul Tillich, and Simone de Beauvoir, highlighting their vital relevant concepts. Judith Butler's concept of performativity, which challenges traditional notions of gender, identity, and power, will be explained in detail. Butler's view that gender is not an innate identity but a series of actions performed within societal contexts will be critically outlined. Paul Tillich's existentialist philosophy, which emphasizes individual agency and the search for meaning within the human experience, will also be explored. Additionally, Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism, which underscores the fluidity of identity and the impact of societal constructs on individual freedom, will be presented.

Understanding these foundational concepts allows us to appreciate the philosophical divergences and intersections between Butler, Tillich, and de Beauvoir. This comparison will allow us to examine the arguments against Butler's concept of performativity critically. The critique will delve into how existentialist perspectives from Tillich and de Beauvoir challenge or complement Butler's ideas, particularly concerning the dynamic between social constructs and individual autonomy. A comparative analysis will be provided to examine Butler's arguments critically. This involves scrutinizing the performativity concept through the existential lenses Tillich and de Beauvoir provided, identifying strengths, weaknesses, and areas for further exploration. By leveraging existentialist critiques, this study aims to reveal new insights into the ongoing discourse on gender, identity, and agency. Finally, a conclusion will be drawn to synthesize the critiques and insights illustrated throughout the dissertation. This conclusion will

summarize the findings and discuss their broader implications for gender studies and philosophy. It will emphasize how these philosophical discussions can pave the way for more nuanced and interdisciplinary approaches to understanding identity dynamics in contemporary society.

It is essential to acknowledge the boundaries of this dissertation in order to understand its scope. While the critique of Butler's performativity through the lenses of existentialism offers valuable insights, it does not claim to provide definitive answers to the complex questions surrounding identity and agency. Instead, it aims to ignite further inquiry and dialogue within gender studies and philosophy. The intersection of these diverse philosophical traditions underscores the intricacy of identity formation and the ongoing negotiation between individual agency and societal structures. This dissertation, therefore, serves as a launching pad for deeper exploration and discussion, encouraging scholars to delve further into these complex and evolving debates. Finally, Grammarly was utilized to strengthen the tone and structure of this dissertation.

II.   Discussion

II.a. Judith Butler's Philosophy

Judith Butler is a distinguished professor, philosopher, and gender theorist who has made significant contributions to the fields of feminist theory and queer studies. Born in 1956, Butler published "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" in 1990, where she contested traditional notions of gender, identity, and sexuality (Duignan, 2024). Her theory of performativity, which is central to her work, is defined by Butler as "a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (Butler, 1991, p. XV). She has been a significant figure supporting new social trends and identity evolution in younger generations today, changing their perspectives on life and development (Yorker, 2024). By examining the main arguments of "Gender Trouble" and Butler's concept of performativity, we can understand the complexities of gender identity, the power dynamics involved in its construction, and the implications of this theory for feminist and queer politics. Exploring the intersections between Butler's ideas and the philosophies of Paul Tillich and Simone de Beauvoir can deepen our

understanding of how gender, identity, and agency are conceptualized and contested in contemporary discourse.

To understand the arguments of this dissertation, we need to analyze and comprehend Butler's main concepts. In her book "Gender Trouble," Judith Butler introduces concepts that challenge traditional attitudes toward gender, identity, and power. One of her key ideas is performativity. By emphasizing the fluid and constructed nature of gender, Butler disrupts essentialist viewpoints and highlights how individuals actively participate in enacting gender roles based on societal expectations and conventions. She claims that we are not born a gender, but rather that gender is a repetitive act in time, meaning that we unconsciously perform the norm of a gender. By foregrounding the performative aspect of gender, she critiques fixed understandings of identity and underlines the dynamic relationship between individuals and their cultural environments in shaping gender expressions and experiences (Butler, 1991, p. XXii). This viewpoint encourages us to reflect and reassess gender as a varied interaction between social, cultural, and personal variables while prompting them to contemplate how established societal standards impact and restrict their sense of self and to consider how they might participate in reshaping these standards (Butler, 1991, p. 33). While Butler's theory highlights the pervasive influence of social norms on identity, it also provides space for agency and resistance. Individuals can performatively enact their identities in ways that challenge and subvert normative expectations. For instance, the repeated performance of non-normative gender expressions can destabilize and transform the very norms that seek to constrain them. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that Judith Butler's theory of performativity emphasizes that social constructs significantly shape identity. Still, she also acknowledges the role of individual agency and the capacity for resistance within these constructs. This complexity highlights the dynamic interplay between societal norms and personal agency in forming identity. However, this dissertation still provides a deeper understanding and limitations of her concept.

Furthermore, by emphasizing the performative nature of gender, Butler destabilizes the notion of a fixed and stable gender identity, opening up possibilities for resistance and subversion. She writes, "Subversive bodily acts, the stylization of the body, can have a powerful impact on the cultural field, disrupting the norms that govern the reproduction of gender" (Butler, 1991, p. 125). When Butler discusses "subversive bodily acts" and the stylization of the body,

she is referring to how individuals can actively challenge and disrupt dominant gender norms through their actions and behaviors. These acts of subversion involve consciously deviating from or critiquing established gender expectations, thereby creating a space for alternative modes of gender expression and identity to emerge. Butler argues that such subversive acts have the potential to exert a powerful influence on the cultural landscape, as they disrupt the norms that govern the reproduction of gender (Butler, 1991, p. 125).

By highlighting the potential of subversion within the performative framework of gender, Butler underscores individuals' tools in shaping and contesting prevailing gender norms. This perspective highlights an engagement with how gender is constructed and maintained, suggesting a new way for individuals to question and reshape existing gender categories. Ultimately, her exploration of subversion within the performative context of gender identity illuminates the possibilities for resistance and the creation of new forms of gender expression that transcend traditional binaries and constraints.

Moreover, Butler's concept of performativity goes beyond individual actions to encompass broader social and cultural practices. She argues that gender is not a personal attribute but a social phenomenon produced and maintained through collective practices and discourses (Butler, 1991, p. 187). Butler's argument underscores the idea that individual characteristics or choices do not solely determine gender identity but are significantly shaped by the broader social context in which it is situated. These collective practices play a significant role in forming and maintaining gender identities, influencing how individuals perceive and enact their gender within a given social framework.

By examining how gender is performed and reiterated within social contexts, Butler reveals the power dynamics in shaping and regulating gender identity. Butler's assertion that "gender is not a radical choice, but rather a choice constrained by the very structures that enable it" (Butler, 1991, p. 187) accentuates the idea that gender expression is not a purely individual decision but is significantly influenced and constrained by societal structures and norms. Revealing how power operates through the repetition and normalization of gendered behaviors, underlining how gender norms are not only upheld but also implemented and policed within the roots of society. She illuminates how gender identity is deeply embedded in social practices and discourses, revealing the complex interplay between individual agency and societal constraints in the construction of gender. This perspective invites a critical assessment of the power dynamics

at play in shaping and regulating gender norms, ultimately provoking a deeper understanding of how gender identity is both constructed and preserved within broader social contexts.

Further understanding of Butler's main takeaways will be provided throughout the course of this dissertation for better understanding. This will be done throughout her comparisons with Paul Tillich and Simone De Beauvoir.

II.b. Paul Tillich's Existential Philosophy

Following our understanding of the importance of individual perspectives, we turn to Paul Tillich, a German-American theologian, philosopher, and existentialist known for his interdisciplinary approach to exploring human existence and meaning. Through his work, he dives into the power of self-acceptance (Unhjem, 2024). This dissertation will follow his work "The Courage to Be," which emphasizes the importance of confronting existential anxieties and living authentically in a secular world. Through his work, Tillich sought to reconcile religious faith with modern culture, focusing on the "ground of being" concept as the ultimate reality. We turn to Tillich as he could provide a deeper understanding of the existential aspects of Butler's gender performativity. It is essential to highlight that research between Butler and Tillich was not found, especially concerning performativity.

Consequently, this dissertation will add to the research gap between existentialism and performativity. Tillich's focus on faith as an act of ultimate concern, which will be mentioned later in this section, could be used to explore the deep-seated faith in societal norms that underpin gender performances. His ideas on truth, freedom, and the courage to be have had a lasting impact on contemporary thought, inspiring us to search for meaning and purpose in a complex and changing world (Tillich, 2000).

In exploring existential philosophy, Paul Tillich's insights help to understand the complexities of human existence and the pursuit of meaning. At the center of his philosophy lies the dynamic interplay between the "courage to be" and the concept of the "ground of being," offering perspectives on freedom and the human condition. Through a comprehensive analysis of Tillich's existential thought, this section aims to elucidate the philosophical underpinnings of his ideas, their relevance in contemporary discourse, and how they could be linked to Butler's concept of performativity.

Starting with Tillich's "courage to be" concept, which affirms one's existence amidst existential anxieties and uncertainties. This affirmation entails acknowledging one's existence and identity in the face of doubts, questions, and anxieties arising from contemplating the fundamental aspects of human existence, such as the meaning of life, freedom, choice, responsibility, and mortality (Tillich, 2000, pp. 3, 35). Unlike psychological fortitude, this courage embodies a fundamental ethical reality deeply ingrained in the core of being. When people face challenging aspects of life like the fear of not existing or feeling like life has no purpose, it is crucial to have the courage to be brave, explains Tillich. By being brave, individuals can accept who they are and work towards being authentic and finding themselves. His emphasis on courage and authenticity is a continuous process of self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-affirmation. He invites individuals to confront their existential fears and uncertainties with courage, acknowledging that the journey toward authenticity is fraught with challenges and setbacks (Tillich, 2000, p. 123). By underscoring the significance of courage in the face of existential anxieties, Tillich aims for individuals to confront their inner conflicts, embrace their vulnerabilities, and strive toward a more authentic existence (Tillich, 2000, p. 123). Through this nuanced approach, Tillich offers a perspective on the complexities of human nature and the struggle to find meaning and purpose in a world of existential uncertainties. This act of bravery and acceptance is critical to his philosophy. It stresses the importance of dealing with life's hard questions with honesty and strength. Tillich's existential philosophy of the "courage to be" urges individuals to engage with their deepest existential concerns and navigate the complexities of human existence with courage and authenticity, referring to the inner strength needed to confront life's external and internal challenges by embracing one's authentic self and facing these uncertainties with integrity and conviction (Tillich, 2000, p. 6). Through understanding this concept, we can link this back to Butler in the context of identity. Tillich illustrates the consequences of not dealing with inner insecurities/conflicts. We can understand the impact of recognizing the "existential concerns" without dealing with them. This could lead to inner conflict and confusion of identity, questioning whether we are "correct" or "wrong" the way that we are due to the overwhelming stress that's been undealt with. The stress and confusion would make one try to change or act in specific ways to feel at peace with themselves. This would lead us to possibly perform a certain gender, as Butler would say, to fill this lack of peace due to anxieties and inner conflicts. In addition to this point, Butler's perspective contrasts

with Tillich's concept of believing in an innate self. According to Butler's performativity theory, gender identity is produced and performed via repeated acts and behaviors rather than being innate or preset (Durmuş, 2022, p. 4). This states that Butler believes we are always the result of performing instead of having an innate self that could be covered by the insecurity of existential anxiety. Butler believes there is no stable or essential self before these performances. Instead, the self is constantly developed and formed by social interactions and cultural conventions. While Tillich emphasizes the authenticity of expressing one's innate self, Butler's theory questions the idea of a pre-existing, essential self. Butler believes that gender performance is not a representation of an inner truth but a continuous process of enactment and repetition that gives the illusion of a fixed identity (Durmuş, 2022, p. 9). This viewpoint is consistent with Butler's critique of essentialism and emphasis on the socially constructed aspect of identity. As a result, Butler's method does not rely on the concept of an innate self, instead emphasizing the fluid and contingent character of identity production. Butler views the concept of an innate self as rejecting essentialist ideas about fixed identities rather than a matter of viewpoint.

Complementing the notion of the "courage to be" is Tillich's concept of the "ground of being," which symbolizes the ultimate, unconditioned reality from which all existence originates. This ground of being transcends personal deity, serving as a universal and transcendent source that underpins the structure of reality and offers a foundation for meaning and significance in life. This ground of being is the foundation that helps us make sense of life, allowing us to find our place and purpose (Tillich, 2000, p. 156). By exploring existential themes like anxiety and uncertainty, Tillich strives to confront the challenges of existence and strive for authenticity through courage. Through the interconnectedness of self and world, Tillich emphasizes the dual aspects of self-affirmation and engagement with the universal structure of being. By transcending the limitations of self and world, individuals can align themselves with the ultimate reality of being, finding meaning and purpose within this existential framework. Ultimate reality refers to all existence's foundational and transcendent source (Tillich, 2000, p. 156). In relating it to Butler, this would mean that our reality and ourselves are not just a result of social constructs. We are not who we are because of how society made us; we have inherent differences from each other, whether male or female or even of the same sex, which explains that there is some kind of reality more significant than who we are. This statement could be supported by psychological research on the gender equality paradox. This paradox states that countries with higher levels of

gender equality have fewer women graduating in STEM fields than less gender-equal countries ("Corrigendum: The Gender-Equality Paradox," 2019). However, it is crucial to recognize that this research does not prove anything for this dissertation or on its own and is purely psychological research, looking at behavioral differences between sexes. This study only acts as additional insight for the claim provided.

The "ground of being" represents existence's fundamental source or essence, providing a basis for understanding the universe's meaning and coherence. By examining the relationship between self-affirmation—asserting one's true identity—and this ultimate source of being, Tillich states that individuals can establish a deep connection between their personal sense of self and the fundamental essence of life itself (Tillich, 2000, p. 1). In other words, he suggests that when individuals dare to affirm and embrace their true identity, they can establish a deep connection with the essence of life itself, making it relevant for addressing the concept of performativity. A hypothetical scenario could be someone who has always struggled with self-doubt and uncertainty about their identity and purpose in life. Instead of dealing with these uncertainties by altering or questioning who they are, this individual begins confronting their fears and insecurities through introspection and self-reflection, gradually gaining the courage to assert their true identity and values. As they delve deeper into this self-affirmation process, they recognize a sense of inner strength and authenticity emerging within them. In this hypothetical scenario, the individual's journey of self-affirmation mirrors Tillich's idea of establishing a thorough connection between one's sense of self and the fundamental essence of life itself, represented by the "ground of being." By aligning their true identity with this ultimate source of being, the individual experiences a deeper sense of meaning, coherence, and purpose.

Through this, Tillich aims to prompt individuals to contemplate the essence of existence, grapple with ethical dilemmas, and seek meaning in a world that often appears ambiguous and uncertain. This means that instead of changing who we are to try and solve our uncertainties, we should confront our fears and anxieties and work through them to become our authentic selves. By approaching these deep existential concerns with courage and authenticity, individuals are provoked with self-discovery, ethical reflection, and existential understanding that enriches their experience of being alive (Tillich, 2000, p. 1).

Following our understanding of the central concepts of Tillich's "The Courage to Be," we dive deeper into his understanding that identity is linked to self-affirmation in the face of

non-being. Non-being refers to the absence or negation of being, representing the existential void or nothingness individuals confront (Tillich, 2000, p. 32). As mentioned above, according to Tillich, courage is affirming one's being despite the existential anxiety caused by the threat of non-being (Tillich, 2000, p. 86). This self-affirmation is vital for individuals to maintain a sense of identity and purpose in a world filled with uncertainties and challenges. In his quote, "Man in the existential situation of finitude and estrangement can reach truth only in an existential attitude" (Tillich, 2000, p. 126), he emphasizes that individuals must affirm themselves as separate, self-centered beings and as participants in the larger world (Tillich, 2000, p. 86). This concept is significant because the act of performing gender can be seen as a manifestation of non-being. When we consciously choose to embody a particular gender identity, we may struggle to fully realize and live this identity due to uncertainties or lack of complete understanding about what that gender entails. When people try to act or present themselves as a specific gender, they may feel like they are not fully meeting society's expectations or their own understanding of that gender. This feeling of not completely fitting into a particular gender role can create a sense of uncertainty or confusion about their identity. It highlights the complexity of how individuals navigate societal norms and personal feelings when expressing their gender. By highlighting the sense of non-being or uncertainty that individuals may experience when trying to embody a specific gender, this critique suggests that gender identity is not only a matter of performance or repetition (Reville, 2013).

By affirming themselves as such, individuals acknowledge their limitations, assert their unique identity and values, and recognize their interconnectedness with the broader context of society and the universe. This balance allows individuals to navigate the complexities of truth-seeking authentically and meaningfully within the human condition. This dual affirmation of the self as an individual and part of a collective or universal whole aids in establishing a coherent sense of identity that transcends mere existence (Tillich, 2000, p. 121).

Furthermore, in terms of existence, Tillich's view is not limited to the realms of academia but extends to the existential attitude of involvement rather than detachment (Tillich, 2000, p. 123). He argues that individuals must confront the tension between their finite, transient existence and their essential participation in eternal truths or ideals (Tillich, 2000, p. 4). As this quote displays, "The anxiety of individual non-being is transformed into anxiety about the collective, and anxiety about the collective is conquered by the courage to affirm oneself through

participation in the collective" (Tillich, 2000, p. 99). This existential tension between the temporal and the eternal realms shapes human experience and understanding of reality. Tillich draws on philosophical concepts such as Plato's distinction between the essential and existential realms to highlight the fundamental nature of this existential dilemma (Tillich, 2000, pp. 4, 127). Finally, if we think of Butler's concept of performativity, we can question the freedom of choice to become something or someone else. Through this thought, Tillich's framework of freedom is not just a concept but a state of being intimately connected to the courage to affirm oneself in the face of anxiety and doubt (Tillich, 2000, p. 121). He proposes that true freedom emerges from the individual's capacity to affirm their identity and existence despite the threats of non-being and meaninglessness. By embracing the courage to be oneself and engage with the world, he proposes that we can transcend the constraints of fear and uncertainty. Additionally, Tillich underscores the significance of enthusiasm for the universe and the self as a means to combat doubt and existential angst (Tillich, 2000, p. 121). This affirmation of one's being and connection to the universe liberates individuals from guilt, condemnation, and existential dread, empowering them to embrace their freedom with assurance and vitality; as said by Tillich, "Courage is the self-affirmation of being despite the fact of non-being. It is the act of the individual self in taking the anxiety of non-being upon itself by affirming itself" (Tillich, 2000, p. 25). Tillich's view of courage as affirming one's being despite existential challenges aligns with Butler's concept of performativity, which underscores how individuals construct their identities through repeated actions conforming to societal norms. Both highlight individuals' active role in asserting their existence and shaping their identities through conscious acts of affirmation and performance.

In short summary, Tillich's concept of the "courage to be" can be represented as self-acceptance of who we are, meaning our inner self. In other words, Tillich promotes self-acceptance and encourages us to work through our existential anxieties to uncover our authentic selves. In the context of performativity, which mentions that gender identity is unstable (Ton, 2018), we can reflect that through conscious self-acceptance and development, we wouldn't have to question identity's worth or validity we would just be. Butler associates the self with society, we are who we are because of social constructs and norms. However, through our understanding of Tillich, if that were the case there would be no room for self-discovery and development. Additionally, through Butler's thoughts it is difficult to argue for self-acceptance of who we are and aim for freedom when no self is involved in the equation.

II.c. Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics

Born in 1908, Simone de Beauvoir was a prominent representative of existentialism in post-war France and a philosopher, novelist, feminist, public intellectual, and activist (Simone De Beauvoir, 2023). Her books "The Ethics of Ambiguity" and "The Second Sex" are essential in existential philosophy and offer a thoughtful examination of human existence, ethics, identity, and freedom. This chapter will observe her central ideas and their implications for identity, freedom, and subjectivity.

Simone de Beauvoir's influence extends beyond her time, resonating in the works of contemporary philosophers like Judith Butler (Durmuş, 2022). While Beauvoir's focus on the inherent ambiguity and complexity of human existence challenges traditional notions of identity and freedom, Butler's work extends this critique by highlighting the performative nature of gender and the construction of subjectivity through social norms and practices. Additionally, by contrasting Butler's and Beauvoir's views on gender, we see that while Butler emphasizes performative acts within societal constraints, Beauvoir highlights the existential ambiguity and agency in shaping one's identity. Despite these differences, both philosophers are committed to questioning established norms and advocating for ethical responsibility towards others, underscoring the relevance of their ideas to our contemporary world (Durmuş, 2022). Simone de Beauvoir's focus on agency and social construction contrasts with Judith Butler's concept of performativity. Beauvoir's idea that women are made, not born, challenges Butler's view of gender as a repetitive performance constrained by societal norms (Pickard, 2023). Additionally, Beauvoir's consideration of intersectionality and embodied experiences adds depth to the discussion, critiquing the abstract nature of Butler's theory (Pickard, 2023). Consequently, Looking into Beauvoir's insights provide a valuable framework for analyzing gender identities beyond Butler's perspective.

Within her work "Ethics of Ambiguity," Beauvoir tackles the complexities of life, exploring the innate ambiguity that permeates our existence and compelling readers to confront the ethical dimensions of their decisions within a landscape fraught with uncertainties. Through her philosophical inquiry, she seeks for us to question the equilibrium between individual autonomy and our obligations towards ourselves and others. As we transit through this academic

work, we are urged to contemplate the essence of truth, freedom, and the thoughtful ramifications of our actions on the liberties of those in our midst (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 1). Moreover, we will uncover some of the concepts from "The Second Sex," a famous work in feminist philosophy that provides a fundamental grasp of how gender is constructed and oppressed and can help guide conversations about how gender identity is performative (De Beauvoir, 2011).

At the heart of Beauvoir's philosophical framework in 'Ethics of Ambiguity' is the assertion that human existence is inherently ambiguous (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 1). The word 'ambiguity' means the ingrained complexity, uncertainty, and multiplicity of human existence, signifying the lack of fixed meanings, conflicting choices and values, and the perpetual need to navigate uncertain circumstances (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 71). She challenges us to consider the ethical dilemma of determining when freedom should be curtailed and when it is deemed justifiable, highlighting the deep ethical ramifications of our actions on the freedoms of those within our sphere of influence (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 64). In her book, she advocates embracing life's inherent uncertainties and contradictions while assuming responsibility for our actions and choices (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 3). She suggests that grappling with ambiguity can lead to a sense of liberation through acceptance and deeper understanding. However, she also warns of the dangers of avoiding engagement with the world and accountability for our deeds, inspiring us to challenge ambiguity with courage and conviction (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 9). Through this ambiguity, Beauvoir explains that in the search for freedom, instead of questioning the limits of our freedom, we should understand the complexities and uncertainties inherent in human existence (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 57). Additionally, we should take responsibility for our actions and how they could limit other people's freedom. This relates back to performativity in the sense that seeking to perform a particular gender could be seen as seeking more freedom to be or live as we would want to. Moreover, while performativity examines the social construction of identity, it may overlook the ethical implications of individual actions on others' freedom and agency.

Furthermore, through "The Second Sex" " she explores in great detail the social construct of gender, how women are oppressed, and how women are defined in relation to males. Beauvoir fundamentally critiques conventional gender norms and expectations by examining how women are "othered" and objectified in society (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 25). Her emphasis on how cultural norms and historical structures shape women's identities aligns with Butler's focus on the

performative nature of gender (Durmuş, 2022). By drawing on Beauvoir's philosophical insights, we can critically discuss Butler's arguments, investigating how Beauvoir's ideas might enrich and challenge Butler's views on gender, identity, and agency. This comparative analysis can help better grasp feminist philosophy and contribute to a broader debate about these complicated philosophical topics.

Subsequently, diving deeper into her key concepts and their implications on freedom, identity, and subjectivity, Beauvoir emphasizes the existential freedom of individuals to define their essence through their choices and actions (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 33). She argues that true freedom is not only the absence of constraints but also the active engagement with the world and accepting responsibility for one's decisions (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 57). Beauvoir implies that genuine freedom goes beyond mere external limitations; it involves individuals' conscious and deliberate involvement in shaping their lives and the world around them. This contrasts with Butler's concept of performativity, where identity is not a pre-existing entity but an outcome of one's actions. While both theorists acknowledge the role of actions in shaping identity, Beauvoir's concept of freedom underscores the idea that individuals are not predetermined by their circumstances but have the agency to shape their lives through authentic choices. This suggests a level of intentionality and consciousness in one's actions that Butler's theory of performativity does not necessarily imply. Moreover, according to Beauvoir, repressive societal systems prevent women from realizing their full potential and limit their autonomy, therefore relegating them to the condition of the "Other" regarding males (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 8). This analysis questions established ideas of freedom and emphasizes how crucial it is for women to stand up against oppressive systems and declare their agency free and autonomous.

Following with identity, Beauvoir challenges the idea of fixed identities and posits that individuals constantly negotiate their identities through interactions with others and the world (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 3). She rejects essentialist views of identity and asserts that identity is a dynamic and evolving construct shaped by personal experiences and social contexts. Beauvoir's perspective on identity highlights the fluidity and complexity of human selfhood. Beauvoir explores how historical circumstances and cultural norms that support gender inequality have formed women's identities. She confronts the objectification and marginalization of women in society and promotes a reassessment of women's rights and liberties according to their own standards (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 19). In Addition, she highlights the significance of women

claiming their subjectivity and refusing restriction to male-defined roles and expectations, challenging the dominant conventions that define women only as men (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 11). Through this notion, Beauvoir refutes the idea that gender identity is only a performance influenced by cultural norms and expectations by highlighting the significance of women regaining their agency and autonomy. Beauvoir's call for women to define their rights and liberties by their own standards questions the idea that gender is a purely performative construct. She does this by pointing out the more structural disparities and power dynamics that influence women's experiences and opportunities for agency and autonomy (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 19). While Butler's notion of performativity emphasizes the disruption of gender norms through performative acts and recurring behaviors, Beauvoir's perspective offers a more comprehensive critique. Beauvoir asserts that women should reject confinement to roles established by males and actively create their own identities and destinies. This approach goes beyond performative behaviors and challenges societal constraints (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 11). Beauvoir's philosophy underscores the necessity of addressing institutional barriers and cultural norms that restrict women's agency and autonomy. It calls for a more thorough transformation of societal structures to enable women to achieve true liberation and self-expression, moving beyond the surface-level subversion of gender norms proposed by Butler (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 842). Thus, Beauvoir's perspective surpasses Butler's concept of performativity by emphasizing not just the disruption of gender roles but also women's empowerment in shaping their identities.

Building on this critique, another key distinction between Butler and De Beauvoir lies in their views on the relationship between gender and embodiment. Butler's concept of performativity, focusing on the idea that gender is a social construct enacted through repeated performances, emphasizes the fluid and contingent nature of gender identity (Durmuş, 2022, p. 4). In contrast, De Beauvoir, while acknowledging the influence of societal norms on gender roles, also emphasizes the embodied experience of women within patriarchal structures. Her analysis delves into the lived experiences of women as embodied subjects, highlighting how societal expectations and power dynamics are inscribed on the female body (Durmuş, 2022, p. 5). Butler does not recognize people's personal experiences as their self. Rather, she sees them as portraying the result of their experiences. If gender was solely a social construct, how could we recognize the value of lived experiences from females and support them in their rights and freedom?. Wouldn't we then contradict the notion and still diminish the value and hardships of

the gender?. This distinction has meaningful societal implications, underscoring the importance of understanding gender as both a social construct and a lived experience.

Furthermore, Butler's emphasis on the performative aspects of gender identity tends to prioritize the discursive and linguistic dimensions of gender construction, highlighting the role of language and cultural norms in shaping identity (Durmuş, 2022, p. 9). This focus on the discursive aspects of identity formation is critiqued by De Beauvoir's existentialist approach, which emphasizes women's concrete experiences and lived realities within oppressive social structures. De Beauvoir underscores the material and embodied dimensions of gendered existence, offering a more comprehensive understanding of identity formation that goes beyond the linguistic and performative aspects emphasized by Butler (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 842).

Simone de Beauvoir's investigation into subjectivity, which she identifies as the core of human existence, illuminates the deep interconnection between an individual's subjectivity and that of others (Beauvoir, 1948, p. 6). She proposes that subjectivity is not an isolated event but instead takes shape in relation to the world and other beings. Moreover, Beauvoir highlights the intersubjective aspect of human experience. She emphasizes that our self-perception is closely tied to our interactions with others and the larger social context. This recognition of the interplay between individual subjectivity and the subjectivity of others carries comlpex ethical weight. Beauvoir's perspective compels us to acknowledge the subjectivity of others in our interactions, promoting empathy, understanding, and a solid ethical obligation towards others by emphasizing the importance of recognizing the agency and autonomy of individuals in social interactions (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 388). Furthermore, by underscoring subjectivity's relational and interdependent aspects, Beauvoir encourages us to reflect on the ethical necessity of acknowledging and respecting the diverse subjectivities that mold human experience. In doing so, she advocates for a more empathetic and inclusive approach to interpersonal relationships and societal dynamics.

Finally, Beauvoir emphasizes the importance of women asserting their independence and self-governance in a society that frequently attempts to undermine their power. She contends that women should not be characterized exclusively by men but should instead define their own futures and identities, affirming their individuality and self-determination (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 8). Beauvoir's contributions underscore the imperative for women to counteract dehumanization

and marginalization, reasserting their independence and self-governance to unlock their full potential and attain genuine equality and emancipation (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 14).

Beauvoir's stance, which opposes the notion of women being solely defined in relation to men, interrogates Butler's concept of gender identity as a performative act. Beauvoir's stance challenges the traditional notion of women being defined solely in relation to men by emphasizing the autonomy and agency of women as independent individuals (Durmuş, 2022, p. 4). This perspective deviates from Butler's concept of gender identity as a performative act. Beauvoir's focus on women's autonomy and self-definition challenges the idea that gender identity is solely a performance or enactment, highlighting the complexities of individual agency and self-determination in shaping one's identity. Beauvoir's point of view calls into question the conclusion that Butler's concept of performativity seeks to improve societal standards. While Butler's theory emphasizes gender as a repeating act that questions and destroys societal norms, Beauvoir's perspective dives into the structural inequities and power dynamics that shape women's experiences, autonomy, and chances for self-determination (Durmuş, 2022, pp. 3, 4), (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 11). In advocating for women to counter objectification and marginalization, Beauvoir emphasizes women's need to affirm their individuality and self-rule in a society that often attempts to undermine their power. This focus on women reclaiming their power contests the notion that gender identity is purely a performance molded by societal norms, underscoring the need to confront systemic barriers and societal anticipations that restrict women's independence and power (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 342).

III.   Critical Examination

III.a. Critical Examination of Performativity using Paul Tillich's Philosophy

Paul Tillich's existentialist philosophy focuses on concepts of existential anxiety, the courage to be, and the relationship between individuals and their ultimate concerns. His ideas provide a strong framework for critiquing Judith Butler's theory of performativity, particularly in how existential elements shape human identity and agency.

Tillich's idea of "the courage to be" applies to affirming one's existence despite intrinsic anxieties and uncertainties. This concept questions Butler's notion of performativity by introducing the component of individual courage and agency. While Butler accentuates the

repetitive nature of gender performances dictated by social norms (Butler, 1991), Tillich's philosophy depicts that individuals possess the courage to combat these norms. This presents a layer of personal agency and existential affirmation, indicating that performativity may not fully account for the complexities of human identity formation.

Tillich's concept of existential anxiety refers to the inherent tension and uncertainty in human existence originating from the awareness of non-being and the quest for meaning in a finite life (Tillich, 1952). Applying this to Butler's performativity, one can argue that performative acts are driven not just by societal norms but also by deeper existential anxiety. This anxiety pushes individuals to continuously seek validation and identity through their performances, suggesting that performativity is not simply a surface-level social construct but greatly intertwined with existential concerns (Tillich, 2000, p. 32). Additionally, the "ground of being" concept indicates that by facing these anxieties, we can aim to understand ourselves beyond the insecurities and trauma we have experienced, leading to a more authentic self rather than using performativity as an escape (Tillich, 2000, p. 1).

Moreover, Tillich argues that individuals are driven by ultimate concerns, which provide a sense of purpose and authenticity. In contrast, Butler's performativity often characterizes identity as fragmented and distributed across various performances. However, using the "ground of being," we might consider that our reality is more than just the result of social structures and societal influences. Through our understanding of Tillich, existential worries and insecurities engendered by these structures frequently cover our genuine selves. By confronting and embracing these existential problems, we can begin a journey of self-discovery that goes beyond superficial societal layers. Instead of changing our identity in reaction to social pressures, a more meaningful strategy of accepting ourselves as we are and actively questioning the stereotypes and expectations placed upon us would be more realistic. This process of self-acceptance and defiance of societal conventions facilitates genuine individual development and a richer, more authentic sense of being.

Embracing this concept allows us to develop our true selves, nurturing inner strength and resilience independent of external validation. Thus, it provides a path to personal progress and fulfillment based on existential authenticity and courage (Tillich, 2000, pp. 123, 86). By incorporating Tillich's focus on ultimate concerns, we can critique Butler's framework for potentially overlooking the quest for authenticity and deeper meaning in life. This critique argues

that performativity might benefit from integrating existential perspectives to offer a more holistic understanding of identity.

Another critical perspective on Judith Butler's concept of performativity stems from the existential challenge of how people can perform a gender they don't naturally understand. Tillich's philosophy, which explores the intricacies of existence and identity, provides a solid foundation for this critique. Butler proposes that gender is a sequence of performative behaviors governed by societal standards. However, this presents an important question: if people don't know what the other gender is, how can they perform it authentically? This question implies that gender performances are frequently based on secondhand information and societal expectations rather than true understanding or experience (Tillich, 2000, pp. 123, 86). Tillich's existential framework emphasizes the significance of addressing the uncertainties and ambiguities of life in order to uncover one's true self. Applying this to the concept of gender, one could argue that performative behaviors are more than just mirroring cultural standards; they also include navigating severe existential confusion about what it means to represent a gender other than one's own intrinsic understanding.

Furthermore, Butler's concept of paradoxical performativity addresses the issue of agency in the context of perpetual performance. If everything is considered performative, the concept of agency is destabilized, resulting in the paradox of performance without agency. This allows us to question if our gender identity is an intrinsic part of who we are or if it is merely a continuous performance with no genuine agency. This existential doubt is consistent with Tillich's concept of existential anxiety, in which people confront the underlying tension and ambiguity of human life. In the context of gender performativity, this anxiety can show as apprehension over whether one's gender performance is genuine or simply a mirror of society's preconceptions and gossip. The dependence on external stimuli to execute a gender that one does not naturally understand underscores the existential struggle for authenticity and self-affirmation.

Thus, Butler's performativity is critiqued via Tillich's existential perspective, emphasizing the need for a deeper, more true engagement with one's identity. Instead of relying on external conventions and imperfect understandings of the other gender, people are encouraged to explore and affirm their genuine identities, generating a sense of existential honesty and personal development (Tillich, 2000, p. 86). This viewpoint emphasizes that while cultural norms influence performativity, it is also inextricably linked to the existential need for authentic

self-understanding and validation (Tillich, 2000, p. 1). This critique further challenges Butler's concept by adding the paradox of performativity and the question of agency, implying that gender identity may be an intrinsic component of our being rather than a societal norm-driven performance.

III.b. Critical Examination of Performativity using Simone De Beauvoir's Philosophy

Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist feminism emphasizes the concepts of ambiguity, freedom, and individual situatedness. Her philosophy provides a counterpoint to Butler's performativity, highlighting the interplay between social structures and individual agency.

Through Simone de Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity, I acknowledge the complexity and fluidity of human existence, in which people continuously balance freedom and restriction (Beauvoir, 1948). I believe this concept is critical in evaluating Judith Butler's theory of performativity since it accentuates that gender performances are not only influenced by external standards but also display individual freedom within these limits (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 57). Her perspective enriches Butler's theory by recognizing individuals' existential freedom even inside limited social structures. In this way, I think gender performativity can be viewed as a dynamic interaction of societal norms and personal agency. Butler highlights the repeated character of gender performances determined by social standards (Butler, 1991, p. XV), while Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity implies that these performances also represent an individual's existential freedom. This difference to me demonstrates that people are more than just puppets of societal structures; they are active participants who navigate and, at times, oppose these limits to express their true selves.

Furthermore, I understand that Beauvoir's existential ethics accentuates people's responsibility for their acts and how they affect the freedom of others (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 57). This ethical dimension is crucial when investigating the consequences of gender performativity. I believe seeking to embody a specific gender might be interpreted as a desire for greater personal freedom—to live and be as one wishes. However, this goal must be tempered with an understanding of how such performances may affect the freedom and agency of others. While performativity focuses on the social production of identity, I think it may miss the ethical consequences of individual actions for the larger community. Beauvoir's framework forces us to recognize the responsibility that comes with freedom, implying that our gender performances

should not only strive for personal liberation but also respect and promote the freedom of others. This ethical aspect adds to Butler's theory by introducing a moral dimension, pushing for a more comprehensive view of identity that incorporates both existential freedom and ethical duty.

Another argument is that Simone De Beauvoir strongly advocates for female rights and freedom (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 8). She points out that people are placed beings shaped by their historical, social, and personal circumstances. This situatedness influences how they see and perform their identities. However, according to Judith Butler's concept of performativity, gender is a performance shaped by cultural norms and expectations rather than an innate trait (Butler, 1991, p. XV). This poses an important question: How can one fight for a gender's rights if the principle of performativity argues that we perform genders rather than being them? I believe that this question is especially important for women, who may feel unrecognized for who they are if their identities are shaped only by society's beliefs and expectations. It suggests that Butler's concept of performativity may damage women's rights and liberties (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 19). By seeing gender as a social construct, we diminish women by separating them from the self. However, integrating Beauvoir's focus on situatedness into Butler's performativity reveals to me that performative acts cannot be fully understood without considering the specific circumstances in which individuals function. This critique adds to my thinking that Butler's theory may benefit from a more nuanced treatment of situatedness, so providing a more comprehensive understanding of how identities are built and performed. In this light, Beauvoir's advocacy for female rights and freedom might be interpreted as a plea to acknowledge and respect the context of women's lives and identities. I see it as a call to challenge the societal norms and expectations that define gender performances, as well as to affirm women's rights and freedoms as placed people. This argument stresses the significance of considering both Beauvoir's and Butler's perspectives while comprehending and arguing for gender rights. It highlights the need for a more inclusive approach that recognizes both the performative character of gender and the context of individual experiences and identities.

Building on the previous argument, I believe Beauvoir's philosophy provides a persuasive alternative to Butler's concept of performativity. According to the readings of Beauvoir, gender identity is not simply a performance created by cultural norms and expectations. Instead, I see the value in women reclaiming their agency and autonomy (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 8). I believe that women should be able to define their own rights and freedoms, rejecting the assumption that

gender is solely a performative construct. I realize the systemic disparities and power dynamics that influence women's experiences and their potential for agency and autonomy. Butler's performativity focuses on undermining gender norms through repeated acts and behaviors, whereas Beauvoir provides a broader critique. She believes that women should actively construct their own identities and destinies rather than accepting male-imposed positions (De Beauvoir, 2011, p. 25).

Finally, Beauvoir's philosophy contributes to the topic of gender identity by highlighting the value of individual agency and autonomy. It rejects the idea of gender as a solely performative construct and advocates for a more thoughtful definition of identity that considers the complexness of human life. This argument emphasizes the need for a more comprehensive approach to understanding gender identity, one that incorporates both performative and existential viewpoints.

IV.   Conclusion

Concluding, the findings of this dissertation show that Judith Butler's concept of performativity offers vital insights into the social construction of gender, challenging conventional knowledge by emphasizing the importance of societal norms and discourses in forming identity. By combining Paul Tillich's existentialist perspective, which emphasizes self-acceptance and authenticity, the study emphasizes the conflict between societal standards and individual authenticity. Simone de Beauvoir's emphasis on agency and the social construction of identity adds to this theory, providing a foundation for understanding gender identities as dynamic and multidimensional. These multidisciplinary viewpoints emphasize the importance of considering societal factors and individual agency when discussing gender identity. This comprehensive approach broadens our understanding of identity dynamics. It encourages ongoing dialogue and study in gender studies and philosophy, ultimately leading to a more nuanced and holistic discussion of gender.

Reflecting on Butler's concept of performativity has been an intellectual exploration and scholarly engagement, requiring interrogating established theories and reevaluating foundational assumptions regarding identity and societal power dynamics. This critique expands the

understanding of performativity and encourages a reexamination of how individuals navigate their identities within societal structures. This dissertation analyzes Butler's performativity theory in conversation with existential philosophies, revealing a richer understanding of identity formation and freedom. Recognizing the study's boundaries is crucial for defining its reach and implications for ongoing research. While it does not provide definitive solutions to the complex queries surrounding identity formation and agency, it motivates further investigation and discussion in gender studies and philosophy. Integrating knowledge from diverse academic fields highlights the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches to tackling contemporary challenges, emphasizing collaborative scholarship. Demonstrating the global-local connection reveals how individual experiences are intertwined with broader societal structures.

This study shows that integrating existentialist perspectives with performativity theory provides a richer understanding of identity formation and freedom. Ongoing research could further explore these intersections in practical contexts such as social policy and education. The insights gained in this research open several promising avenues for future exploration. One potential area is investigating the practical implications of performativity theory in various social contexts. Additionally, ongoing research could delve into the intersectionality of gender identity with other aspects of identity, such as race, class, and sexuality.

This study's integration of knowledge from diverse academic disciplines underscores the necessity of interdisciplinary approaches in tackling the intricate challenges of today's modern world. This research demonstrates the significant interdisciplinarity needed to grapple with the diverse nature of identity and societal structures. It becomes clear that the complexities of current-day challenges cannot be adequately understood or addressed through the perspective of a single discipline. This accentuates the importance of collaborative scholarship, inspiring scholars to embrace various perspectives and approaches. Drawing relevant conclusions illuminating the global-local connection, this study highlights the interconnectedness of individual experiences with more general societal structures. The contributions of Beauvoir, Tillich, and Butler assist in exploring the complex ways in which global discourses on gender and identity intersect with local manifestations of power and agency. Through recognizing the global implications of local struggles for self-determination, this dissertation stresses the need for nuanced and contextually sensitive approaches to understanding and addressing inequalities globally.

In conclusion, this dissertation critiques Butler's performativity theory. Also, it offers a pathway for future research that embraces interdisciplinary perspectives, acknowledges limitations, and seeks to unravel the intricate connections between global discourses and local manifestations of identity dynamics. By enabling a holistic and inclusive approach to gender studies and philosophy, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities ingrained in contemporary discussions of identity, aiding for continued dialogue and exploration.

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