Accounting for Identity with Alcoff and Butler

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Abstract

What is the problem with identity? A genre of academic articles has emerged out of concern over the use of identity in various political and social contexts. These articles worry that social identities such as race, gender, and ethnicity limit the freedom of the individual if we assume them to be real or a priori distinctions. They implicitly retain a modern view of the subject that counterposes pre-social individual agency against the imposition of social identity. This modern view of the subject generates the very problem with identity they try to solve. In contrast, the works of Judith Butler (Gender Trouble, 1990) and Linda Alcoff (Visible Identities, 2006) aim to overcome the modern view of the subject by articulating a self that is socially constituted by its identities. Despite the vast differences in their accounts, each continues to employ a split between a pre-social self and the social in which agency can always overcome one’s social identity. I argue that an account of identity must not aim to solve the modern problem with identity, but instead show that such a problem only arises when agency and identity are understood to be mutually exclusive. Identities function as the apparent authorizing origins of the social norms that produce them. But because identities inevitably fail to ever fully justify those norms, they are not inherently reifying.
What’s the Problem with Identity?

The election of Donald Trump dealt the final verdict on identity politics, according to a New York Times Opinion piece written after November 9th, 2016. “One of the many lessons of the recent presidential election campaign and its repugnant outcome is that the age of identity liberalism must be brought to an end” (Lilla, “The End of Identity Liberalism,” November 18, 2016). For Lilla, the 2016 presidential election is damning evidence against identity’s political career, proving at last the necessary transition into a “post-identity” (Lilla) political era. But while the election may mark a sense of urgency in the history of identity talk, imperatives to do away with it are nothing new. Rather than to indicate an ultimate break or turning point, I cite Lilla’s article as articulating yet another ‘final straw’ in a debate about the political use and abuse of identity that masks an underlying ontological anxiety about the self. Lilla’s own mask slips when he remarks, “our children are being encouraged to talk about their individual identities, even before they have them.” Lilla claims that children quite literally are not born with their own identities, but rather assume them under the influence of society. Figuratively, he implies the historical contingency of the very notion of identity in contrast to what he calls “perennial” issues of the self. Lilla worries that identity talk not only exaggerates its own importance, but also generates the dangerous illusion of its reality. Merely talking about identity, it seems, is powerful enough to conjure into being something that we might not have or need in the first place.

What is so dangerous about identity? In this paper, I argue that the problem with identity as it is commonly understood is modeled after a modern understanding of the self and the social. The problem arises because the agency of the self is understood as
necessarily conflicting with the identities imposed upon it by the social. As a result, various articles expressing concern over this problem try to solve it by arguing that we ought to control how the notion of identity is used in order to preserve the freedom of the individual self. But, I argue, the strategies employed by these articles can never succeed in solving the problem, but can only further exacerbate their own anxieties about identity. I then look at two accounts of identity by Linda Alcoff and Judith Butler that recognize the modern conception of the self and the problem of agency it carries with it. Alcoff and Butler both rightly provide accounts of a socially constituted subject in order to overcome the modern notion of a pre-social self as the seat of agency against the social. Alcoff’s insight is that identity must be understood as constitutive of agency in some way. An account of identity, therefore, does not have to account for identity only insofar as it oppresses the individual. Butler’s insight is that identity is best understood as a social construction that produces subjects in the first place, rather than as something real or fake. Thus, we cannot intentionally maintain or change our identities prior to having them. Instead, identities function to both consolidate and splinter the intelligibility of subjects that always already possess identities. However, I argue that Alcoff and Butler both mistakenly try to solve the modern problem of identity, rather than move past it altogether. They still understand identities as potentially harmful to subjects prior to their social articulation of such subjects. As a result, they both end up situating agency against identity in their accounts in order to solve the problem on its own terms. Consequently, they maintain the notion of a pre-social self they had both sought to discard. But, building on their insights about identity, I critique the notion that private or new identities are the locus of agency against oppression, whereas public or conventional identities are always
at risk of implementing and enforcing identity-based oppression. An account of identity must not try to solve the problem it seems to have under the modern conception of the self.

**Historicizing Identity: The Genre of Identity Anxiety**

Commonly articulated considerations of identity, such as Lilla’s, predominantly focus on historicizing identity in order to evaluate the effects of using it responsibly or irresponsibly. Such considerations follow the same general pattern: first, they note that despite its widespread use, the notion of identity is a recent historical development. In light of that fact, they argue, we ought not take identity for granted as universal and ahistorical, especially because the notion of identity tends to have reifying and thus dangerous consequences. Finally, they conclude that we ought to use identity more carefully, or stop using it altogether, to combat the notion’s tendency to seem real. The numerous variations of this format constitute a distinct genre of academic articles in the social sciences and humanities. This genre of identity anxiety always responds to the same question: how is it possible to use, manage, or discard our identities, in order to avoid or disarm their negative effects? In the following, I examine an overview of the literature to identify the underlying presumptions about identity and the self that motivate this question.

Historian Philip Gleason’s article, Identifying Identity (1983), is often cited within the genre as an early instance of critical awareness about identity’s historical contingency and proliferation across social, psychological, and political discourses.¹ His article follows the pattern typical of the identity anxiety genre. First, he claims that while many

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assume identity has always been around, anyone who does some historical research “soon makes an arresting discovery—identity is a new term, as well as…an elusive and ubiquitous one” (Gleason, 910). Even though, according to Gleason, identity referred to philosophical problems of personal identity since Locke, identity is now often used to talk about ethnicity, race, and other so-called social or group identities (910-911).

Though Gleason was not the first to make such an observation, he opens Identifying *Identity* by reporting the startling realization of identity’s newness, ubiquity, and elusive meaning. Identity seems indispensible—we can “hardly” (910) imagine doing without it—yet there was a historical moment when we did. This revelation is significant for Gleason because it proves that identity is not a universal, given, or well-understood notion. In the case of identity, he argues, its recent “enormous popularization” (931) results in the diffusion of its meanings, which sanctions the “increasingly loose and irresponsible usage” (931) of the term. Uncertainty over the meaning of identity both results from and contributes to its careless usage. Conversely, the remedy to such conceptual confusion entails rigorous historical investigation of the word identity to reveal its “legitimate” (930) meanings, so that historians can use the term responsibly.

What accounts for identity’s presumable increase in popularity in the first place? According to Gleason, identity refers to the current form of the “perennial problem” (926) of the relationship between the individual and society as it “presented itself to Americans at midcentury” (926). The peculiar advantage of identity, he notes, is that it names both one’s “individual personality” (926), what makes someone distinct from

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2 Mackenzie’s *Political Identity* (1978) is an earlier attempt to take stock of the recent, apparent change in the meaning of “identity” as well as its popular usage in political science and other disciplines. Further, as Gleason himself points out, prior academics such as Robert Coles (1972) were aware enough of an overuse of “identity” to complain about it (Gleason, 913). Also, identity has been used to refer to race and other group categories as early as John Stuart Mill (Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics Of Identity*, 2007).
others, and the “ensemble of social and cultural features that gave different groups their distinctive character” (926). Similarly to the rest of the identity anxiety genre, Gleason historicizes the new emergence of identity as particular to a specific time and context. But he departs from the genre, as we will see, by suggesting that identity might offer a certain insight about the limits of a modern problem (which he mistakes for a perennial problem) of self and society.

Gleason sees the issue of identity as consisting of the conceptual confusion over its meaning. He argues that the proper application of identity combats its widespread, irresponsible usage. But due to the particular nature and history of the word, he suggests that historians and academics have a standing obligation to monitor the notion. Can the responsible usage or application of the word identity ever succeed in clarifying the concept? Gleason’s conclusion not only calls for “lively” (931) attention to history of identity, but also a standing obligation to regulate its future use, so long as there is a “need” (931) to do so. And there is something about identity, according to the genre, that makes identity particularly susceptible to frequent and even dangerous conceptual confusion.

The genre of identity anxiety since Gleason further elaborates and intensifies his initial diagnosis of conceptual confusion and careless usage. The genre’s main concern is that we take identity to be a universal, real notion, and that doing has potentially reifying, oppressive, and divisive consequences. Thus, the genre emphasizes that identity is a historically particular, conceptually ambiguous concept to combat any misconception of its apparent reality. For example, Brubaker and Cooper argue that the word itself is “riddled with ambiguity, riven with contradictory meanings, and encumbered by reifying
connotations” (*Beyond Identity*, 34, 2000). The “use and abuse of ‘identity’…affects not only the language of social analysis but also—inseparably—its substance” (2).³ Brubaker and Cooper worry that treating social identities such as race or gender as real—as analytic, a priori, distinctions—could cause the Balkanization of populations based on artificially delineated categories.

The unforeseen consequence of historicizing identity and contrasting it to more real, accurate, or universal terms, is that the very notion of identity, even the word itself, seems to be intrinsically problematic. In any context, it seems, it bears the potential to do “violence” (34). And its purportedly uncontrollable consequences call for its limited or abolished usage. The entire thesis of Brubaker and Cooper is that we must “go beyond ‘identity’” (36). Some alternatively suggest that we replace “identity” with “identification,” or some other set of terms, in order to overcome the reifying yet confusing tendencies within the word itself. Even though alternatives may raise similar “conceptual difficulties” (Hall, 2, 1996) to identity, they are apparently still “preferable” (Hall, 2, 1996) to identity itself.⁴ Indeed, the problems of identity are sometimes acknowledged with uncertainty over their legitimacy, yet noted nonetheless.⁵ It is as if saying identity too much will make it real. For it to be “mobilized” within discourse is to risk that it “harden[s] into something fixed and determinate” (xvi). Based on these characterizations of identity, the genre finds compelling reason to control the notion by regulating or abolishing use of the word. The elusive and ubiquitous quality of identity

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³ Also see Richard Handler’s *Is Identity a Useful Cross-Cultural Concept?* (1994) and Martin Sökefeld’s *Reconsidering Identity* (2001).

⁴ See also Bauman, 11 (2009): “Perhaps instead of talking about identities…it would be more in keeping with the realities of the globalizing world to speak of identification.”

⁵ Anthony Appiah, in *The Ethics of Identity* (2005), notes that “Indeed, in the spirit of those side-effects warnings you find in drug advertisements-those blocks of microscopic text that cause the blurred vision they warn about-I should offer a disclaimer…I should admit, preemptively, that talk of identity, too, can have reifying tendencies” (xvi).
that motivated Gleason’s analysis to clarify identity is now reason to replace the word, in order to do away with the problems with identity.

What does it mean when the trouble with identity is answered overwhelmingly with calls to regulate or even replace the word, in hopes that it ameliorates the substantive threat of identity’s insubstantial reality? Identity seems to be inseparable from the conceptual and material problems attributed to it. The very invocation of identity is a risk, whether of reification, oppressive sameness, or the debilitating Balkanization of social groups. But can imperatives to limit or eliminate the use of “identity” defuse its threat? Or do the relentless calls to regulate its irresponsible usage inevitably contribute to its uncontrollable proliferation, such as when articles cite and thus circulate examples of irresponsible uses of identity? What sort of historical evidence, supporting what sort of argument, could possibly end this discussion of identity? What strategy, prescription, or imperative could be deployed with enough force to police the future uncontrollable proliferation of identity? Using the techniques of the subgenre, can we ever finally determine the meaning of identity in order to move beyond it? Can its dangerous track record not always be resurrected with every historical account of it, every rediscovery of its past? In other words, the strategy of historicizing and regulating the term can never succeed in its aim to clarify identity and explain the confusion around it. This strategy undercuts its own efforts because is not clear that we “solve” the problem with identity by limiting our usage of the word or concept.

The ultimate fear is that identity assumed to be a universal, perennial notion, when in fact it is a recent and particular concept. But what this strategy cannot do is show

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6 I take this point from what Butler says about hate speech in *Excitable Speech* (1997), which itself is drawn from Foucault.
that the notions of the self, the individual, and the person are also as historical as identity. And that currently, identity cannot be divorced and cast off from the possibility of understanding the subject. To debate over how we should use the notion of identity in order to regulate its substantive impacts on the world is to posit an agency prior to or separable from a notion of identity that is already in operation. Elsewhere in Identifying Identity, Gleason suggests an alternate approach to understanding identity. Rather than explaining the contingent emergence of identity in light of a universal problem between the individual and society, Gleason points to a more genealogical approach. He asks, “What elements in the intellectual background of its emergence help explain its extraordinary popularity?” (Gleason, 914). The goal is not to decide how we ought to use identity, or discover what it really is, but to understand the significance of its appearance and search for the conditions under which it seems to be problematic. Thus, the anxiety around identity, while intelligible, calls for a genealogical strategy with larger scope.

A Change in Strategy: Visible Identities and Gender Trouble

My brief overview of the identity genre indicated the need for an alternative genealogical strategy to diagnose its anxieties. I therefore turn to the critical analyzes of identity undertaken by Linda Alcoff and Judith Butler. Both argue that the troublesome notion of identity seems to cause is actually a symptom of ontological worries about the shortcomings of the modern conception of the self. The worry consists in asking: To what extent can subjects decide whether to keep or discard their un-chosen identities? How important are identities to the self, and how can the self avoid being oppressed and betrayed by the very identities that constitute herself? Both depart from the genre of
identity anxiety because, rather than merely arguing how identity is problematic, each investigates the ontological and historical underpinnings to explain what is problematic about it. Both attempt to provide an account of the self that is socially constituted by identity. In the following, I provide an overview of Alcoff and Butler’s accounts of the problem identity presents and their solutions. Because both try to solve the problem with identity with their accounts of the socially constituted self, however, their accounts maintain a split that opposes agency to identity, which produces the apparent problem with identity in the first place. Even though Alcoff responds to Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and other essays, I discuss Alcoff’s work first in order to question the prevailing conception within the identity anxiety genre: that to consider the reality of identities is to abuse the term. But is it really the case that the very consideration of identities as real entities is necessarily pernicious?

**Alcoff’s Realist Account of Identity**

Is identity as inherently problematic as it is considered to be across the spectrum of popular, political, and philosophical discourse? Alcoff’s *Visible Identities* is a wide-ranging critical investigation motivated by that very question. And if, as Alcoff argues, there is no a priori problem with identity, then how should we understand identities such as race and gender? Alcoff rightly criticizes the prevailing rhetoric that identity is always reifying and oppressive. When she examines the basis of the philosophical critique of identity, she concludes that identities seem inescapably problematic only when understood as making inherently inaccurate, false claims about an insubstantial self. She challenges this mistaken standard view of identity by arguing that insofar as identities are
real, they are neither pernicious nor oppressive. Much of the criticism against identity is unwarranted, she claims, because “what identities really are (as opposed to what they are sometimes said to be) is nothing to be politically afraid of” (Alcoff, 290). Throughout *Visible Identities*, Alcoff maintains that a plausible account of identity must understand identities to be real, i.e. descriptive of the self, and grounded in experience. She insists on phenomenological grounds that we can distinguish real identities from the reductive, inaccurate identities targeted by the philosophical critique. According to Alcoff, in doing so we realize that real identities cannot be inherently oppressive to the self.

According to Alcoff, the standard philosophical view of identity consists of a mistaken characterization of one’s external social identities, internal self, and the relationship between them. As a result, she says, identity seems a priori pernicious because it can only make false and therefore oppressive claims about the self. Under the standard view, identities are portrayed as “reductive” (112), “homogenous” (112), and “neatly coherent” (124). Thus, identities seem inherently misleading because, when used to describe something, they are already understood as over-simplifying, generalizing, and obliterating the nuances of reality. Further, Alcoff notes, the standard view “makes all substantive representations of the self inadequate and even equates the very attempt to represent with the attempt to oppress” (69). Thus, agency is conceptualized as necessarily in opposition to identity, as the ability of the self to affirm the inadequacy of any external representation of itself. For example, the claim, “I am a woman” would be understood as inherently misleading because it reduces or equates all that I am to my gender. In other words, identity claims falsely determine that the particular complexities of my self, such as the way I experience and understand myself, are exhausted by my identity as a woman.
Accordingly, under this view, identity categories must be conceptualized as “in an important sense false claims” (122). And conversely, the true self must essentially be able to negate, subvert, or refuse what is external to it in order to resist determinacy and have agency.

According to Alcoff, even when the standard view rightly acknowledges the importance of one’s external social context, which includes identities such as race, gender, and ethnicity, it wrongly posits a universal, immaterial self that is independent of its particular historical and cultural context. According to Alcoff, such a view endorses “a nonsubstantive acting self-in-progress, a self that resists, that exists beyond content” (Footnote 7 from page 78, Alcoff 293). Alcoff interprets this to mean that the self is not constituted by any material content because it is only a pure negating capacity. In consequence, under the standard view, it seems that the only truth to be known about one’s indeterminate self is that it is essentially the ability to deny any externally originating representation of it. Further, therefore, any relation between identity and the self entails the self either overcoming identity or succumbing to identity’s misrepresentation of the self.

In order to redeem identity against the mistaken standard view, Alcoff argues that all one must do is account for what identities really are. And, she claims, insofar as identities are real and therefore materially based in experience, they are neither pernicious nor oppressive. She points out that we know from lived experience that identities are not monolithic, reductive entities, in part because of the vast variations among individuals within any social category. Therefore, Alcoff argues, “I can say it is accurate to portray me as a woman even though I would resist the claim that [such an
ascription] exhausts who I am” (78). Identity ascriptions such as, “I am a woman” do not claim to determine all one is, but can still be “accurate or successful” (78). And, since they can be accurate, then it follows that they “do not in every case require or motivate resistance” (78). Thus, on Alcoff’s view, the criteria for an identity claim to be accurate about myself are both less stringent and more accommodating than the standard view portrays them to be. And even further, identity claims that actually describe the self could never exhaust all that one is in a reifying way, because according to Alcoff, real identities are neither static nor determinate: “Identities themselves—meaning…the lived bodies—are fluid, complex, open-ended, and dynamic, which is why reductive and overly homogenous characterizations of identity are inaccurate” (112). In contrast to the standard view, Alcoff argues, the self does not exist beyond content. Rather, it is based in the embodied experience of material reality. Thus, agency is not at risk when one accounts for the reality of identity. Insofar as identities are real, she claims, the self is never fully determined by them.

Alcoff grounds her account in phenomenology, which she understands to base “its account primarily on a reflective description of lived human experience as a corporeal being in the world” (109). Determination by one’s identities is impossible under such an account, she claims, due to the “nature of embodied, temporal existence” (110) itself. Our lived experience of identities, which informs our lived subjectivity, is “open-ended, multilayered, fragmented, and shifting” (110). Alcoff claims that we are never fully determined by identity because the nature and meaning of our lived experience is open-ended. And, under her account, the self is closely entwined rather than in tension with identity. Indeed, the agency of the self depends on identity: “the substantive and
particular nature of a given subjectivity is constituted *through* its publically recognized identity” (93-94).

Alcoff challenges the standard view that there is an inherently oppressive relation between the self and one’s identity. She thinks that a realist account of identity dissolves worries that identities make a priori false and therefore oppressive claims. However, her account falters because she relies upon a pre-social understanding of the body to ground and justify the reality of social identities. She relies on this notion in two ways. First, she claims that identities such as gender are more real than those such as race, because there is a pre-social sexual difference behind expressions of gender. Second, she marks an a priori distinction between one’s inner subjectivity and outer public identity that is based in the reality of the lived experience of a pre-social body.

In her realist account of identity, Alcoff emphasizes the prediscursive material basis of gender. She grounds gender in the sexual difference of the body, and argues that while the meaning of gender is not exhausted by such biological differences, it nonetheless is always connected to them. Unlike race, gender “has an objective material basis that is stable across past and present cultural variability” (289). Thus, she grounds the reality of social identities based on the extent to which they are the social effects of a culturally stable material reality. Alcoff’s notion of identity this depends on a reality of the body behind social effects of identity. There is a persistent reality of gender identity that is independent of social practice and part of the non-discursive body. One might say that we can save her account by doing without Alcoff’s notion of a pre-discursive sexual difference of bodies. But we cannot escape that, under her account, the incoherence of the
self is either real or pernicious based on whether it is grounded in pre-social temporal reality.

According to Alcoff, a realistic account must acknowledge a distinction between the way I see myself in the inside and the way the world sees me on the outside. According to Alcoff, this distinction is necessary for two reasons. First, she claims, the distinction accounts for a real feature of experience: one’s self-understanding often does not neatly cohere with the way others see her. Second, she notes, the distinction marks a political mode of resistance, in which one’s affirmative self-understanding enables her to critique the insidious misrepresentation of her public identity.

Alcoff says that because our lived subjectivity is “not always perfectly mapped onto our socially perceived self” (93), this interior aspect of the self can be “experienced and conceptualized differently” (93) from our public identity. Someone might pass as straight, when in fact her inner understanding and experience of herself is as a lesbian. This distinction between inner and outer is attractive, according to Alcoff, because such incoherence is a real feature of lived experience: “there is no ultimate coherence between anyone’s multiple identities; there will always be tensions between various aspects” (112). A friend of mine is publicly recognized as of Indian nationality and ethnicity, but has a Canadian passport, while the rest of her family has Indian passports. This often causes confusion in airport customs when she flies internationally with her family. Rather than indicate that identities are always inaccurate, such incoherence suggests that they are complicated and may never neatly cohere.

But what distinguishes between the real incoherences between one’s lived subjectivity and public identity, and the inaccuracies between them? On what sort of
reality does Alcoff base the split between the interior and exterior of the body? Alcoff bases these incoherences on the reality of a pre-discursive rather than socially constituted temporality of embodied experience. Alcoff argues that this distinction can also be understood as elucidating a political need in order to base critiques of inaccurate social representations on the reality of lived subjectivity. According to Alcoff, there is a “need to characterize the way in which a public self may not match a lived self” (93), and account for the way we “manage to separate ourselves from our public interpellation” (93). Alcoff understands this need as political, and sees such a separation between our inner and outer selves as a mode of resisting oppression. Those with stigmatized identities, she argues, have often resisted the damaging effects of their oppression by affirming positive understandings of themselves in contrast to their pernicious public representations. According to Alcoff, the range of reflective and other activities, the agency based in our lived subjectivity, is the locus of resistance in cases when our external public identities misrepresent who we are.

But her point ends up raising questions about how appropriate her realist account of identity is. Again, how do we distinguish between accurate identities with various degrees of incoherency, and inaccurate identities that misrepresent what the identities really are? Alcoff claims that there is nothing to fear from real identities, only fake ones. But are real, accurate public identities always innocuous? For example, it might be true that fewer people of color become academic philosophers. But to put mostly white students on information pamphlets about graduate schools that reflect their racial diversity would not be innocuous, but might dissuade people of color from applying in the first place. Thus, accurate representations of identities are not necessarily innocent.
Further, does it make sense to evaluate identities as if they are true or false, real or fake? When identity claims are false, does it make sense that they are pernicious or warrant resistance? My Italian-American mom always says that she has a temper because she’s Sicilian. I don’t have a temper, but my sister does. Does that mean that the claim that Italians are emotional or have strong tempers is false? Does it mean that I’m not actually Italian, or that Italian does not accurately describe me because I do not gesticulate? Rather than as true or false about me, I understand who I am as an individual, as Italian-American and as not having a temper, to the degree that I diverge or approach such an identity claim.

Alcoff’s account is important because it dispels the prevailing notion that identities are necessarily pernicious insofar as they real, or taken to be real. She shows how identities can be positively constitutive of agency and the self, and based on her account it is reasonable to say that an account of identity need not account for identity insofar as it oppresses individuals. But ultimately, her realist account of identity is unsatisfying for two reasons. One, she relies on a prediscursive, and thus a priori, notion of the body behind the social effects of identity in order to ground their reality. Two, she accounts for identity based on whether or not it accurately describes subjects, which fails to account for how identity works. Are identity claims best understood as making claims about reality that can be evaluated as true or false? And are there ways that identities are pernicious even when not understood as making false claims about reality? Butler’s account, in contrast, understands identities as neither true nor false, but socially constructed. She attempts answer these questions that Alcoff leaves unanswered.
Butler’s Synthetic Constructivism

Must identities be understood as making epistemic claims about the real self? Are identities pernicious only insofar as they misrepresent a true self? Does Butler argue that identities are inherently false, or does she challenge the primacy of such an epistemic-ontological model altogether? Butler’s strategy in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* can be understood as the inverse of Alcoff’s project. Whereas Alcoff argues that any plausible account of identity not pernicious to the self must presume that identities are real, describe the self, and are grounded in lived experiences, Butler argues that this approach is mistaken from the start. “Clearly,” writes Butler, “[my] project does not propose to lay out within traditional philosophical terms an ontology of gender whereby the meaning of being a woman or a man is elucidated within the terms of phenomenology” (45). To uncritically theorize what it means to be woman is to already assume that there is a reality to being a woman. And to elucidate what it means to be a woman in terms of her lived experiences is to assume that an authoritative account of what it means to be a woman can be found in those experiences. Thus, Butler argues, such a strategy assumes a priori that there a substantive, stable, real identity, whether that of gender or of an individual, that expresses one’s true gender or self. Instead, Butler’s genealogical critique understands identities to be the “effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” (xxxi), rather than the origin of an ontology of identity. According to Butler, Alcoff’s realist account of identity, in which a real, substantive self persists as the agency behind social effects, is not only incorrect, but

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7 I take this phrase from Alcoff, who uses it to distinguish her own realist account of identity from Butler’s so-called anti-realist account: “Because [Butler’s] account of the self is relentlessly antinaturalizing, I call her approach a synthetic constructivism, to highlight her view that even the very basic elements of the body and subject are made of, so to speak, synthetic materials” (Alcoff, 75). I do not necessarily agree with Alcoff’s characterization of Butler’s account of the self.
also generates the very problem with identity that calls for its subversion. The further we ground gender identity in reality, on Butler’s view, the more we unwittingly justify the defining institutions of heterosexuality and phallogocentrism that produce such identities in the first place. Therefore, Alcoff’s presumptions would take as already legitimate the very institutions, practices, and discourses through which identities insidiously appear to genuinely describe an inner self.

Contrary to how Alcoff understands the philosophical critique of identity, Butler’s problem with identity is not that it makes inherently false claims about a true self. Instead, Butler argues, the problem is the discursive production of identities as real or false in the first place. An epistemic-ontological model, such as Alcoff’s, in which identity makes a claim about the inner truth of a subject, inevitably “disavow[s] its own cultural location and, hence, promote[s] itself [the reality of identity] as a global subject” (Butler, 201). Specifically, this model presumes that within any social context, there is a pervading, knowable reality of being an identity. If this were the case, it seems plausible that the reality and legitimacy of certain gender identities could be determined. One could ask questions such as: Is being a trans woman an authentic, real gender, or in reality a man wearing women’s clothing? Under this model, it also seems plausible that gender accurately or inaccurately describes someone. One might reasonably presume that there is some method to determine the truth of whether or not I am a woman. Based on the knowledge of what it means to be a woman, it would also be possible to evaluate representations of gender as realistic and accurate, as opposed to stereotypical or exaggerated. However, Butler objects to this model on both methodological and political grounds.
Methodologically, she objects to the idea that we can separate descriptive accounts of gender from normative accounts. A descriptive account would aim to neutrally describe what gender is. It would ask questions such as: How are the elements of sex, sexuality, dress, body comportment, etc. related to each other in men as opposed to women? Based on that account, normative judgments about the legitimacy of certain genders and the accuracy of certain representations of gender could be made. But, Butler argues, such a separation is impossible to make because of the socially constructed nature of identities. Gender is not the sort of thing that can be true or false, but instead is “only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (186). In other words, there is no ontology of gender identity prior to or independent of its expression. In fact, Butler notes, the notion of gender expression is misleading because it presupposes a prior gender identity that is expressed through one’s dress, sexuality, practices, etc. Instead, identity is “performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (34). The unity of elements that appear to be constitutive of one’s gender are “determine[d] in advance” (xxii) by cultural expectations of what gender should be. Thus, any seemingly neutral description of gender is already conditioned by normative operations of power. To say the claim, “I am a woman” both accurately describes me and informs what it means to be a woman overlooks the fact that my sex, dress, mode of presentation, etc. has already qualified me as what it means to be woman. If being a woman depends at all on the lived experiences of women, we must ask what qualifies those with such experiences as women in the first place. There is no prior ontology behind the performance that constitutes gender identities.
But if identity is not the sort of thing that is genuine or real about the self, then what is its ontological status? And if an epistemological-ontological account of what identities really are does not dissolve the problems of identity, but in fact contributes to those problems, then how ought we understand identities as socially constructed? On Butler’s view, gender is a regulatory ideal, something approximated but never fully embodied. One can never, therefore, “be” an identity but only approximate it (26). To say that gender is constructed does not mean that it is illusory or artificial, as opposed to something “real” or “authentic” (45) of the self. Instead, what are often taken to be real, authentic genders by the epistemic-ontological model are actually culturally intelligible configurations of gender: “The appearance of an abiding substance or gendered self…is thus produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence” (33). What this means is that there is no stable, primary, or interior source of gender that truly expresses itself.

This is where Butler’s political objection to the epistemic-ontological model comes in. She worries that the ontological presumption of stable, substantive gender identities reifies and regulates possible gender relations. To speak of a true gender identity conceals the “performative possibilities for proliferating gender configurations outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality” (192-193). It enables normative judgments, disguised as neutral descriptions, about whether (for example) transgender identities, or lesbians, are real or fake genders or sexualities, but instead those who express them are confused, perverted, or unnatural. The epistemic-ontological model not only mischaracterizes gender identity but also stigmatizes those with culturally unintelligible genders. Thus, “the various reifications of
gender that have constituted its contingent ontologies” (46) operate to “forcibly
foreclose” (46) alternative possibilities of gendered subjects.

Butler argues that to found the reality of women on a model of substantial, stable
identity is to rely upon and reify notions of identity that stigmatize culturally
unintelligible genders as fake and illegitimate. If agency is not enabled by the reality of
identities, but rather threatened by it, then how ought agency be conceived? Butler
counterposes the possibilities of agency and their expansion to the reification of identity
categories. The reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or
generated, opens up possibilities of “agency” that are insidiously foreclosed by positions
that take identity categories as foundational and fixed” (201). Rather than opposing
construction to agency, she claims, construction “is the necessary scene of agency, the
very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible” (201).
Except, it seems, when socially constructed identities become reified, in which case
alternative possibilities of the subject are foreclosed.

Butler argues that the subject can only appear as gendered, as a subject that
already possesses a gender identity. To some extent, it seems as though identities are
necessary as the current mode of cultural intelligibility of subjects. Thus, they enable
agency, it seems, insofar as they articulate the cultural possibilities of gender
configurations rather than foreclose them. And further, the productive possibilities of
contesting the naturalized or reified foundations of identities is found within the structural
failure of bodies to fully embody regulatory ideals. Gender identities are neither real nor
fake, but instead the intelligible or unintelligible substantial effects of regulatory ideals
that also condition the subject, whether the universal subject of women, or the universal
individual person, as a unity. Such regulatory practices “institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire” (23). For example, a causal-biological model of gender might assign female biological sex as the cause for expressions of femininity and sexual attraction to men. Unintelligible genders are those constituted by elements that do not follow such ideals of cultural coherency. What gender is someone with female biological sex, masculine expressions, and sexual attraction to men and women, under the causal-biological model? Is this person a man or a woman? By calling this person a bisexual trans man, have we escaped the regulatory ideals that produce coherent identities? Or merely reproduced them?

Further, regulatory practices also institute and maintain relations of intelligibility over time and place. For example, one might say that if someone is gay, that means that person must have always been gay and will always be gay, no matter the context. Such an example illustrates the presumption of certain norms of cultural intelligibility, according to which sexuality ought a priori to be continuous and to be universal. Underlying such configurations of intelligibility is the notion of a substance, which Butler glosses as a metaphysically self-identical being (26). The intelligibility of the category of woman as a coherent relation of elements and as continuous through time and place is effected by regulatory practices. But regulatory practices do not only govern the substantial effect of gender. They also govern the intelligibility, “the “coherence” (23) and “continuity” of the very notion of the subject as an a priori individual, as the universal person. Indeed, the very notion of the individual subject is intelligible “only through its appearance as gendered” (46). Rather than “logical or analytic features of personhood” (23), those features are “socially instituted and maintained norms of intelligibility” (23). Being a
woman, rather than the unifying principle behind my sex, sexuality, dress, body comportment, etc. appears unified because it is the effect of culturally contingent regulatory ideals.

But then why is Butler anxious about identity claims, if the pernicious reification of identities is revealed to be the operation of contingent regulatory ideals rather than based in natural fact? When Butler remarks that being a lesbian feels “neither true nor false” (Butler 1991), she expresses suspicion at a category of sexuality, of being a woman sexually attracted to other women, that requires the context of the “heterosexual matrix” (7) for its stability. Does the claim “I am a woman” purport that “woman” is a universal subject? And if so, then under her analysis, do identity claims a priori and in all cases make universal claims about identities? Whereas Alcoff understands Butler’s resistance to the claim, “I am a woman” to be a worry that “woman” is falsely taken to describe all that “I” am, Butler’s resistance to the claim is that it posits a universal subject “woman” that appears ontologically prior to the various other cultural configurations that contribute to the effect of “I.” Being a woman is “surely not all one is; the term fails to be exhaustive, [but] not because a pregendered “person” transcends the specific paraphernalia of its gender” (4). Alcoff to some extent makes this point to argue that the claim is unproblematic. For Alcoff, there is a substantive, internal, particular self that persists through time. The substance might not be self-identical, but it is regulated by social norms insofar as it seems real because it is culturally intelligible. The claim is problematic under Alcoff’s view only if “women” is taken as coherent, stable, unified, and exhausts the “I.” But in fact, Alcoff claims, what identities really are is complicated, and “I” really can have many incoherent identities. Alcoff bases this reality of identities
in the lived experiences of pre-social body and its indeterminacy, due to the temporal experience of embodied existence.

But for Butler, the claim that I am a woman is possibly problematic because of the various ways that gender is socially articulated, such as racially or in modes of presentation other than the internal attributes of an individual’s self. The term “woman” inherently fails to exhaust all that “I” am for two reasons. First, gender is an unstable term that varies across temporal contexts. It is “not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts” (4). Second, gender cannot be understood independently of the various other contingent aspects that go into producing what it means to be a “woman” in a particular context: “gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (4-5). Butler understands the problem with the claim that “I am a woman” to be that it wrongly or artificially airlifts gender out of its contingencies by articulating it in the mode of a prediscursive ontology, when in fact, “it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained” (4-5). Here, it is not so much that Butler’s understanding conflicts with Alcoff’s as much as they differently understand what is problematic about this claim.

Alcoff understands this claim as unproblematic when accurate, because on her account, being a woman describes only part of who she is. But Butler understands this claim as deceptive and thus anxiety provoking because it claims that the category “women” preexists the context through which such an identity is produced and maintained. Alcoff thus presumes as ahistorical the very social temporality of linguistically structured intelligibility that structures agency, the intelligible appearance
of the “I.” But to say that the identity of women or gender of women is equivalent to the effects of discursively constituted identities is not to say that complex individuals are reduced to their identities, according to Butler. Instead, the source of her anxiety is that the intelligibility of such a claim relies on a matrix of regulatory ideals that inevitably produce unintelligible configurations of gender or sexuality that are thus always already marginalized.

Butler privileges the subversion or instability of a repeated act as the site of agency for the individual. Repetition leads to reification that oppresses the individual. But this is not necessarily the case either. How else can “I” exist other than as a woman? The very “words, acts, gestures, and desire” (185) are what “produce the effect of an inner core or substance” (185), who I am as a subject. I did not choose to be constituted this way. In fact, I cannot but (for example) desire whatever I desire as the object of my sexuality. This desire is, as Butler says, socially constituted rather than natural or innate, and it can change over time. But part of what it means to sexually desire certain practices, bodies, etc. is to measure up to a particular sexual identity instituted according to certain regulatory norms. Insofar as I depart from that norm, it seems, I am not therefore oppressed by it, but in fact I am able to exist as a socially recognizable, even if incoherent or abnormal, subject. The non-normative configures recognizable existence no less than does normative subject positions.

**Adding Up Alcoff and Butler**

In contrast to much of Western philosophical thinking in which one’s individual agency and external social identities seem to mutually exclude each other, Alcoff and
Butler both provide insightful accounts of the socially constituted nature of the individual subject. But both Alcoff and Butler retain in their accounts a notion of a pre-social, universal entity in their understandings of agency. Even though they do not explicitly invoke any pre-social or universal acting subject, they still maintain an *a priori* split within their accounts of the subject, and attribute agency to one part of the split. As a result, this distinction counterposes individual agency and freedom with the realm of social identity and determinism. This happens because Alcoff and Butler try to distinguish identities that socially constitute the agency of individuals and groups, from identities that inevitably oppress and reify the individual or social groups they name. Conversely, both try to make room in their theories for some sort of authority that undermines the oppressive reification of such “bad” identities. As a result, Alcoff and Butler fall into and continue the same problematic, dead-end line of questioning as the genre of identity: when is the social (understood as identity) bad for the individual? How can the individual retain ultimate authority over her (pre-existing) social identities to combat them when they are harmful to her? In the following, I critique the notion that a private/new identity is always better than public/conventional identities, and the notion that agency inheres in marginal identities.

Like Alcoff, Butler argues that the subject is constituted by identity: there is no lived subjectivity fundamentally distinct from social identity, what Alcoff calls public identity. And, like Alcoff, Butler understands identity to be particularly dangerous when reified, or in other words when identities that are in fact fictitious pose as real. But the danger both fear is inherited from a picture in which the exercise of agency, even when socially constituted, is in a priori opposition to certain other forms of social construction.
Their commitments to an a priori agency are both motivated by an anxiety about the oppressive potential of identities.

Instead, we must recognize that such an a priori split between those identities that enable agency and those that risk oppression is mistaken. Such a distinction cannot be made ontologically prior to the social context through which identities are produced. Alcoff’s account splits the unique, embodied lived subjectivity, the seat of “agency” (93), from one’s public identity. Even though Alcoff does not think that one’s public identity is only made up of monolithic, reified social representations, and even though she argues that one’s public identity constitutes one’s lived subjectivity, she still insulates individual agency from one’s public identity, to guard against its full determination by the social, by grounding it in a pre-social conception of embodied experience. She justifies this split by saying that there is a “need” (93) to separate one’s public identity from one’s agency in order for marginalized identities to resist identity-based oppression. But in order to grant the individual the real authority to challenge her public identity, Alcoff implements an a priori split between the interior and exterior of the body. Her reasoning is that there is a “need” (93) to separate one’s public identity from one’s agency in order for marginalized identities to resist identity-based oppression. Thus, the agency within the interior of the self provides the real authority to challenge one’s public identity.

Butler’s account finds agency within the open possibilities of resignification (the “scene” (45) of agency), in opposition to the reified closure of a sign. Butler argues that subversion of mandatory heterosexuality and patriarchy is not found prior to culture, but instead within the same culture in which such oppressions exist. Thus, the gender norms that police the intelligibility of gender identities also produce the culturally unintelligible,
alternative gender configurations that challenge the apparent naturalized authority of those gender norms. But when Butler argues that gender norms and stable identities themselves are inherently oppressive, whereas the subversion of those stable notions is the scene of agency, she too makes an a priori split that maps onto the freedom of the unique individual and the oppression of individual freedom through the mandatory repetition of gender relations. Those with non-normative identities, it seems under Butler’s view, are those with agency, or at least more agency, than those with normative identities, because they reveal the illusory reality of naturalized gender categories. Butler does claim that in fact, all subjects have non-normative genders because it is impossible to ever fully embody the regulatory ideals of (for example) gender. But insofar as there are certain identities that are reproduced without much variation, it seems, the expanded possibilities of their agency are foreclosed.

Instead, agency is not to be found in the subversion of consolidated identities by appeal to some authority, whether the open-ended possibilities of the body (Alcoff) or the open-ended possibilities of signification (Butler). Alternatively, identity is an organizing principle produced by social norms that can be grasped only after the fact, but operates as the origin of authority in appeals to both change or maintain social norms. Alternatively put, the individual (whether understood as the self, the interior, the person) has the same status—it is a form or category of social identity—as race, gender, or sexuality.

Both Alcoff and Butler also retain an understanding of agency as located within the unique particularity of the individual self/subject in contrast to the social, even though both acknowledge the social constituted individual. Despite trying to provide alternative accounts of identity and the self that are not universal and pre-social, both Alcoff and
Butler make a priori arguments about identity and the self. Alcoff posits a social temporality of the individual (“real self”) as an a priori coherence by distinguishing between interior and exterior aspects, where the agency of the individual is located within. Alcoff locates the heart of agency in the authority of the interior self to control her exterior social self. Butler posits that identity consolidation is a priori nefarious because it is reifying. Social norms produce the very identities that authorize the legitimacy of those norms. Identities function to appear as the origins or primary authority of those norms. But unlike what Butler sometimes suggests, identities are not monolithic effects attributable to certain univocal institutions or discourses, such as mandatory heterosexuality or phallogocentrism. Further, even when the reality of identities seems to originate (as Alcoff claims) from the very embodied, lived experiences of an interior self, they can never (as Butler says) be fully embodied or internalized in such a way. The degree to which subjects fail to conform to norms that produce stable, coherent identities is not the origin of social oppression imposed upon the freedom of an individual. Instead, identities produce subjects as necessarily “failing” to embody social norms, to various degrees.

Identity cannot be done away with intentionally, because otherwise the very illusory effect of the subject, constituted by the institutional and discursive practices, no longer exists. Identity is an organizing principle that is grasped only after the fact. By the time I realize my identity as a woman, various acts, desires, and practices have already been attributed to me and thus have constituted me as a woman. And my identity appears to me as knowledge about a prior, inner self, rather than the organizing principle effected by various gender norms. Identity, as the effect of a norm or a regulatory ideal, produces
the subject as always already more or less culturally intelligible. The subject only after the fact grasps its identity and thus itself in the mode of a knowable entity, as knowledge of itself. Identities play a role in the productive conditions of subjects. Identities that are less culturally intelligible, such as trans gender identities, are already effected by the same culture that has phallogocentrism and mandatory heterosexuality. In naming them as contested identities (are they real or fake?), it is already too late to say that they are options that are culturally foreclosed, as if they are alternative expressions of gender that exist outside of or prior to culture.

Conclusion

My investigation began with a question about social identities such as race, gender, and sexuality. Why is there so much consternation over using the notion of identity? Is the anxiety surrounding identity warranted? An overview of relevant literature betrayed a fear that taking seriously one’s socially contingent identities threaten the agency of the universal individual subject, by reifying who she is before she gets a chance to determine herself. But the important question is not whether, when, or how we should use or invoke identity. Such a line of inquiry could never succeed in finding an answer that would finally put it to rest. Instead, at stake is how we understand the subject to be fully socially constituted, in the shadow of a philosophical tradition in which agency is necessarily pre-social and at risk of oppression by one’s social context. Alcoff’s insight is her skepticism of how dangerous identities actually are. Identities seem pernicious only when they are mischaracterized as claiming to exhaust of the self, which by contrast must be able to overcome its externally imposed identities to save itself from
such oppression. But she uses an epistemic-ontological model through which we can distinguish the reality of identities from their inaccurate representations through the reflective capacities of the interior self, in order to critique oppressive identities. She thus invokes a split between agency and identity in order to solve the modern problem with identity that she had just shown to be artificial and mistaken. From Butler, we get a skeptical view of the model Alcoff takes for granted, and further reasons to understand identities not as real or fake but as socially constructed. Identities are the effects of social norms rather than the origins that justify those norms. But because she equates the production of stable identities with the reification of patriarchal, heterosexist gender relations, identities seem to only oppress subjects by limiting alternative gender configurations. Thus, she situates agency in performative acts that challenge or subvert the repetition of identities. As a result, however, she reproduces the modern split counterposing agency with identity and fails to account for the way the repetition of identity is inseparable from its subversion. Instead, an account of identity and a fully socially constituted self would not solve the problem identity has under the modernist view, in which individual freedom is limited by social identity.
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