
The Failed Divine Performative: Reading Judith Butler's Critique of Theology with Anselm's *On the Fall of the Devil*

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Of all the many examples of failed ideological interpellation, the fall of the devil is undoubtedly the most extreme. Created to be the greatest of all angels, Satan instead turns against God, thereby becoming the figure of ultimate evil. Although it is legitimated by reference to a few ambiguous passages in Scripture, the story of the fall of the devil was created virtually from scratch in the course of theological reflection, in an attempt to account for the evil that already appears to have been present before the fall of Adam and Eve, represented by the tempting snake in the Garden of Eden. In addition to the role of prequel to the fall of humanity, the fall of the devil came to serve as a way of thinking through the formal conditions of a creature choosing to defy the divine intention.

This search for the conditions of possibility of rebellion against one's creator resonates strongly with Judith Butler's account of ideological interpellation, which constitutes the subject but at the same time always necessarily fails. In light of recent interest in Butler's work among scholars of religion,¹ one might be tempted simply to offer a Butlerian reading of a representative text on this theological theme. To skip directly to an appropriation of Butler for the purpose of understanding a theological text, however, would be to ignore a major thread of Butler's development of the notion of ideological interpellation and the allied concept of performativity: an uncompromising critique of what she calls "theological" patterns of thought. Indeed, this critique is so pervasive that it is difficult to gauge the precise stakes of her theory of

¹ See, e.g., the recent collection *Bodily Citations: Religion and Judith Butler*, ed. Ellen Armour and Susan St. Ville (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

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interpellation unless one understands what Butler means by theology. In turn, a reading of a theological text in light of Butler's theory can serve as a test case to determine whether Butler's critique hits its target—or, alternatively, whether theological texts might actually move in directions similar to Butler's own project.

For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen Anselm's *On the Fall of the Devil* as my test case.² Anselm's unquestioned influence on the history of theology allows me, at least provisionally, to take him as representative, not simply of the theological theme of the fall of the devil, but of the mainstream of Western Christian theological discourse. Before analyzing Anselm's text, however, I must achieve two interrelated goals: outlining Butler's theory of interpellation and clarifying her critique of theology. My procedure, then, will be as follows. First, I will examine what Butler means by theology, focusing on her critique of Jacques Lacan in *Gender Trouble*.³ I will then elaborate Butler's closely related theories of performativity and interpellation as laid out in *Excitable Speech* and *The Psychic Life of Power*, and in particular in her reading of Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in the latter work.⁴ Only after all this has been established will I attempt a Butlerian reading of Anselm, with an eye toward determining whether theological texts are always as "theological" as Butler seems to assume.

Butler refers to theology in nearly all of her books. These references are almost uniformly negative, but not in the sense of indicating an explicit polemic against theology or religion. She does take a Nietzschean critique of religion largely for granted, but the primary targets of her critique of theology are avowedly secular thinkers who take up positions that seem to Butler to function theologically. What she means by this is perhaps best exemplified in her critiques of Lacan (which are echoed in her later critiques of Lacanians such as Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar). In one of her many discussions of Lacan in *Gender Trouble*, Butler makes a distinction between "the materialist and Lacanian (and post-Lacanian) positions" regarding sexual difference.⁵ The materialist position, exemplified by Jacqueline Rose and Jane Gallop, "un-

² Anselm of Canterbury, *On the Fall of the Devil*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Davies and G. R. Evans, trans. Ralph McInerny (New York: Oxford, 1998), 193–232. The Latin text with facing French translation can be found in Michel Corbin, ed., *L'œuvre de S. Anselme de Cantorbéry*, vol. 2 (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1986), 251–375.

³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Tenth Anniversary Edition (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁴ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), and *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–86.

⁵ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 38.

derscore[s] . . . the constructed status of sexual difference, the inherent instability of that construction, and the dual consequentiality of a prohibition that at once institutes a sexual identity and provides for the exposure of that construction's tenuous ground."⁶ In this view, "the prohibition that constructs identity is inefficacious," so that "the paternal law ought to be understood not as a deterministic divine will, but as a perpetual bumbler." By contrast, in the Lacanian view (including Luce Irigaray's post-Lacanian view), the "paternal Law" as that which generates sexuation "bear[s] the mark of a monotheistic singularity."⁷

One is tempted, then, to say that for Butler, the Lacanian view does understand sexual difference as "a deterministic divine will," whereas a materialist view (i.e., Butler's own) emphasizes the constructed and fluid character of sexual difference. However, her account of the monotheistic nature of the Lacanian view is much more complex. Further on in *Gender Trouble*, Butler criticizes Lacan's conception of the Symbolic or paternal Law as constitutively unattainable, arguing against the plausibility of "an account of the Symbolic that requires a conformity to the Law that proves impossible to perform and that makes no room for the flexibility of the Law itself, its cultural reformulation in more plastic forms."⁸ Such a view of the Symbolic leads to "a romanticization or, indeed, a *religious* idealization of 'failure,' humility and limitation before the Law, which makes the Lacanian narrative ideologically suspect."⁹ Butler compares this concept of the law to "the tortured relationship between the God of the Old Testament and those humiliated servants who offer their obedience without reward," a comparison that for Butler is all the more telling in light of her perception that sexuality has taken the place of religion's "demand for love."¹⁰

Thus, the monotheistic element of Lacan's thought consists in the idea of a law that is unilaterally imposed and nonnegotiable, but at the same time impossible to fulfill, leading Butler to wonder if the law aims only at enforcing the subject's feeling of "an enslavement to the God that it claims to be unable to overcome."¹¹ For Butler, therefore, "Lacanian theory must be understood as a kind of 'slave morality'" in the Nietzschean sense.¹² The task of the reader of Lacan is to look "for the theological impulse that motivates" the account of the unchanging paternal Law "as well as for the critique of theology that points beyond

⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁸ Ibid., 71–72.

⁹ Ibid., 72 (emphasis added).

¹⁰ Ibid., 72.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

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it.” Most importantly, one must avoid the key move of “slave morality,” namely, the disavowal of “the very generative powers it uses to construct the ‘Law’ as a permanent impossibility.”¹³

The problem with theology, then, isn’t simply that it’s an illusion—although it is clear that Butler’s materialism commits her to the view that no extratemporal absolute, in the form of either a personal God or an immutable law of all human culture, can actually exist. The problem is rather that the subject, by participating in and thereby maintaining this illusion, fails to recognize its own power. The Lacanian who resigns himself or herself to the inevitability of the Symbolic does not just decide not to waste energy on something impossible—in conceding the immutability of sexual difference, the Lacanian or theological subject lends his or her energy to the ongoing struggle against any reformulation of the Symbolic order. One is reminded of Carl Schmitt’s insight that the attempt to exempt oneself from the political can itself be a profoundly political gesture.¹⁴ Despite this decisive rejection of a theological stance, it is not the case that theology is the sole object of her critique. The third part of *Gender Trouble* is devoted to an analysis of the ways that attempting to ground gender in some kind of prelinguistic realm—including apparently quite “materialist” attempts—are always necessarily self-undermining insofar as they simply end up repeating the patterns of the hegemonic norms of sexual difference. With all this in mind, then, one can tentatively distinguish two types of error with regard to sexual difference in Butler’s theory. On the one hand, there is what one could call the vulgar materialist error, which misrecognizes the appropriate field of battle, obfuscating the stakes of a political-cultural-linguistic struggle by misdirecting it toward a biological or otherwise prelinguistic ground. On the other hand, there is the theological error, which is correct insofar as it locates sexual difference on the level of culture and language but goes astray in reifying a particular cultural construct (e.g., the paternal Law) and thereby attempting to put it above the fray—a move that necessarily generates, and is in turn reinforced by, feelings of failure and guilt.

With this concept of the “theological” in hand, we can now turn to Butler’s theory of performativity as it is developed in *Excitable Speech*. The argument of *Excitable Speech* is closely related to that of *The Psychic*

¹³ Ibid., 73.

¹⁴ Based on his concept of the political as an antagonism between friend and enemy, Schmitt argues that the claim to be waging war on behalf of humanity as such—which “has no enemy, at least not on this planet” and therefore cannot serve as a political concept—does not indicate an escape from politics, but rather “has an especially intensive political meaning.” See Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 54.

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Life of Power, in particular to the reading of Althusser in the latter. In the introduction to *Excitable Speech*, she provides a capsule summary of this reading, arguing that “Althusser inadvertently assimilates social interpellation to the divine performative,” resulting in a figuration of the “‘voice’ of ideology” as “almost impossible to refuse.”¹⁵ The divine performative and related notions, however, are developed in more detail in *Excitable Speech*, resulting in a kind of mutual coimplication—in order to fully understand either, one must start with the other. Given that this analysis is directed toward the reading of Anselm’s *On the Fall of the Devil*, in which the account of the devil’s interpellation presupposes the power of the divine performative to call the devil into being, I have chosen to begin with *Excitable Speech*, a choice that also has the benefit of clarifying the concrete political stakes of Butler’s more abstract philosophical argument in *The Psychic Life of Power*.

As the above quotation illustrates, Butler makes reference to theology in connection with performativity in *Excitable Speech*, but it is not the only or even the primary mode in which she critiques various opposing theories of the performative. First of all, she frequently deals with John Austin’s distinction between illocutionary speech acts, where the effect happens immediately *in* the words, and perlocutionary speech acts, where the effect happens *by means of* the words. Although she does not go so far as to say that they don’t exist, she does find the notion of illocutionary speech acts deeply problematic insofar as it tends toward a “magical view of the performative,” one that is automatically effective in any context whatsoever.¹⁶ For Butler, Catharine MacKinnon’s theory of pornography as hate speech, which has found a certain amount of favor in court cases, amounts to such a “magical view.” By contrast, Butler argues that “not all utterances that have the form of the performative, whether illocutionary or perlocutionary, actually work.”¹⁷ Consequently, Butler is “skeptical about the value of those accounts of hate speech that maintain its illocutionary status and thus conflate speech and conduct completely,” preferring regulations that keep open “the gap between saying and doing” and acknowledge “that there is always a story to tell about how and why speech does the harm that it does.”¹⁸ Thus, to use a religious example that Butler does not, no act of hate speech, even the most unambiguously offensive, should be thought of as doing harm *ex opere operato*, simply by being uttered.¹⁹

¹⁵ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 31.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

¹⁹ This reference to the Roman Catholic doctrine whereby the sacramental ritual, simply

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But the political stakes of Butler's argument in *Excitable Speech* go far beyond a simple policy recommendation. This is visible in her use of another word, in addition to "theological" or "magical," to characterize misleading accounts of the performative: "sovereign." This word is so central to Butler's argument here that she titles the second chapter of the book "Sovereign Performatives." Before turning to that chapter, however, it may be helpful to put my analysis of Butler's idea of theology to work by addressing a passage in which Butler closely relates theology and sovereignty. In the first chapter, Butler critiques notions of hate speech that privilege the prosecution of particular individuals as the best, or perhaps even sole, means of redressing the damage done by such speech. This approach depends on the installation of a monadic, "singular subject and act," which for Butler is a "clearly theological construction."²⁰ The first step in designating this construction theological is to claim that "the postulation of the subject as the causal origin of the performative act is understood to generate that which it names," on the model of God's creative "Let there be light."²¹ As in the case of the Lacanian paternal Law, the stakes of this theological turn move beyond the level of mere delusion to active dissimulation. That is, the installation of the subject covers up the history and citationality that actually render possible the damage of hate speech, and this particular dissimulation is itself a subspecies of the general dissimulation of the subject-effect: "If the function of the subject as fictive origin is to occlude the genealogy by which that subject is formed, the subject is also installed in order to assume the burden of responsibility for the very history that subject dissimulates; the juridicalization of history, then, is achieved precisely through the search for subjects to prosecute who might be held accountable and, hence, temporarily resolve the problem of a fundamentally unprosecutable history."²²

This analysis of the theological operation of the subject comes after a long analysis of the relationship between Austin's theory of performativity and Nietzsche's critique of the tendency to allow grammar to fool us into positing a doer who preexists the deed. Here Butler emphasizes that in Nietzsche's account, the doer is thought of "primarily as a wrongdoer"²³ and relates that insight to the fact that "prosecuting

by virtue of having been performed according to canonical rules, automatically confers God's grace, would be interesting to follow up with reference to Butler's critique of Kripke's theory of primal baptism in Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 212–18.

²⁰ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 50.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 50–51.

²² *Ibid.*, 50.

²³ *Ibid.*, 45.

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hate speech . . . underscores the power of the *judiciary* to enact violence through speech.”²⁴ And indeed, Austin presupposes the “subject as sovereign” in his account and even uses a judge’s sentence as a privileged example of performativity. By treating hate speech as the quasi-divine or magical performative of a sovereign subject, the courts effect a “displacement of [state] power onto the citizen and the citizenry, figured as sovereigns whose speech now carries a power that operates like state power to deprive other ‘sovereigns’ of fundamental rights and liberties.”²⁵ Beyond that, it also opens up the possibility for the state to view the sovereign citizens’ words as a violent threat to itself—a possibility that is realized in the Supreme Court decision that Butler so brilliantly analyzes later in the first chapter.

In the chapter “Sovereign Performatives,” Butler generalizes the consequences of basing a theory of performativity on the presupposition of a sovereign subject. Specifically in the context of hate speech prosecution, Butler worries about “the peculiar *discursive power* given over to the state through the process of legal redress,” namely, the power to “[produce] hate speech”; that is to say, hate speech would not exist without the state’s action of legally defining it in general and in particular cases.²⁶ Paradoxically, when the state produces hate speech through its juridical action, it produces it precisely as the act of a sovereign subject (the individual citizen), showing yet again that the subject-effect serves to occlude the subject’s own historical origins. The idea of the sovereign subject is itself a “trope derived from state discourse,” such that “figuring hate speech as an exercise of sovereign power implicitly performs a catachresis by which the one who is charged with breaking the law (the one who utters hate speech) is nevertheless invested with the sovereign power of law.”²⁷

In yet another turn of the screw, however, Butler follows Foucault in claiming that “power is no longer constrained within the sovereign form of the state,” meaning that the exercise of law itself is no longer properly sovereign.²⁸ Illusions multiply: “This idealization of the speech act as sovereign action (whether positive or negative) appears linked with the idealization of sovereign state power or, rather, with the imagined and forceful voice of that power. It is as if the proper power of the state has been expropriated, delegated to its citizens, and the state

²⁴ Ibid., 47.

²⁵ Ibid., 48.

²⁶ Ibid., 77.

²⁷ Ibid., 81.

²⁸ Ibid., 78. For an account of the further mutations of state power in the afterlife of sovereignty, see the chapter “Indefinite Detention,” in Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006).

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then reemerges as a neutral instrument to which we seek recourse to protect us from other citizens, who have become revived emblems of a (lost) sovereign power.”²⁹ Although Butler does not explicitly state it, this is clearly parallel to the Hobbesian myth of the origin of the state out of the war of all against all. Once again, the principle from Schmitt cited above proves to be apt: by presenting itself as a neutral arbiter of the political struggles represented by hate speech prosecutions, the state gains considerable leeway to intervene in those very struggles, most often in quite reactionary ways: “To give the task of adjudicating hate speech to the state is to give [the] task of misappropriat[ing hate speech] to the state.”³⁰ Those who advocate a model of hate speech based on the performative act of a sovereign subject thereby end up reinforcing state power, a power of which Butler is, with good reason, deeply suspicious. Thus, Butler repeats the basic structure of her critique of a theological view of sexual difference in her critique of sovereignty, adding the further complicating layer of the dialectical relationship between the state and the citizen. Here again, the primary target of her critique of theology is not so much contemporary religion as an ostensibly secular phenomenon—in this case, state authority.

At this point, we are prepared to turn to Butler’s reading of Althusser, who “inadvertently assimilates social interpellation to the divine performative.”³¹ This reading is found in the fourth chapter of *The Psychic Life of Power*, “Subjection Doth Make Subjects of Us All,” which stands at a crucial turning point in the structure of the work as a whole, substantially completing the treatment of subjectification in general and opening the way for the concluding two chapters’ consideration of melancholy and gender. The project of *The Psychic Life of Power* is to bring together psychoanalysis and the Foucauldian theory of power, and she does so by examining a variety of texts that share a common structure. Each one, in its own particular way, locates the intersection of power and the psyche—of the outside and the inside of the individual—at the point of self-reflexivity, which is always figured as a religious or quasi-religious self-beratement. The guiding thread is provided by Nietzsche’s analysis of bad conscience in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, a text that is historically a common ancestor for both psychoanalysis and Foucault; Hegel’s account of the “unhappy consciousness” appears to function primarily as a precursor to Nietzsche.³² Thus, to a certain extent,

²⁹ Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 82.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 31, and *Psychic Life of Power*, 110.

³² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

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the text itself retraces some of the same ground we have already covered. Hegel and Nietzsche correspond to Butler's critique of theology (which is of course explicitly based on Nietzsche in *Gender Trouble*), while Foucault corresponds to the application of that critique in a particular realm of state activity (prisons and hate speech, respectively). The reading of Althusser, then, should serve to complete the circle, presenting a vision of social life as completely saturated with what Butler has critiqued under the name of theology.

Butler herself fiercely resists this vision, which leads to some interesting consequences for her reading of Althusser, of which the chief symptom is the general sense that she has somehow "caught" Althusser in something he did not intend to be doing. Butler proposes to reread Althusser's essay "to understand how interpellation is essentially figured through the religious example," so as to indicate the ways in which Althusser, like Hegel, Nietzsche, and Foucault, makes subject formation dependent on "a passionate pursuit of a recognition which, within the terms of the religious example, is inseparable from condemnation."³³ Here she follows her general principle of refusing to allow an example to be merely an example, and she defends this procedure as allowing "a symptomatic reading [note: this is Althusser's own term] that 'weakens' rigorous argument": "I do not mean to suggest that the 'truth' of Althusser's text can be discovered in how the figural disrupts 'rigorous' conceptualization. . . . The concern here has a more specific textual aim, namely, to show how figures—examples and analogies—inform and extend conceptualizations, implicating the text in an ideological sanctification of religious authority which it can expose only by reenacting that authority."³⁴ The problem here is not that Butler is making too much of the example, however, but rather too little—she is treating it precisely as just an example in the sense of a mere figure, when in actuality Althusser's references to religious ideology are grounded in his analysis of the situation of the Middle Ages, when the Church was "the number-one Ideological State Apparatus."³⁵

Although he proposes the school as the replacement for the church in the modern era, Althusser chooses instead to focus on the Christian ideology (presumably because his readers are more accustomed to thinking of Christianity as a form of ideology than of schools), justifying this choice by his general principle that "the formal structure of all ideology is the same,"³⁶ or, as he often repeats, "ideology has no his-

³³ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 113.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 114.

³⁵ Althusser, "Ideology," 152.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

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tory.”³⁷ Butler never quotes this principle in her reading of Althusser.³⁸ The lack of attention to this unchanging element in Althusser’s theory is surprising given the strident theological critique to which she subjects Lacan in *Gender Trouble* and one of Lacan’s followers, Mladen Dolar, in this very chapter. We have already seen that Lacan’s paternal Law, which is both nonnegotiable and impossible to fulfill, is theological in the Nietzschean sense of the word adopted by Butler. Dolar’s critique of Althusser is characterized as explicitly theological due to its positing of a preexisting subject,³⁹ which again is based on the Nietzschean insight that was shown above to be at work in Butler’s critique of the sovereign subject. Thus, it seems to be out of step with Butler’s general Nietzschean stance on theology—which, up until now, has proven to be remarkably consistent—to argue that Althusser’s theory of interpellation is religious solely because it uses explicitly religious examples.

What is missing here is any sense of the significance of Althusser’s Marxism. For Butler, the use of religious examples serves to sacralize ideology, whereas for a Marxist like Althusser, comparing bourgeois ideology to Christianity indicates that, like Christianity, bourgeois ideology is precisely an illusion. That is to say, Althusser himself is not being theological in his use of religious illustrations, but rather is showing—just as Hegel, Nietzsche, and Foucault do—that bourgeois ideology is theological in the precise sense that Butler uses the term. It may well be the case, however, that it is Althusser’s Marxism—or rather, the unavailability of Althusser’s Marxist stance to Butler—that leads Butler to the kind of reading she performs. Althusser claims that ideology is “endowed with a structure and a functioning such as to make it a non-historical reality, i.e., an *omnihistorical* reality.” He immediately specifies that this holds only under “what we can call history, in the sense in which the *Communist Manifesto* defines history as the history of class struggles, i.e., the history of class societies.”⁴⁰ From the Marxist perspective, there is a classless society on the horizon, but if one cannot regard that as a viable possibility—as Butler presumably cannot—then Althusser is effectively saying that ideology is unchangeable and, more specifically, that ideology, even ostensibly secular bourgeois ideology, always bears features that correspond to what Butler finds undesirable

³⁷ Ibid., 159–160 passim.

³⁸ Butler does refer to “the putative ‘eternity’ of ideology” in *Psychic Life of Power*, 110, as part of a list of examples from Christianity. It is unclear to me whether this should be taken to refer to the principle in question, but in any case, she never directly quotes it.

³⁹ Ibid., 125.

⁴⁰ Althusser, “Ideology,” 161.

about theology. Beyond that, by implicitly positing that change in ideological structures is impossible without a radical and wholesale change in the means of production, Althusser is effectively cutting the ground out from under Butler's more piecemeal and cautious, although no less material, approach to ideological change.

Since my purpose here is to lay out Butler's theory of interpellation rather than to defend Althusser's theory from her critique, I am going to read Butler's critique of Althusser somewhat "against the grain," based on the generally Butlerian principles discovered above. Bracketing for the moment Butler's antagonistic stance toward Althusser's references to religion, one can see that, ironically, it is precisely the Christian references that provide Butler with the means to demonstrate the compatibility of Althusser's theory with her project in *The Psychic Life of Power*. Althusser makes some reference to psychoanalysis, but in general, he does not demonstrate a lively awareness of the inner life of the subject. This coheres with his project in the essay. All along, people had been accustomed to think of ideology as being primarily a matter of the inner life (opinions held, etc.). Althusser's innovation is to emphasize the "material existence" of ideology, and so he consistently sidesteps questions of the subject's attitudes or inner convictions—even and especially in his analysis of Christianity—reducing the inner life to a secondary epiphenomenon.⁴¹

Arguably, then, Althusser formally recapitulates on the level of ideology the tendency he critiques in the Marxist tradition. For Althusser, there has been a tendency to exaggerate the importance of the fact that the relations of production determine ideology "in the last instance" and to downplay the ways in which ideology functions precisely to keep those modes of production in place, that is, to downplay the "relative autonomy of the superstructure with respect to the base" and the "reciprocal action of the superstructure on the base."⁴² What Butler's reading effectively achieves—although Butler herself does not thematize this achievement—is to correct this tendency in Althusser by demonstrating the ways in which the secondary phenomena of the inner life of the subject serve to maintain the material institutions of ideology or, in other words, demonstrating the "relative autonomy of the subject with respect to ideology" and the "reciprocal action of the subject on ideology." Through setting aside Althusser's "deflationary" reading of Christianity and taking his examples literally, she is able to show how this correction is already implicitly at work in Althusser's text,

⁴¹ Ibid., 165.

⁴² Ibid., 135.

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even at the level of vocabulary, as in her analysis of Althusser's use of the verb *s'acquitter*.⁴³ The subject really is produced through a process of obfuscation relying on a paradoxical guilt that precedes but also presupposes knowledge of the law (as in Althusser's famous example of the "hailing" by the police officer) and is exposed to the perpetual blackmail of choosing either obedience or nonbeing. Once the subject is established, however, it is not totally constrained to exercise its agency in the maintenance of the dominant ideology. By emphasizing—and arguably overemphasizing—the effectiveness of ideological interpellation in Althusser's theory, Butler sets in relief her own conviction of the ever-present possibility for subjects to overcome the blackmail of ideology by becoming "bad subjects" who demonstrate "a willingness *not to be*—a critical desubjectivation—in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems."⁴⁴

Thus, for Butler, the "bad subject" does not simply dissolve into nothingness, but rather has the potential to affect the law in a way that upsets Althusser's Marxist scheme. Ideological change need not come about solely through a change in the base, the mode of production. Rather, the very "secondary" epiphenomena that ideology generates in order to maintain itself contain the seeds, if not of ideology's thoroughgoing destruction, at least of genuine change. In the remaining chapters of *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler looks at the specific resources for change that the dominant mode of ideological interpellation generates as necessary side effects (specifically, mourning and rage), so as to open up the prospect for future forms of interpellation that would not be based on obfuscatory guilt. These hopes find more concrete development in her later works, where she tries to conceive a sociality that would be based on respect for vulnerability (in all its forms), rather than exploiting vulnerability in order to exact obedience.⁴⁵

The ground is now prepared for a Butlerian reading of Anselm's *On the Fall of the Devil*,⁴⁶ which is intended to serve as a test case for Butler's notion of theology. Anselm's text is set up as a dialogue between a student and teacher, beginning with the student asking whether 1 Cor. 4:7 ("What do you have that you have not received?") applies to angels as well as human beings (§1). The student does sometimes propose initial theories that the teacher ends up rejecting, but for the most part,

⁴³ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 118.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁴⁵ See, in particular, Butler, *Precarious Life*, and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

⁴⁶ All references to *On the Fall of the Devil* will be given in the text and will refer to section numbers, which are consistent across all editions.

he is fairly docile and eager to praise his teacher's brilliant solutions to very difficult questions, a kind of "good subject" to stand in contrast to the extremely "bad subject" (i.e., the devil) whom they are discussing. I will not be foregrounding the student's role in the reading that follows, but one of the student's responses in particular seems to exemplify the stance of the good subject: "Your argument neither accuses God nor excuses the devil [*accusat deum aut excusat diabolum*], but rather excuses God and accuses the devil [*sed omnino deum excusat et diabolum accusat*]" (§20; trans. altered).⁴⁷

In order to avoid accusing God, the teacher lays out the principle that everything that exists comes from God, and everything that exists is good (§1). Based on this, the student points out that the gift of perseverance is a good and therefore must proceed from God. Therefore, the devil, who lacked such perseverance, must not have received it from God. This creates a conundrum based on a principle that Anselm shares with nearly every Christian theologian—namely, that merit or sin exist only where the will is involved. If the devil never received this perseverance and could not have attained it on his own, then "he could not be justly damned if the fault was not his" (§2). Already, then, it is a matter of being able to attribute guilt, and the teacher's initial answer to this problem displays the same kind of "time warp" character as the a priori guilt that plays such a central role in Butler's theory of interpellation. It is true, the teacher argues, that God did not give the devil perseverance, but only because the devil refused it, rendering ineffective the attempt to give: The devil's "not accepting to hang on to what he abandoned is not because God did not give it, but God did not give it because he did not accept it. . . . The will to retain is not always prior to the will to abandon" (§3). In other words, the devil preemptively rejects God's gift, apparently without receiving it even to the minimal degree required to know what he is rejecting.

The use of the concept of perseverance might initially lead one to assume that Anselm is positing a relatively simple narrative parallel to the traditional image of the fall of humanity: Adam and Eve lived for a period in the Garden of Eden, and at some particular point they

⁴⁷ The verb *excuso* has connotations of both "exempting from blame" and the more obvious "excusing." The former connotation, with its preemptive quality (for instance, someone could be excused from a meeting that has not yet occurred and then be blameless for missing it), is obviously what is desired when the student applies it to God, but the verb is used first with the devil, in which case it would seem to carry connotations of considering mitigating circumstances when assessing a wrong done. The parallelism creates a certain degree of instability: Is the teacher asserting that God had no responsibility to prevent the devil's fall, or is he making excuses for an event God is responsible for? (The translation quoted and altered has "absolves God" for *deum excusat*; I simply restored the parallelism.)

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sinned, that is, rejected God's continued gift of perseverance. Yet this cannot be the case if the devil preemptively rejects it without first receiving it, nor does it make sense to claim that the devil somehow endured in a state of "original justice" without receiving the gift of perseverance. The stakes quickly shift, then, to the more general question of justice, which Anselm uses to mean essentially "right relationship to God." That is to say, the devil does not simply interrupt an existent state of justice, but refuses God's gift of justice entirely, as it were from the first moment he is created (cf. §16). This creates a further problem: It is axiomatic that no action can be judged that doesn't involve will. But how could the devil will injustice in the very first moment of his existence, since he must necessarily receive his initial willing from God? In light of this problem, Anselm posits a prerational will, which simply wills happiness and is logically, if not temporally, prior to the will toward justice or rectitude (§12).

With a will in place to receive moral blame, Anselm proceeds to detail the devil's sin. By willing "to be happy to the degree that he knows it," he naturally "wills to be like God," who enjoys the height of happiness (§13). Indeed, Anselm says elsewhere that even if he did not explicitly will to be like God, he can formally be considered to have done so because "he willed something by his own will, as subject to no one. It is for God alone thus to will something by his own will such that he follows no higher will" (§4). But it is the very definition of will to have "no other cause by which it is forced or attracted, but [to be] its own efficient cause, so to speak, as well as its own effect [*sed ipsa sibi efficiens causa fuit, si dici potest, et effectum*]" (§27). So it is by following the dictates of the prerational will that God gave him—and whose "direction," as it were, God set—that the devil runs afoul of God. However, this prerational will to happiness is shared with the irrational animals and is in itself always formally blameless. It is a necessary precursor to receiving the will to justice but is itself neither just nor unjust. Only by receiving both can a rational being become morally accountable (§14). The devil, however, has not received this will and so would seem to be formally blameless, just as an animal is not held morally accountable for its acts: "Before receiving justice, in fact, no one is just or unjust and, after having received it, no one becomes unjust unless he willingly abandons justice" (§18).

It is here that Anselm's argument takes a deeply Butlerian—or Althusserian—turn. As in the example of the "hailing" of the police officer, the devil is a priori unjust, parallel to Butler's account, where "to become a 'subject' is thus to have been presumed guilty, then tried and

declared innocent.”⁴⁸ Although Anselm all but admits that the devil should be regarded as formally innocent since he has not received the gifts that make a proper moral judgment possible, the devil is treated as guilty simply because God regards him as such, that is, as lacking justice that the devil ought to have (§19). For Althusser, the voice of Christian religious ideology works “by interpellating the individual, Peter, in order to make him a subject, free to obey or disobey the appeal, i.e., God’s commandments”—but, as Butler points out, this is not a truly free choice, since choosing to be a bad subject is in a certain sense choosing not to be a subject at all.⁴⁹ Further strengthening the parallel with the scene of interpellation, Anselm depicts the devil as being in a state of radical ignorance of the consequences of his action (§21), but still responsible (§22), just as the modern subject of law is normally factually ignorant of most laws but still fully accountable to all of them. In fact, knowledge of the possibility of punishment would only have increased his guilt if he had nonetheless sinned and tarnished his goodness if he hadn’t, since justice should be desired only out of love of justice, not out of fear (§23).

The good angels—like Althusser’s “nine out of ten” subjects who respond appropriately to interpellation—were also in this state of ignorance about punishment but obeyed nonetheless (§24). Therefore, God confirms them in perseverance so that they can never fall, just as he closes off all possibility of the devil ever achieving the status he refused. Yet it appears that it is not simply by God’s arbitrary decision to grant the good angels perpetual rectitude that they remain good ever after: “The good angel cannot now sin for this reason alone: that he knows the sin of the bad angel to have been followed by punishment, which inability does not deprive him of praise, but is the reward for having served justice” (§25). In terms of Butler’s account of interpellation, then, it appears that the fate of Satan becomes a kind of warning that reinforces the blackmail of power, the choice between obedience and nonbeing. The parallel here is almost exact even on the verbal level, since for Anselm evil and injustice are, strictly speaking, nothing—so that, for instance, the devil’s so-called will to injustice was actually a failure to will the justice that he should have willed (even before receiving the formal conditions of willing justice). A large part of the argument of this treatise is taken up with establishing the precise status of evil as privation and the ways that it can nonetheless have real effects. Following on the principle that everything that ex-

⁴⁸ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 118.

⁴⁹ Althusser, “Ideology,” 178, and Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 119.

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ists is from God and all that is from God is good, Anselm maintains that a bad will is not inherently evil but remains good insofar as it exists (§8). Thus, if one understands the devil to be the one out of ten who runs away from the police officer instead of turning when hailed, it becomes clear that bad subjects are still interpellated, but they use the agency that interpellation grants them to turn against the voice of law. By the same token, the nine out of ten who do turn toward the police officer are still presumed guilty—a test precedes their confirmation as good subjects.

To put this Butlerian reading of Anselm into schematic terms, then, one can say that in *On the Fall of the Devil*, we are dealing with a situation in which the rational being can only receive justice from God, but the very process of bringing about this justice necessarily presupposes the preexistence of a guilty moral agent, just as happens with the ideological interpellation of a moral subject. The situation is thus presented as one of free choice, but those who choose wrongly enter into a kind of limbo where they cannot properly be designated as moral agents at all. Thus, it does appear that this theological text recapitulates the basic structure of Butler's concept of theology. The subject is born out of guilt, and its installation creates a fictive structure that covers over its own origin. Even in this most extreme and formalized scene of interpellation, however, where the voice of ideology is quite literally God, the ones who insist on willing outside the parameters of the given order (i.e., "justice," or right relationship to God) do not face sheer annihilation, which confirms Butler's conviction that one must not take the blackmail of power too literally.

In a sense, then, Anselm's text confirms Butler's refusal of the idea of a magical "divine performative": the divine performative that calls the devil into being has a concrete effect, but apparently not even God is in full control of the consequences of his performative acts. In fact, the bad subjects here have the opportunity to act in ways that influence the shape of the given order: in this case, causing the fall of humanity and triggering the Incarnation. In Nietzschean terms, the Incarnation is a highly problematic event that exponentially compounds the stranglehold of guilt or debt (*Schuld*) on the subject, and it is not my intent here to argue or imply that Butler should somehow embrace the idea of Christ's Incarnation as a positive thing.⁵⁰ There is one aspect of Anselm's text, however—and here Anselm is no longer a representative of the mainstream of Western Christian theology—that may resonate

⁵⁰ For a more detailed analysis of Nietzsche's account of the Incarnation, see Adam Kotsko, "The Sermon on Mount Moriah: Faith and the Secret in *The Gift of Death*," *Heythrop Journal* 49 (2008): 44–61.

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somewhat with Butler's hopes. In discussing the punishment of which the devil was and should have been ignorant before his fall, Anselm refers to the characteristically medieval idea that in the kingdom of God, human beings would replace the fallen angels. Thus, because of the actions of this bad subject who demonstrated "a willingness *not* to be,"⁵¹ a realm that was formerly populated only with abstract minds will now be filled with bodies—a notion that perhaps echoes Butler's call for a social order that would recognize our constitutive vulnerability rather than repressing and exploiting it. Even in this quite "theological" theological text, then, we find an implicit critique of theology: both the formal conditions for agency and a small—but real—example of that agency's effects.

⁵¹ Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 144.