

Dissertation Abstract

“The Drama of Sexual Difference:

A Catholic Critique of Judith Butler’s Theory of Gender as ‘Performativity’”

Candidate: Daniel Meola

Director: Dr. David S. Crawford

Judith Butler’s influential theory of gender as “performativity” is the result of a dramatic shift in the understanding of sexual difference. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the concept of sexual difference went from being laden with universal moral and metaphysical meaning, to being instead mechanistic, biological data separated from all personal and cultural meaning, to then being a disposable, constructed element of the project of *gender*, as with Butler. For Butler, gender is anti-essentialist. It is neither something one “is” nor is it rooted in any enduring, essence or meaning of sexual difference. It is something one “does” with one’s bodily matter in opposition or subordination to the arbitrary previous “doings” of gendered society and power represented in the cultural norms of sex and sexuality. Despite the widespread influence and acceptance of Butler’s theory of gender, there has been no study of it from a Catholic anthropological perspective. This dissertation attempts to accomplish that objective. Specifically, it will examine what metaphysical, anthropological, and theological premises undergird Butler’s theory of gender and critique those positions.

At the heart of the historical shift that led to Judith Butler’s theory of gender was the rise of the modern sex/gender distinction. **Chapter One** and **Chapter Two** therefore traces how the modern sex/gender distinction arose through such diverse thinkers as Aristotle, J.S. Mill, Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Sigmund Freud, Simone de Beauvoir, John Money, and Gayle Rubin. These chapters also demonstrate how these thinkers helped create the conditions

for Butler's gender theory. **Chapter Three** examines Butler's theory of gender, its foundation in the thought of Michel Foucault, and how it embodies the same problematic modern sex/gender distinction Butler wishes to go beyond. **Chapter Four** critiques Butler's metaphysical, anthropological, and theological post-structuralist essentialism—despite her anti-essentialist position—and shows how her theory represents the logical outworking of the anthropological assumptions of the modern sex/gender tradition. Chapter four also briefly considers what an alternative understanding of sex and gender, built upon Catholic anthropological and metaphysical ground, might be and how it may achieve the legitimate aspirations of Judith Butler's theory of gender as performativity.