Poststructuralism and the Inescapability of Ethics

By Jedediah S. Purdy

The poststructuralist position challenges the most basic assumptions of social analysis and critique. Taken at face value, poststructuralism at once provides a devastating account of contemporary society, identity, and theory, and denies itself and others the normative resources that might lead from that account to condemnation or to change. In section I, I outline poststructuralism, a charge of incoherence leveled at it by Charles Taylor, and some responses. In section II, I argue that poststructuralism denies itself indispensable theoretical resources and, in application, inevitably borrows these from other sources. On poststructuralism's own terms, the choice of what and whence to borrow remains frustratingly arbitrary. In section III, I suggest that this choice need not be arbitrary. Rather, as a reading of Charles Taylor and William Connolly indicates, poststructuralism's insights can be cautiously wedded to a fuller position that invites neither arbitrariness nor charges of incoherence.

In this paper I treat Judith Butler's position as emblematic of poststructuralism. Where Butler's ideas are continuous with those of Michel Foucault, I consider him as well, especially as an object of criticism.

I. Poststructuralism and the Challenge of Incoherence

As I treat it here, poststructuralism begins with the epistemological insight that our knowledge and experience are never of "things in themselves," but always of entities, categories, and phenomena as these are constructed in language. Therefore, the "natural kinds" and "natural essences" that we take to order the world reflect not ontological, but ascriptive properties. The means of ascription is "discourse," a category encompassing language and the range of institutions and practices that uphold, transmit, and gradually reshape linguistic patterns and their counterparts in the social order.¹

Jedediah S. Purdy is a junior majoring in social studies and philosophy at Harvard University.
Of course, skepticism toward natural kinds does not itself entail a strong social critique. John Locke acknowledged that no necessary link exists between objects and their linguistic designations, then merrily produced the Second Treatise on Government. However, two concepts distinguish poststructuralism sharply from traditional epistemological wariness. First, poststructuralism relies heavily on the idea of “power.” Power is not a unitary entity, but the sum of the discursive effects that define the limits of discourse itself. As a heterogeneous effect rather than a homogeneous cause, power “dictates” that certain discursive formations have currency, while others are rendered unintelligible, beyond thought and expression.\(^2\)

Second, poststructuralism applies its epistemological claims to persons. Rather than free originators of discourse, we are substantially its products. Our attitudes, desires, and capacities reflect not essential characteristics but contingently appropriated discursive resources. Further, these resources are not, as it were, implanted so deeply in us as to become effectively, if post-natally, constitutive; rather, they come into being performatively, or in the enactment and reiteration of discursively available tropes. The sum of our performative attitudes is our “character”; but this feature, however apparently coherent, is always an ensemble of performative attitudes, and never a set of orientations that precede or underlie discourse.

In relation to persons, power does not repress some pre-existing desire or orientation, but produces those same qualities by making certain ensembles of personality intelligible and “natural” while others become marginal or inconceivable. Power operates primarily not through explicit codes directed at already constituted subjects, but in techniques of normalization, defining adherence to and deviancy from standards of normality and abnormality, and so constituting the very subjects to whom it is applied.

This model substantially changes the theoretical landscape. All discursive regimes, while plainly distinct from each other in a variety of ways, now appear normatively equivalent. Differently put, traditional models of evaluation appear equally irrelevant to all. No idea of rights, interests, or procedures of communication can be established as independent of, or prior to, discursive formations and so cannot form as a basis for evaluating these. Instead, these phenomena are themselves products or features of discursive regimes. Rights and interests are simply elements of the performative identities that become available, even hegemonic, within the discourses of modernity. Similarly, communicative procedures are only contingent discursive forms, marked by such tropes as “autonomy” and “reciprocity,” and have no priority to alternative forms. Initially, then, poststructuralism appears to preclude
evaluation.

Nonetheless, Butler and Foucault take an interest that can only be viewed as normative in a particular sort of politics, one that might be termed "resistance." Resistance consists in transgressing, and so by reiterated example expanding, the range of performative attitudes understood as intelligible and available to persons. Because persons lack extra-discursive, originary powers, the transgressions that make up resistance consist in appropriating and reiterating discursive tropes that are not wholly congruent with the dominant discursive regime. These tropes represent, as it were, slippage within discourse, performative attitudes whose adoption and recasting challenge the dominant discourse's boundaries of intelligibility.

This normative interest accompanies a commitment to "unmasking," or demonstrating the exclusionary, partial, and power-laden elements of every ostensibly universal, neutral, and natural discursive feature. This practice moves under the rubric of "genealogy." In genealogy, poststructuralism seeks to identify the exclusion and marginalization of potential formations that occur in every discursive regime. This means locating and highlighting the abnormal and unintelligible and demonstrating their contingent and constitutive relation to the normal and intelligible. Genealogy, then, aids resistance by exposing to contestation discursive features that would otherwise be treated as unproblematic.

This portrait invites the question of whether poststructuralism is coherent. One argument that it is not comes from Charles Taylor, who submits that Foucault's doctrine displays a series of performative contradictions, assertions, or judgments that presuppose some claim that the theory explicitly repudiates. For Taylor, this incoherence indicates that poststructuralism cannot adequately portray human experience.

Again, the poststructuralist model makes impossible any context-independent distinction between oppression and freedom, while showing every local distinction to be a product of discursive regimes. For Foucault, South Africa in the 1980s and Sweden in that same period, while clearly very different societies, cannot be normatively distinguished according to some quality of "freedom" that is present in one and absent from the other. Yet, Taylor argues, without a notion of freedom, the concept of power is incoherent. "[T]he notion of power or domination requires some notion of constraint imposed on someone by a process in some way related to human agency. Otherwise the term loses all meaning." On Taylor's account, then, while Foucault is clearly right to point out that power is not necessarily emitted from a single, identifiable agent, "power needs targets." These targets cannot simply be neutral bodies, but must be agents possessing criteria for decision and action: "something is only an imposition on me against a background of desires, interests, purposes, that I have." When some ensemble of effects frustrates these, then we can understand power to be at work. However, where "power," say, "produces" a set of heterosexual desires, and then "produces" corresponding desires in others and institutions through which these can be fulfilled, "there is no call to speak of an exercise of power/domination." On this basis, Taylor asserts that "power... does not make sense without at least the idea of liberation" (italics original), an idea that Foucault must reject.

By the same token, poststructuralism requires for coherence a notion of "truth." Poststructuralist unmasking reveals where, through mistaken acceptance of
some institution, desire, or some other feature of discourse as necessary or “natu-
ral,” “we can participate in our own subjugation.... [T]he imposition proceeds here
by foisting illusion on us.” Yet as with liberty, “falsehood makes no sense without
a corresponding notion of truth.” Unmasking is meaningful only to the extent
that something lurks behind the mask. The very idea of masking becomes incoher-
ent without reference to a prior reality that can be revealed. If “everything is a
mask,” nothing masks in any sense in which we can grasp the term.

Taylor argues, then, that poststructuralism is untenable because its primary ana-
lytic and (perhaps implicitly) normative devices are incoherent without reference to
freedom and truth, which it explicitly repudiates. William Connolly, to whom I
return later, offers a rejoinder on Foucault’s behalf. To Taylor’s claim that unmask-
ing requires a notion of truth, Connolly offers several responses. First, he suggests
that Foucault’s position is no more tenuous than those of his opponents because
“they affirm conceptions of truth and subjectivity constantly called into question in
the modern episteme.” Given the contested character of all positions, Foucault
appears as stable as any as “he strives to stretch the limits of the thinkable.”

However, there is a meaningful difference between Taylor’s contested “concep-
tions of truth and sub-
jectivity” and
Foucault’s model. Taylor’s ideas may be “constantly called into
question” — may in
fact be wrong — but they are nevertheless coherent. Taylor’s argument is that Foucault’s
position lacks precisely this fea-
ture. By developing a
theory that hinges on notions of power and unmasking unaccompanied by notions
of freedom and truth, Foucault has not only “stretched the limits of the thinkable,”
he has passed beyond the pale of conceivability, where none can coherently follow.
Rather than reject Taylor’s complaint in this manner, Connolly must show that
Foucault’s position can at least be “thinkable.”

Connolly then proposes that “genealogy... is not itself a claim to truth. It con-
stit... of rhetorical strategies designed to incite the experience of subjugation in
those areas in which the question of truth recently has been given primacy.” This
version of Foucault’s project, however, does not omit the requirement of commit-
ment to an idea of truth. The decision even to deploy “rhetorical strategies” in any
situation depends on the truth claims undergirding the sense that genealogy will
elucidate false “necessity” rather than obscure real necessity. For instance, genealo-
gy that examines the “production of heterosexual subjectivity” in a regime of “com-
 pulsory heterosexuality” in a possible world in which sexual orientation is in fact
genetically determined and predominantly heterosexual simply represents an
unhelpful error. The “experience of subjugation” that genealogy might create in
such a world would represent mere delusion. Yet poststructuralism plainly
assumes that the "experience of subjugation" clarifies one's sense of one's circumstances. Genealogy must accompany the conviction, and so the implicit truth-claim, that no "prediscursive facts" establish necessity in this case.

There is, however, a sense in which Connolly's response might stand. Poststructuralism's truth claims might be merely heuristic. One can test "rhetorical strategies" against a given discursive regime to seek out false necessity. The most effective way of doing this may be to assume that necessity is always only an illusion, while recognizing that this assumption is not itself foundational, but assumed for the purpose of further inquiry. This model, though, may not totally capture Judith Butler's attitude to her own "truth-claims." Although I later cite critical exceptions, Butler often rejects pre-discursive ontologies altogether: "the body is not a 'being,' but a variable boundary, a surface whose permeability is politically regulated, a signifying practice within a cultural field of gender hierarchy."16

However, whether Butler understands her claims as heuristic or authoritative, she need not surrender to Taylor's critique. One can consistently maintain the negative claim that "truth" is unavailable independent of discursive regimes, and can proceed in unmasking by reference to this claim. The "masks" that genealogy removes are false claims to a necessary, essential, or otherwise immutable or neutral truth, revealed now to conceal the workings of power. The "truth" behind the masks is only the absence, and the impossibility, of the sort of truth that they claim to embody.17 This position may become grimly repetitive, but it is not incoherent with the poststructuralist idea of power. This position is "thinkable," if uncomfortably so. Here, then, I take Taylor's attack on poststructuralism to fail.

In his response to Taylor's claim that power depends on an idea of freedom, Connolly reads Foucault as incorporating a notion of pre-discursive bodily drives that mutely and stubbornly resist the normalizing force of power. This model is something like a poor relation of the ideal of sexual liberation that I sketched in an earlier footnote. Connolly writes that "Subjectification... subjugates recalcitrant material in an embodied self resistant to this form."18 In showing this subjugation, Foucault helps us to "see the subject as an artificial reality imposed on material not designed to receive it."19 Connolly, then, locates a notion of freedom in the resistance of these drives against the workings of power.

Taylor might acknowledge these drives as making for a crude notion of imposition, as Connolly appears to have in mind impulses that persons actually experience as repressed but insistent desires. However, drives cannot play the role Connolly proposes for them in the model of poststructuralism I am considering. Butler makes this explicit in accusing Foucault, in effect, of not being poststructuralist enough. "Occasionally," she complains, "Foucault seeks recourse to a pre-discursive multiplicity of bodily forces that break through the surface of the body to disrupt the regulating practices of cultural coherence imposed on that body by a regulatory regime."20 However, she understands this as a lamentable lapse on Foucault's part, not an indispensable constituent of his analysis. At his best, Foucault is a discursive constructionist through and through, as is Butler herself. Connolly's rejoinder falls from deaf ears to a cold shoulder. On Butler's view, for Connolly to "save" Foucault here would be to give away the game by compromising poststructuralism's rejection of all pre-discursive ontologies of the person.
II. Inescapable Normativity and Poststructuralism as Supplement

H

OWEVER, THIS RESPONSE DOES NOT ESTABLISH whether the theory of power in fact requires a conception of freedom. Butler’s own work suggests that, in any coherent application, it does. Butler appears unable to resist reference to such a conception, despite her rebuke to Foucault. It is even more ironic that Butler’s conception of freedom appears grounded in an ontology of the body much like that which she alleges Foucault to harbor. This is most interestingly explicit in the psychoanalytic account that seems to underlie Butler’s treatment of the “renunciation,” or exclusion, “of the possibility of homosexuality,” the critical element of subject formation in a regime of compulsory heterosexuality. Butler takes this renunciation to produce “heterosexual melancholy,” a relation of constrained sorrow toward “disavowed attachments or identifications.” This is “less the refusal to grieve... than a pre-emption of grief performed by the absence of cultural conventions for avowing the loss of homosexual love.” Because “the rage over the loss can redouble by virtue of remaining unavowed... collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial to survival, to... the reweaving of sustainable relations.”

Here, by all appearances, Butler draws normative imperatives from a definite account of emotional needs intimately related to physical desires and practices that carry a normative and, apparently, empirical primacy. One might tendentiously take this passage to mean by “disavowed attachments or identifications” exclusions like any other. However, Butler gives every indication of treating the initial presence of both “homosexual” and “heterosexual” attachments in persons as especially forceful, apparently because of some physiological primacy. After all, we do not experience preempted mourning for every one of the performative attitudes we might have adopted, from bestiality to intellectualism. Homosexuality is not simply another among many roads not taken, but is “lost” and “disavowed” and so must first be present. Homosexual attachments exist not only as a “possibility,” but as a fact.

Still, one might generously understand the presence and subsequent disavowal of homosexual desire as a “structural” feature of our regime of compulsory heterosexuality, an early, profound, and nearly universal slippage in subject formation. The normative priority of this desire would still demand explanation, but might not rest on an ontology of the person. Butler appears to take the opposite tack, terming the institutions she proposes “life-affirming rejoinders to the dire psychic consequences of a grieving process culturally thwarted and proscribed.” Here, then, is “culture” thwarting something that is not culture, that is, in some sense, prior to culture. Although this reading is not decisive, Butler seems to rely on an ontology of the person derived from psychoanalytic theory for her normative conclusions.

Two questions follow from these revealing passages. First, does Butler’s evident normative commitment reveal a personal foible or a general validation of Taylor’s claim that the idea of power requires normative orientation to an idea of liberty? Second, does such normative orientation require some ontological commitment? If so, does the necessity of some privileged idea of truth, although open to consistent rejection on its own terms, become necessary through the necessity of normativity?

In Sources of the Self Taylor provides support for the latter readings of Butler.
Taylor offers an argument that our experience of agency, of choosing among possible actions, presupposes and is incoherent without normative orientation. Without such orientation, one could not experience oneself as choosing a course, but would act arbitrarily. Arbitrariness, on Taylor’s view, is incompatible with agenthood: “stepping outside [evaluative] limits would be tantamount to stepping outside what we would recognize as integral, that is, undamaged human personhood.” Persons outside these limits “wouldn’t know anymore, for an important range of questions, what the significance of things was for them.” This condition applies, for instance, to the decision to adopt a genealogical method of critique and apply it to sexuality.

Although he does not offer so general an argument, Taylor then proposes that moral orientation has always referred to “constitutive goods” or ontologies that “constitute [goods] as goods.” These are features of the world that account for the values by which persons are oriented. The role of constitutive goods is evident in, say, forms of pagan or Christian cosmology, in which the world expresses a beneficent, divine will. Even in the most “disenchanted” perspective of Weberian rationalism, however, Taylor identifies “a constitutive reality, namely, human beings capable of... courageous disengagement.... [O]ur sense of admiration and awe for these capacities is what empowers us to live up to them.”

Butler appears to reproduce Taylor’s model. Human sexual and emotional needs capable in fulfillment of resisting “thwarting” by “culture” and so overcoming melancholy provide a constitutive good that accounts for Butler’s normative commitment to unmasking the regime of compulsory heterosexuality and showing the way to “collective institutions for grieving.” Made coherent by this account of the person is the ideal of “sustainable relations.” The same model makes articulate sense of Butler’s largely inarticulate commitment to making intelligible an expanded range of identities which would presumably produce less “sorrow” and “rage” than the binaries that now shape us. Despite her theoretically determined wish to do so, Butler cannot escape the conditions Taylor outlines. There is no reason to believe, in view of her failure, that one can coherently do so. Both normative and ontological commitments appear in some sense unavoidable.

Butler is plainly aware of this paradox and tries to negotiate it by reconciling the necessity of normative and ontological hypotheses with an ultimate commitment to discursive constructionism. She acknowledges “that theory posits foundations incessantly, and forms implicit metaphysical commitments as a matter of course, even when it seeks to guard against it; foundations function as the unques-
tioned and the unquestionable within any theory.”31 These, of course, “are themselves constituted through exclusions.”32 Nonetheless, some implicit or explicit ontology is always present, and “in order to set political goals, it is necessary to assert normative judgments.”33

However, like the heuristic devices that I suggested might make sense of Connolly’s second response to Taylor’s argument about truth, these judgments must be only tools, at best modestly interesting in themselves. Butler’s attitude toward this issue is exemplified in her assertion that “a fundamental mistake is made when we think that we must sort out philosophically or epistemologically our ‘grounds’ before we can take stock of the world politically or engage in its affairs actively with the aim of transformation.”34 Butler appears to put herself in the tenuous, but tenable, position of endorsing her “foundations” only as necessary instruments in the theoretical process. However, these foundations serve to challenge and unmask other, less self-aware foundations, not to establish their own superiority.

Where does all of this leave the discussion of poststructuralism? If the poststructuralist commitment to unmasking in the service of resistance is coherent only in reference to a normative orientation and a constitutive good, even where these are taken to be radically contingent, then poststructuralism is in no sense a complete position. Any use of genealogy, that is, following Taylor, any decision that genealogical techniques are called for in a given political situation, must be yoked to some ethical and ontological outlook. Yet that outlook is largely independent of the claims and methods of poststructuralism. In principle, one could self-righteously genealogize the idea of human rights in the service of Apartheid. In practice, then, poststructuralism therefore appears less a “position” than a technique of enquiry that focuses on the conditions under which “foundations” are produced, albeit always with a focus that itself depends upon assumptions that serve as foundations.

This assessment helps to make sense of Nancy Fraser’s treatment of Foucault. After an examination of Foucault’s evident normative dependence on some notion of liberty or right, and the incompatibility of this dependence with the inaccessibility of normative “foundations” within the poststructuralist model, Fraser deems Foucault “normatively confused.”35 The point here is that the paradox of poststructuralism’s relation to normativity remains and has gained urgency with the recognition that genealogy must always choose, so to speak, a normative and ontological partner — yet contains no internal criteria for this choice.

This assessment highlights how radically open any poststructuralist account is to normatively driven redescription. Nancy Fraser demonstrates this nicely by describing a utopian scenario in which the requirements of Habermas’s ideal-speech

**In practice, then, poststructuralism therefore appears less a ‘position’ than a technique of enquiry that focuses on the conditions under which ‘foundations’ are produced.”**
situation are met. Here, on the model of liberty that Fraser takes Foucault implicitly to employ, “autonomy” is merely an effect of normalizing power that constitutes radically disciplined persons. Hence, “this would not be freedom.” Fraser suggests that, faced with so totalizing a critique, “the Habermassian humanist... digs in and says, ‘If that’s discipline, I’m for it.’” Because its totalizing description provides no distinction among disciplinary regimes, “there is no good reason to oppose such a society,” any more than to support it. The difficulty here is that, with no good reason on her side, the poststructuralist has no resources with which to argue against such redescription except to point out the arbitrary commitments and exclusions of the competing account — which are, after all, mirrored in her own.

III. Practical Reasoning and Poststructuralism as Epistemic Gain

There is something deeply unsatisfying in this description of poststructuralism as always only a supplement to an arbitrary and unstable normative and ontological partner. This picture depends on the claim, which I have so far accepted, that once all knowledge and experience are situated within discourse we have no means of adjudicating among the competing claims of differing discursive regimes, meaning that poststructuralism’s “partnerships” must be arbitrary. However, this conclusion is not self-evident. To the extent that epistemological and normative inquiry can reveal both limits to, and direction for, our theoretical and political options, we should indeed “sort out our grounds” both before and during engagement. The nature of these grounds will then have much to do with the sort of role that we identify for poststructuralism. A great deal, then, turns on the sort of fruitful inquiry into these areas that is possible once we have accepted poststructuralism’s epistemological starting point.

In this section, I attempt an argument in several steps. First, considering elements of Butler’s texts and drawing on Nancy Fraser and Jurgen Habermas, I propose that our location within discourse does not entail that all phenomena are “produced” by discourse in identical manners. If correct, this means for practical purposes that not all phenomena are equally arbitrary and contestable, despite their common inaccessibility to ultimate epistemological validation. Second, I draw on Taylor to suggest that this insight helps to adjudicate among certain elements of competing discursive regimes. Finally, still with Taylor, I submit that we might similarly adjudicate among normative claims without reference to an extra-discursive “foundation.”

First, it is not the project of poststructuralism to revive idealism by denying the existence — as against the unmediated accessibility — of a world independent of our language and perceptions. As Butler points out, “the options for theory are not exhausted by presuming materiality, on the one hand, and negating materiality, on the other. To call a presupposition into question is not the same as doing away with it.” The immediately apparent question, then, is just how determinate or underdetermined, hence how arbitrary, our discursively mediated conception of “materiality” is.

However, poststructuralism does not take up this question. Because its intense concern with uncovering “necessity’s” discursive production precludes acceptance of “natural limits” contained in an obdurate physical, biological, or other reality,
poststructuralism often manages to sound unsettlingly idealist. At its worst, this tendency produces a levelling rhetoric that represents all “products of discourse,” bodily and normative alike, as equally arbitrary. Nancy Fraser makes this point in her observation that “Foucault calls too many different sorts of things power and simply leaves it at that.”

Fraser’s passage refers to “sorts of things.” I take it that by this she does not mean natural kinds. To make sense, however, her phrase must refer to something like features of the world across which we can map more or less perspicacious and helpful descriptions while recognizing that our experience of them is always already linguistically mediated, and that our language never mirrors the order of a mind-independent nature. I take all of this to be compatible with Butler’s suggestion that language is “the very condition under which materiality may be said to appear,” so long as the “condition” is only epistemologically, and not ontologically, constitutive.

Drawing this distinction helps us to recognize that, although discourse inescapably shapes our experience, it does not exhaustively produce the conditions of that experience. Every bit as much as, vice-versa, “materiality” is “the very condition under which” discourse “may be said to appear.” Acknowledging this requires resurrecting none of the old epistemological bugbears. We need maintain no sharp distinctions between, say, a putatively referential language and a world of discrete facts to which the language refers, in order to recognize that language and world are interwoven.

This implies that materiality informs discourse, that setting the limits of intelligibility is a mutual project. Part of the work of language is to disclose, through ultimately imperfect descriptions, the limits and opportunities that materiality contains. In performing this task, the natural sciences and other disciplines do not and cannot leave behind their linguistic setting behind; they never come to speak “the language of nature,” and so never develop truly universal and necessary knowledge. From the impossibility of this ultimate “adequacy to the world,” however, does not follow the impossibility of increasingly (or decreasingly) rich and elucidating descriptions of the conditions under which we operate. Further, the ultimate inadequacy of these descriptions does not entail that they cannot inform our political and normative deliberations; indeed, to the extent that we reflect at all about these categories of commitment and engagement, our best descriptions of the world, our sense of the limits of the possible, must inform this reflection.

A somewhat threadbare example gives life to this point. First, we do not hesitate to raise against the hypothetical reintroduction of slavery, or the very real continuation of inequity and exploitation across racial and ethnic lines, that the eigh-
teenth- and nineteenth-century project of race science and older quasi-theological accounts of natural inferiority have failed — failed to predict phenomena, to find "correspondence" in any genetic or physiological element of the "materiality" of our bodies, and to produce intellectually interesting work. Further, we do not deny that these efforts have given way substantially to a biological science that, while as ultimately epistemologically inadequate as any other and admittedly practically imperfect, does not fail by those same standards. We take the latter as more meaningful in reflecting on how we can and cannot judge.

I am not attempting an irrefutable argument. One can always raise the in-principle claim of ultimate epistemological arbitrariness against any discourse. Nor do I wish to develop something like a Pragmatic theory (or non-theory) of "truth." Rather, I hope to evoke some sense of the force of what Jurgen Habermas calls the "problem-solving" capacities of language. As Habermas puts it, "linguistically mediated processes such as the acquisition of knowledge, the transmission of culture, the formation of personal identity, and socialization and social integration involve mastering problems posed by the world" (italics added). In this sense, language acts "as the medium through which those acting communicatively get involved in relations to the world whenever they agree with one another about something in the objective world, in their common social world, or in the subjective world to which each has privileged access" (italics added).

Again, all of this seems compatible with Butler's claim that language and "materiality," or whatever we wish to term what is quaintly called "the world," are inextricably interwoven. Further, as a non-idealist, Butler appears to recognize that the world does take more or less immutable certain forms, about which our approximate descriptions can tell us a good deal. In this case Butler's refusal, for instance, to accept even the mildest "essentialist" claims as somehow "adequate to the world" can be best understood as reflecting her commitment to the distinctively skeptical method of genealogy. Butler suggests as much in remarking of "the critic [who] might... seek assurances that... that there are, minimally, sexually differentiated parts, activities, capacities, hormonal and chromosomal differences that can be conceded without reference to 'construction'... I want to offer absolute reassurance to my interlocutor." However, "some anxiety prevails. To 'concede' the undeniability of 'sex'... is always to concede some version of 'sex.'... Is the discourse in and through which that concession occurs... not itself formative of the very phenomenon that it concedes? In other words, Butler fears the political consequences of a concession that discursively constitutes some claim as necessary and foundational; however, she admits not only that there will be such claims, but that some will be, so to speak, adequate to the world in ways that others are not.

Thinking about why and how some sets of claims, and so some discursive regimes, appear more adequate than others is not poststructuralism's concern; divorced from their particular normative commitments, Butler and Foucault insistently demonstrate the impossibility of perfect epistemic adequacy, apodictic knowledge, etc., and the political implications of this impossibility. If we are concerned, however, to reflect on the sorts of political projects to which we choose to apply the genealogical technique, we might do well to engage in the kind of thought that poststructuralism eschews. Ultimately, such reflection should enable us to refine our normative and ontological commitments and so take these beyond the arbitra-
ness with which poststructuralism appears stuck. If successful, this move would add
stability to a social critique developed through the genealogical method, as a (some-
what) non-arbitrary starting point would produce an account less vulnerable than
Butler's or Foucault's to equally plausible redescriptions.

Here Taylor once more proves helpful. In *Philosophical Arguments*, he starts
from the epistemological insight with which I have identified poststructuralism.
When we accept that knowledge and experience occur within particular discursive
regimes, Taylor acknowledges, we cannot locate any set of "external criteria" that
participants in any two discourses must accept and which will decide between the
competing accounts that the two regimes give. However, this does not mean that
we cannot decide between competing accounts. That erroneous conclusion reflects
a hangover from the era of metaphysical ambition, a standard of knowledge that
would judge all claims by a single, universal arbiter of validity. Rather than con-
cluding that "anything goes," Taylor asserts in discussing the example of philosophy
of science, "it is clear that what needs revision is our metatheory of scientific rea-
soning." The alternative model that Taylor proposes relies on strictly comparative rea-
soning, that is, reasoning from within competing discourses about one another,
without reference to the independent standard that has been revealed as unavailable.
Taylor proposes three ways in which we might comparatively evaluate competing
discourses. First, following Alisdair MacIntyre, we can consider the ways in which
competing accounts deal with mutually acknowledged problems, such as, in
Taylor's example, inertial motion. In this way, we apply a standard that is not exter-
nal or absolute, but is contained in approximate form within each account.

Second, evaluation can proceed by reference to competing accounts' capacities
to deal not only with a commonly recognized object domain, but *with one another*;
that is, to account for each other's successes, failures, and internal standards. Again
invoking the conflict between pre-Galilean science, which he characterizes as con-
cerned to show humanity's place within a meaningful cosmos, and instrumental
Galilean science, Taylor avoids the strictly theoretical incommensurability between
the two by observing that "what the earlier science can't explain is the success of the
later on the later's own terms. Beyond a certain point, you just can't pretend any
longer that manipulation and control are not relevant criteria of scientific suc-
cess." On the contrary, Galilean scientists can provide a satisfactory account of
their predecessors' project and of its limitations.

Third, Taylor's suggests that, where one account is not manifestly superior in
explanation to an alternative, we can nonetheless choose that account because of the
elements that make it up, or the steps involved in reaching its conclusions. Again,
the reasoning is concerned with comparison or transition between accounts,
where this "can plausibly be described as mediated by some error-reducing move." Such moves Taylor characterizes as "the recognition of a contradiction,
or the overcoming of a confusion, or the recognition of a hitherto ignored relevant
factor." Although these standards are in some sense both subjective and internal
to discourses, Taylor believes that they aid us in recognizing when shifting from one
account to another represents an "epistemic gain," or clarification of understanding.

To be sure, these standards do not carry anything like apodictic certainty; they
are, after all, designed to deal with the impossibility of precisely that. Nonetheless,
unless we accept the implausible idea that accounts of the world ranging from animism to particle physics are equally perspicacious, we ought to seek some account of the hermeneutic process that defines our transitions. I take Taylor's position to provide an adequate starting point for this task.

If this much is accepted, at least for scientific argument, then the door is opened for Taylor's hope that practical reasoning can prove useful in moral reflection. Here, Taylor takes the quasi-foundational step of asserting "a basic human reaction, which seems to be present in some form everywhere: that humans are especially important and demand special treatment." Every version of this principle incorporates limits on those to whom it is applied, excluding members of other cultures or races, women, slaves, future generations, and so on. Nonetheless, Taylor believes that once this principle finds some articulation, a minimal common ground exists, and interlocutors can fruitfully discuss one another's exclusions: "These special pleadings can be addressed, and many of them found wanting, by rational argument [following the rough account of practical reason sketched above]." An obvious instance is the long-term vulnerability of arguments that, for instance, women or blacks ought not to be accorded political rights, which cannot defend its exclusions against a principle asserting the equal political competence of all.

Here I want to bracket some critical questions. First, I shall not inquire into precisely what sort of "moral realism" Taylor is defending, but take him to mean (quite possibly among other things) that we can talk about normative judgments fruitfully and non-arbitrarily, albeit painfully and over long periods. Second, I shall not inquire after Taylor's quasi-foundational claim, which I find plausible enough as a basis for dialogue. Finally, I shall not take up the remainder of Taylor's discussion, which concentrates on the force of rights doctrines in evoking our "basic human reaction."

Instead, I want to consider the implications of Taylor's argument for the broader concerns of this paper. Specifically, I want to consider how poststructuralism might operate within his model of moral reasoning. Here I want to move beyond my portrayal of poststructuralism as a supplement to fuller accounts, and instead consider how a poststructurally inspired position that recognized and seriously explored the necessity of developing a normative attitude might present itself in ontological and moral argument as constituting an epistemic gain. I take as a starting point William Connolly's case in Identity/Difference. After sketching his
position, I consider how Connolly’s position differs from Butler’s and Foucault’s in its open ontological commitments and ethical concern and, most interestingly, what his account suggests about the possible form of a poststructurally inspired politics.

At the heart of Connolly’s position lies a cautious endorsement of an ontology of the person. Connolly proposes outright what Foucault and Butler sometimes appear to suggest: “the human being is not designed to coalesce smoothly with any single, coherent set of identities.” This “design” is intrinsic, as Connolly confirms in referring to those “whose instincts cut against [society’s] grain” (italics added). He emphasizes that this ontology is not foundational in a strong sense, but “construes its ‘ground’ as contestable, fugitive, and ambiguous.” Nonetheless, Connolly plainly views this account as representing an epistemic gain in Taylor’s sense, as it overcomes the error of construing either personal identity or theoretical foundations as “fixed, solid, and harmonious.”

This account of the person lends, so to speak, a material basis to the poststructuralist axiom that every coherent identity rests upon exclusions of alternative possible arrangements, as well as of concrete others. Here Connolly adds a second quasi-foundational principle, this one psychological: awareness of mortality inspires us to consolidate myriad innate and discursive potentialities into a narrowly coherent form, the better to make our short lives distinctive and potentially significant. Connolly thus provides an innate basis for some of our cooperation with the normalizing techniques of power. This process of identity-consolidation accentuates the difference that marks both our internal exclusions and our relations to others and partially constitutes the coherence of both. Connolly takes identity and difference to embody an irresolvable tension. However, he does not view as inevitable the transformation of difference into “otherness,” wherein one identifies difference with sharply negative and potentially threatening qualities and, sometimes, strives for its elimination. On Connolly’s model, otherness is fostered in our culture by a set of interacting forces. First among these is an excessive conception of the self-responsible agent. This conception reinforces the psychological drive to identity-consolidation by a morally infused demand for consistent behavior and, more significantly, posits that some human agency must be responsible for all the world’s evils. This agency is generally identified with “others.” Second is a set of structural characteristics of modernity that frustrate individual agency, chiefly subordination to institutional and historical forces and a growing failure of faith in individual and collective futures. These constraints create an existential resentment that, given the strong difference and idea of moral responsibility already at work, we often blame on some collective “other.”

Connolly’s concern, then, is with both the psychic violence that we do ourselves by our internal exclusions and the violence, psychic and often material, that we do to those whom we have both excluded and identified as morally culpable. Connolly sees poststructuralism as valuable in that its recognition of identity’s contingency and exclusions, accompanied by a genealogy that reveals the dynamics beneath identities that we take to be stable and even “necessary,” provides a sort politically charged therapy. Genealogy enables us to recognize the “other” within ourselves and so to treat difference with forbearance and, perhaps, even respect.

Connolly places his ethical as well as his ontological commitments upfront in a way that accords with Taylor’s account of moral reasoning. Clearly implicit here is
an idea that people are important, that their suffering carries moral weight. On this reading, Connolly proposes to demonstrate one manner in which that suffering comes about, in the psychological dynamics of exclusion. Connolly seeks also to undercut the “special pleadings” by which we remove persons from full moral consideration, here termed otherness, by demonstrating their arbitrary and contingent character. In other words, Connolly offers a set of normative epistemic gains that build on what Taylor calls our “basic human reaction” about the importance of persons.58

The frank character of Connolly’s ontological and normative “grounds” makes his doctrine remarkably articulate in its reformist concerns. Seeing the exclusionary character of both identity and responsibility as ultimately irresolvable, Connolly proposes that we seek both in personal attitudes and in political practice to negotiate these paradoxes by a recognition of our own contingency and an “agonistic” engagement with difference. He proposes that we might “limit the extent to which the voices of a strong identity can define the terms through which alter-identities are recognized and responsibility distributed,”59 “strive politically to inhibit [strong identities] from applying their standards to others as if they corresponded to the essence of human being,”60 and, more positively, “try... to convert you to a more modest, contingent view of your own identity.”61 In this manner, “Politics now becomes a medium for the enunciation of suppressed alternatives and the contestation of entrenched commonalities. It becomes a means by which unequivocal practices of responsibility are compromised and confounded.”62 Agonistic politics fosters a psychological adjustment whereby we might “attend... to that in the self and its world which is defeated or subjugated by contemporary standards of normality and... relax... modern dreams of bringing everything under control or into attunement.”63

Connolly’s account, then, appears to provide one model of a fully articulate poststructuralist position. Such a position can strengthen itself by taking seriously the necessity of ontological and normative commitments and borrowing something like Taylor’s model of practical reasoning to present itself as constituting an epistemic gain. Plainly, a “pure” poststructuralist can level at Connolly the same criticism that Butler offers Foucault. However, once the necessity of certain judgments is acknowledged and the possibility of fruitful reflection on these judgments is established, such resistance seems restrictive, even dogmatic. There is simply more to be gained for social analysis and critique in a model like Connolly’s. φ

Endnotes

1 This is, of course, not the only starting point for an account of poststructuralism. However, I believe that it does the position no injustice.
2 I trust that this definition of power will settle for the purposes of this paper the concerns raised by Jurgen Habermas in chapter X of The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. There, Habermas accuses Foucault of retaining power as a foundational element in an ostensibly post-metaphysical theory. Such an interpretation can easily follow from Foucault’s description of power as omnipresent and productive as well as repressive, which suggests a sort of negative pantheism. However, recognizing that “power” refers to an ensemble of effects, of whose “ultimate” sources no claim is made, reveals
that the term, however unhelpful, does not reflect a foundational commitment.

3Taylor, who is always duly wary of technical philosophical language, does not use the term “performative contradiction” in his discussion of Foucault. However, this notion provides perspicuous expression of the meat of Taylor’s argument.


5Ibid.

6Ibid.

7Ibid., p. 173.

8Taylor rejects a more radical conception of imposition, by which the description I have just sketched might be “an index of the domination of our culture over us,” claiming that “[t]he word would lose all useful profile... if we let it roam this wide” (ibid.). However, this restriction is not necessary to Taylor’s case. Even if one followed, for instance, a model of sexual liberation that treated heterosexuality as an imposition on a pre-discursive “polymorphous perversity,” one would find no comfort in the poststructuralist position, which could treat polymorphous desire as at best a product of discursive slippage, without ontological or normative priority.


10Ibid., p. 174.

11Ibid.


13Ibid.

14Ibid., p. 373.

15Needless to say, I do not find this model of sexuality compelling. Nonetheless, I cannot a priori take it to be in error. I operate under the conviction of its error, as must Foucault.


17I am aware of the charge, still heard in Anglo-American philosophy departments, that this form of “relativism” is self-defeating because it must apply its claim to itself, and so relativize the kernel of relativism that is absolute. What is offered here, however, is not a positive metaphysical assertion, but a negative epistemological admission. This admission does not claim apodictic certainty for itself, but does appear the most compelling account we can provide of the language-systems in which we move and by which our experience and “knowledge” are shaped.


19Ibid.


22Ibid., pp. 235-236.

23Ibid., p. 236.

24Ibid.

25Ibid.

26Seysa Benhabib suggests in Linda Nicholson, ed., *Feminist Contention: A Philosophical Exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995) that Butler’s account of the person works as covert determinism, undoing agency as we understand it. Butler responds that she does not accept agency as reflecting “given” aspects of the person, but treats it as one politically contested discursive resource among many. If Taylor’s account of agency rested on a distinct ontology of the person, his argument would miss Butler’s point. However, here at least, Taylor is making a phenomenological argument
about the experience of agency. Butler does not reject the phenomenology of action and decision, and in fact, as I shall soon discuss, grants Taylor’s point that normative and ontological commitments are practically inescapable. The question can then move to whether these commitments must be arbitrary, as Butler suggests.

As for the broader question, I take Butler’s account to be determinist only inasmuch as she claims that we cannot think and do that which is presently inconceivable or impossible in our culture except by drawing on existing cultural resources and transforming these in ways suggested by other cultural resources. Although perhaps generous, this reading suggests to me that the charge of determinism is not the most interesting critique of Butler.

28Ibid.
29Ibid., p. 93.
30Ibid., p. 94.
32Ibid.
33Ibid., p. 141.
34Ibid., p. 128.
36Ibid., p. 49.
37Ibid., p. 50.
39Fraser, Nancy, Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory, p. 32.
40Butler, Judith, Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,” p. 31.
41The best effort to prove the arbitrariness of scientific description, the radical reading of Thomas Kuhn’s work, notably fails. Briefly, Kuhn’s model cannot account for anomalies that instigate crises and so revolutions without admitting that materiality substantially informs discourse. Were the latter untrue, anomalies would never occur, as existing discourses would both determine and absorb all results. As Habermas puts it, “The ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ of communicatively acting agents is so prejudiced and rhetorically overdetermined by their linguistic contexts [on this model] that the anomalies that start to arise during phases of exhaustion are taken to represent only syndromes of waning vitality, or aging processes analogous to processes of nature — and are not seen as the result of deficient solutions to problems and invalid answers” (The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), p. 206; italics in original). One need not take on board Habermas’s account of validity in its fullness in order to recognize the force of this point.
42Habermas, Jurgen, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures, p. 205.
43Ibid.
44Ibid.
45Ibid.
46Many others might “prove helpful” here, including Habermas. However, Taylor’s hermeneutics appears more sensitive to the conditions that concern poststructuralism than do Habermas’s pragmatic–transcendental arguments. Also, perhaps because it is more tentative and less systematic than Habermas’s model, Taylor’s method is the more amenable of the two to appropriation for the practical reasoning from within poststructuralism that I later propose and identify with Connolly.

48 Ibid., p. 42.

49 Ibid., p. 47.

50 Ibid., p. 51.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., p. 56.

53 Ibid., p. 57.


55 Ibid., p. 196.

56 Ibid., p. 182.

57 Ibid.

58 I emphasize that I mean in no way to collapse the deep divide between Taylor's and Connolly's projects. Rather I hope to show that Taylor's model of practical reasoning, which is extricable from his full-blooded doctrine, can elucidate the advantages of Connolly's position and so of any "fully articulate" poststructuralism over the resolute inarticulacy of Butler and Foucault.


60 Ibid., p. 120.

61 Ibid.

62 Ibid., p. 121.

63 Ibid., p. 32.