

Six plus three approaches to interpreting Judith Butler

When I thought about the different presentations of Butler's work, I divided approaches to interpreting it into six main approaches, or methods (Edward 2022: fn 5).

1. Assimilation to a stock philosopher. One assimilates Butler to a stock type of philosophical character and that is supposed to provide adequate information, for example "Butler is just a Hegelian" or "Butler is basically a logical positivist." I have not explicitly encountered the second example, but she writes of "to the extent that the copula asserts a fixed and self-identical relation" (1986: 36) and criticizes some metaphysical positions for being unverifiable (1986: 37); and John Hawthorne writes of a perspective on metaphysical disputes that is either simply verificationism, with its associated problems, or struggles to evade them (2004: 213-214). That is plausibly a reaction to Butler within the analytic tradition.

2. Careful textual-philosophical reading. One looks carefully at her texts and identifies questions pursued, theses, arguments (premises, conclusions, inferences being made), or assumptions. Sally Haslanger and Kathleen Stock do this (Haslanger 2000: 120-121; Stock 2020). I am including under this heading identifying assumptions she shares with others.

3. "Ethnographic." One spends time in the appropriate social circles and uses the experience to help understand Butler. "There was a circle of Lacanian feminists at the University of Cambridge in the late 1980s and I was involved with it." (Various texts, including probably some texts in the analytic tradition, make more sense if you are at the reading groups, the conferences, the dinners, etc. Responding to Bernard Williams, Nozick writes: "No doubt many readers will feel that all hangs on some other argument; I would like to see that argument precisely set out, in detail." 1974: 233. How did he manage to experience Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* as "a fountain of illuminating ideas" without guides?)

4. Problem-solving. One approaches the interpretation of Butler in terms of a problem or set of problems to solve. "Why does Butler choose to write in this teasing exasperating way?" asks Martha Nussbaum (1999). Another problem she raises is: "One is bewildered to find her arguments buttressed by appeal to so many contradictory concepts and doctrines..." (1999) At the turn of the century, I did a course in which Butler figured heavily, given by Don Kulick, and I take him as trying to remove the bewilderment by presenting and relating the background contributors, or at least now I do.

5. Few puzzle pieces and a guess. One identifies a few key pieces of text and then develops an interesting argument, or clarification, which fits with those pieces. I assume that was Jerry Fodor's approach. He presents a clarification of context-relativity without end, for someone trying to disambiguate, and then writes, "There is an (as it were, Californian) state of mind that luxuriates in this result. The text is new at every reading." (2003: 100)

6. A concept-application trend. Susanne K. Langer writes of how an exciting new concept appears and "...all sensitive and active minds turn at once to exploiting it. We try it in every connection, for every purpose, experiment with possible stretches of its strict meaning, with generalizations and derivatives." One takes Butler to be one of the people doing this with the concept of performative language, applying it to claims such as "That's a girl." Such claims

are said to construct reality, like “I hereby name this ship Majestic,” which, uttered in appropriate circumstances, results in the fact that this ship is named Majestic (see Byrne 2018).

Some of these approaches overlap with each other, but hopefully without totally collapsing into one another. I shall present three more, which I am less acquainted with. They may not figure heavily in the prestigious parts of academia which influenced my use of “main.”

7. Simulation. One tries to dress like Butler and write like Butler and the hope is that one will somehow end up thinking like her as well.

8. Populist politics. A political party, or movement, might take inspiration from a philosopher but that philosopher needs to be transformed significantly and the result might not pass academic exams. Dense texts are replaced with slogans, the jargon is abandoned, etc. There is probably a response to Butler which does this. You read the original and say, “There are however many sexes you want there to be and you can change your sex at will.”

9. Theological interpretation? There is a photograph accompanying Martha Nussbaum’s famous article, with protestors showing images of Butler, one sign using the label “Pedofilia” and another saying, “Go to hell.” (I don’t remember that photograph being there in the 1990s.) I infer the existence of an interpretative method which leads to the conclusion that she is a very bad person, though I have little contextual information. This looks like populist politics, but the conclusion is probably difficult to spread, at least in cultures I am familiar with, and the details of the method are unclear. (When you see that image of Butler, you may well not have an impression of evil. I wouldn’t ask for experiences leading to such an association!)

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