

Senses of the Subject



Author: Judith Butler

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About the Book

This book brings together a group of Judith Butler's philosophical essays written over two decades that elaborate her reflections on the roles of the passions in subject formation through an engagement with Hegel, Kierkegaard, Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, Merleau-Ponty, Freud, Irigaray, and Fanon. Drawing on her early work on Hegelian desire and her subsequent reflections on the psychic life of power and the possibility of self-narration, this book considers how passions such as desire, rage, love, and grief are bound up with becoming a subject within specific historical fields of power.

Butler shows in different philosophical contexts how the self that seeks to make itself finds itself already affected and formed against its will by social and discursive powers. And yet, agency and action are not necessarily nullified by this primary impingement. Primary sense impressions register this dual situation of being acted on and acting, countering the idea that acting requires one to overcome the situation of being affected by others and the linguistic and social world. This dual structure of sense sheds light on the desire to live, the practice and peril of grieving, embodied resistance, love, and modes of enthrallment and dispossession. Working with theories of embodiment, desire, and relationality in conversation with philosophers as diverse as Hegel, Spinoza, Descartes, Merleau-Ponty, Freud, and Fanon, Butler reanimates and revises her basic propositions concerning the constitution and deconstitution of the subject within fields of power, taking up key issues of gender, sexuality, and race in several analyses. Taken together, these essays track the development of Butler's embodied account of ethical relations.

About the Author

Judith Butler is Maxine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature and Critical Theory at the University of California at Berkeley. She works in the fields of feminist and queer theory, European philosophy, social theory, and ethics.

Review

“Judith Butler’s reading of major works on the construction of the subject, ranging from Descartes and Spinoza to Irigaray and Fanon, intertwines three projects, which prove intimately related: a symptomatic reading of texts, where the materiality of their writing reveals a permanent uncertainty about the “sovereignty” or “autonomy” that they claim; a phenomenology of the affective “third substance” which, being neither mind nor body, must also encroach on both; and a critique of normative ontological binarisms which, in particular, confuse sexual otherness with a difference of given places. In this account of the latent “sensible” mover of metaphysics, she also gives an account of herself as incarnated thinker, beautifully complex and inventive. Her book will generate admiration and continuous reflection.”

—Étienne Balibar, author of *Equaliberty*

In this exceptional collection, Judith Butler displays the unusually vivid, even startling insight that makes her indisputably the world’s most interesting contemporary philosopher. These lucid essays climb in and out of the me, the her, the you, dream and reality, subject, object, nature and the preternatural, meaning and its deadly discontents. Butler wrestles the narratives of embodiment into language that lives.

—Patricia J. Williams, Columbia Law School

“Butler concludes the Introduction to this book thus: ‘Acted on, I act still, but it is hardly this “I” that acts alone, and even though, and precisely because, it never gets done with being undone.’ In these eloquent, passionately dialectical, and vertiginous essays, Butler relentlessly tracks our being undone by others, by language, by things, by institutions, and by the normative formations that hold us upright beyond our standing upright in the writings of, among others, Descartes, Spinoza, Hegel, Merleau Ponty, Irigaray, and Fanon. This is echt Butler: a necessity for those who already know her work, and a generous point of entry for those philosophers who have yet to find their way to her thought.”

—J. M. Bernstein, *The New School for Social Research*

With this inspiring book—simultaneously a philosophical dispossession of philosophy, a paean to sensation and an affirmation of the ‘radically impossible venture’ of ethics and politics—[Butler] edges towards a palpable, outward-looking alternative to philosophical chest beating.

—Times Higher Education

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