

Critique of Critique: On Suspending Judgment and Making Judgment

Barbara Applebaum
Syracuse University

That there are various meanings of “critique” employed in educational research has been an important insight. The terms “critical” and “critique” commonly appear in educational discourse as if their meanings were monolithic and transparent. Attempts to categorize these meanings have led to valuable analyses of their convergence and divergence. This essay begins by noting two attempts to group different meanings of critique in order to more explicitly draw out and address a type of critique that is often characterized as “postmodern” or “poststructural.” This type of critique is frequently accused of being pessimistic, relativistic, and destructive because it encourages an incredulity toward metanarratives and throws into radical doubt Enlightenment beliefs such as the belief that language is transparent and that reason can provide an objective foundation for knowledge. Moreover, because such criticality invites us to deconstruct the self as stable and coherent, it is often charged with jeopardizing the possibility of responsibility and politics.

With the help of Judith Butler’s recent work on critique, I want to defend this type of criticality as productive rather than destructive by emphasizing how such critique encourages an interrogation of foundational concepts through examining how they work, what they foreclose, and what new possibilities such critique can open up. Engagement with Butler’s scholarship around critique serves to point in the direction of fruitful clarifications, but also leaves some questions largely unaddressed, questions that must not be ignored if the educational significance of this type of criticality is to be fully appreciated. My overall purpose is not to dismiss Butler’s account, but rather to point to areas in her account that require elaboration.

CATEGORIZING CRITICALITY AND CRITIQUE OF CRITIQUE

Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk distinguish between the criticality presumed by advocates of Critical Thinking and that supported by proponents of Critical Pedagogy.¹ While Critical Thinking is primarily concerned with epistemic adequacy, Critical Pedagogy regards belief claims “not primarily as propositions to be assessed for their truth content, but as parts of systems of belief and action that have aggregate effects within the power structures of society.”² Towards the end of their essay, Burbules and Berk point to a third mode of criticality derived from the work of such theorists as Jacques Derrida and Judith Butler, which is critical of both Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy. They characterize this approach as guided by the deconstruction of metanarratives. Although they do not elaborate, Burbules and Berk insist that this approach does not involve a total rejection of foundational concepts, but rather is characterized by “the ability to question and doubt even our own presuppositions — the ones without which we literally do not know how to think and act.”³ Most significantly, such an approach to criticality has the potential to foster thinking in new ways, to think otherwise.

Influenced by Derrida's argument that the history of Western philosophy represents a continuous attempt to locate the fundamental grounds on which certain knowledge can be established, Gert Biesta offers a different catalogue of criticality — critical dogmatism, transcendental critique, and deconstruction — based on the justification of criticality or what gives each approach the “right to be critical.”⁴ Whereas for critical dogmatism it is the truth of criteria of evaluation that supports the right to be critical, for transcendental critique it is its emphasis on rationality without which all dialogue and debate is impossible that justifies it as critical. Justice, however, undergirds the criticality of deconstruction that is “special in that its critical work is aimed at the very possibility of critique itself.”⁵

While Derrida challenged the metaphysics of presence, or the assumption that we can have immediate access to meaning and the privileging of presence over absence that frames inquiry, he also insisted that a total break from metaphysics is unfeasible. Although we cannot but rely on foundational concepts, Derrida's deconstruction reveals that all foundational concepts are dependent on that which they exclude. The possibility of presence cannot be detached from absence. Central to Derrida's understanding of deconstruction is the notion of *différance*. Building on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure that conceives of language not as a passive mirror of things or ideas that exist outside of language, but rather as part of a system of meanings in which any individual element within the system is meaningless outside its confines, Derrida contended that all foundational concepts rely on this “play of difference” or *différance*. Biesta emphasizes that the point of deconstruction is not to reject the metaphysics of presence “because that is how we talk and how we live our lives,” but rather to critically expose the “‘constitutive outside’ of what presents itself as self-sufficient.”⁶

Deconstruction exhibits criticality in its most radical form because it can *open up* discursive systems in the name of that which cannot be thought of in terms of that system (and yet what makes the system possible).⁷ Such criticality, as Biesta emphasizes, involves questioning what is “impossible” by which he does not mean what is *not* possible but rather “what cannot be foreseen, predicted and calculated as a possibility.”⁸

Derrida connects deconstruction with “justice,” understood as *a relation* to the other's otherness that is “an experience of the impossible.” The impossibility of knowing the other implies that we must always be open to the surprise of the invention of the other. Ethics begins when this radical undecidability is embraced as something that continues to inhabit our decisions. As Biesta puts it, “To acknowledge that there is no safe place to stand on, that there is no absolute beginning, no simple point of departure, is not a weakness of deconstruction but rather its strength.”⁹ I turn to Judith Butler's work on critique to help flesh what this “radical undecidability” can mean.

However, before I do, deconstruction must be distinguished from other approaches to criticality that advocate continually asking questions but that do so on the basis of human fallibility. While the appeal to fallibility assumes truth that is attainable, focuses on error, and is considered a shortcoming, deconstruction is not

primarily concerned with the truth of positions but how positions that assume truth can hide the conditions of its possibility. The impossibility it refers to is different, as Biesta emphasizes, and constructive.¹⁰

If ethics depends on recognizing the limits of our intelligibility, deconstruction is critique that exposes such limits and interrogates them for their exclusions. Vigilance, the lesson that deconstruction offers, is described as always being on the lookout for traces of the metaphysics of presence, for attempts to close off instead of to open up what can be thought.

This aspect of deconstruction has important educational implications for social justice educators. Deconstruction encourages us to always keep asking “whether it might be the case that in the very name of justice we are doing injustice.”¹¹

How does one go about developing this type of criticality that emphasizes vigilance and suspending judgement in order to expose what is hidden by the discourse of truth, yet not disavow making judgments? Judith Butler’s recent work on critique may help address this question.

CRITIQUE, SUSPENDING JUDGMENT, RESPONSIBILITY

Judith Butler launches her essay, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” by setting up a distinction between criticism and critique.¹² While the former is primarily concerned with fault-finding, the latter refers to “a practice that not only *suspends judgment* ... but offers *a new practice of values based on that suspension*.”¹³ Criticism, Butler argues, presumes that “a move beyond critical theory [is] required if we are to seek recourse to norms in making evaluative judgments about social conditions and social goals,” but remains uncritical about the very norms that it presumes.¹⁴ Butler contends that the point of critique, as opposed to criticism, is *not* to evaluate whether its object is good or bad but rather to interrogate how the relation of knowledge and power functions to support norms that preclude the asking of certain questions and that foreclose possibilities of thinking otherwise. In the rush to judgment, Butler explains, the opportunity to expose power and interrogate our investments or complicity in power is lost. Critique, therefore, is “a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing”¹⁵ and involves living “in the anxiety of that questioning without closing it down too quickly.”¹⁶

The work of critique, therefore, involves a double move. First, there is the genealogical practice of developing an historical understanding of how particular social formations, institutions, and practices originate. Second, critique aims to expose what is suppressed by what exists (the absent) so that change becomes possible. According to Butler, “to question a form of a conceptual terrain ... it is, for the duration, to suspend, its ordinary play in order to ask after its constitution.”¹⁷

Suspension of judgment as a process of deferral is essential to circumventing the risk that critical examination of norms will be foreclosed. Such deferral is crucial for exposing how positions that assume truth can hide the conditions of its possibility. Butler argues, “For the question of whether or not a position is right, coherent, or interesting is, in this case, *less informative* than why it is we come to occupy and

defend the territory that we do, what it promises us, from what it promises to protect us.”¹⁸ Unlike traditional calls for suspending judgment that focus on lack of knowledge or not having sufficient evidence, Butler advocates that judgment be suspended because it risks closure. As Butler puts it, “judgments operate ... as ways to subsume a particular under an already constituted category, whereas critique asks after the occlusive constitution of the field of categories themselves.”¹⁹

Moreover, Butler insists that suspending judgment does not entail relativism nor does it imply that one stands *outside* of normative frames or moves beyond critical theory. Critique which demands suspending judgment, according to Butler, *has* strong normative commitments but ones in which it would be “difficult, if not impossible, to read within the current grammars of normativity.”²⁰ The point of suspending judgment is distinctively to open up new ways of thinking by making possible unthinkable questions about who benefits from the systems of knowledge that constitute us and what such systems promise and protect.

A concrete illustration of suspending judgment and making judgment is manifested in Butler’s analysis of the reaction in the United States to the attacks that occurred on September 11, 2001 (9/11).²¹ The binary that President George W. Bush set out in which “either you are for us or you’re with the terrorists” functioned, according to Butler, as a discursive force that constrained public debate and made it impossible to both ask about the United States’ complicity in the conditions that led to those attacks and also to refuse to exonerate those who perpetrated those attacks. In the media, for instance, those who sought an answer to the question “Why do they hate us so much?” were often accused of legitimizing the horrific acts and those who committed them. This discursive tactic safeguarded the belief that the United States is innocent and also justified retaliation.

By differentiating between causes and conditions of events Butler elucidates how inquiring into explanations does not necessarily involve exoneration. Instead, suspending judgment (condemnation or exoneration) is required in order to inquire into the conditions that led to these events. A rush to judgment risks not asking “what can we hear?” but also “what are we responsible for?” When our notion of responsibility is exclusively focused on the *causes* of events, when our concern is exclusively on blame and fault finding, then once perpetrators are located, questions about the *conditions* of events and our complicity in the possibility of those conditions disappear. Our innocence is preserved. Butler advocates that we do not let a concern for causes obscure the need to make inquiries into conditions. We need to interrogate *both* causes and conditions. As Butler puts it, “conditions do not act, agents do. But no agent acts without conditions.”²²

Acknowledging background conditions is crucial, as Clive Barnett explains, not in order to hold actors responsible but rather for “helping to justify the possibility that actors can *take* responsibility for events that do not derive from the range of their effective, intended or unintended causal action at all.”²³ Barnett points out that Butler’s distinction between causes and conditions is in line with the more “forward-looking” sense of responsibility advocated by such feminist moral and political

philosophers as Iris Marion Young and Claudia Card. This conceptualization of responsibility does not start and end with the self-caused actions of which individuals are the authors. As Butler explains, “Our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned. But we are acted on and acting and our “responsibility” lies in the juncture between the two. What can I do with the conditions that form me? What do they constrain me to do? What can I do to transform them?”²⁴ Notable about Butler’s position is her contention that acknowledging responsibility for conditions does not involve rejecting causal responsibility — both models of responsibility have significance.

Butler accentuates a number of points about suspending judgment and its role in critique. First of all, suspending judgment does not involve escape to some judgment-free zone. Explanation does not entail a normatively neutral position. Description is always dependent on normative frameworks. As Butler writes, “We may think that we first describe a phenomenon and then later subject it to judgment, but if the very phenomenon at issue only “exists” within certain evaluative frameworks, then norms precede description.”²⁵

Second, suspending judgment does not lead to a relativist abyss. Butler insists that suspending judgment does not result in “paralyzing our capacity to make ethical judgments on what is right or wrong.”²⁶ Instead, suspending judgment opens a space where those who *wilfully refuse to understand terrorism* are not exonerated and it provides an opportunity for “reconsideration of United States hubris and the importance of establishing more radically egalitarian international ties.”²⁷ Third, suspending judgment facilitates interrogation of some of our most basic assumptions, values, and affects, encouraging us to question the unthinkable.

Butler’s focus on conditions and not just causes reveals that suspending judgment in critique is less about deferring judgment and more about *shifting* the focus of analysis. For example, in the case of 9/11 Butler urges us to shift from an exclusive concentration on causal responsibility (or who is right or wrong, good or bad) and toward questions that inquire into the broader conditions that contributed to the event. The purpose of the shift is to expose what is unthinkable so that new possibilities become available to consider.

Butler offers a clue but does not elaborate about how to shift between different foci when she writes that,

To condemn the violence and to ask how it came about are surely two separate questions, but they *need to be posed in tandem, held in juxtaposition, reconciled within a broader analysis*. Under contemporary strictures on public discourse, however, *this kind of dual thinking cannot be heard*.²⁸

Thus, suspending judgment, for Butler, does not involve exonerating terrorism. Butler explicitly maintains, “*I condemn* on several ethical bases the violence done against the United States and do not see it as ‘just punishment’ for prior sins.”²⁹

SOME LINGERING QUESTIONS

Butler has been extremely helpful in clarifying the relationship between suspending judgment and critique. She insists that suspending judgment does not

preclude making judgments. Although I am extremely sympathetic to the type of critique Butler advocates and personally have found her arguments insightful, I want to raise some questions that have relevance for the educational significance of this type of critique.

First, by calling for a shift in the focus of analysis, Butler draws attention to discourse and the need to interrogate the limits of intelligibility. Yet, can a strong focus on discourse inhibit judgment at moments when avoiding judgment is politically problematic? A cover of *Time* magazine became the center of controversy this past summer.³⁰ The cover featured a photograph of an eighteen year-old Afghan woman, Aisha, beautiful in spite of having her nose and ears cut off on the orders of a Taliban commander as punishment for running away from an abusive in-law. Most of the controversy focused on the caption that framed the image: "What Happens if We Leave Afghanistan." A *Time* reporter writes that Aisha is opposed to any kind of political accommodation with the Taliban and Manizha Nedari, an Afghan-American woman who works at the shelter where Aisha found refuge, is quoted as believing, "That is exactly what will happen. People need to see this and know what the cost will be of abandoning this country."³¹

Critics who opposed the publication of the photograph, correctly I believe, point out that the discursive effect of the *Time* cover is to constitute the American presence in Afghanistan as *civilized* and required to "save" women from the authoritarian and misogynistic, *backward* control of the religious Taliban. Indeed, the image functions to evoke shock at the abuse of women's rights and works to solidify support for the war in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, can the photograph *also* offer a glimpse into this woman's experience that should not inhibit our judgment? The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), for example, has been vocally against both U.S. presence in Afghanistan and the Taliban, whom they describe as "criminal ... fundamentalists and ultra-fundamentalist" on their website. They point to the Taliban's "incredibly ultra-male-chauvinistic and anti-woman orientation" and maintain that "religious fundamentalism (of the warlords in power in Afghanistan) is the main cause of all our miseries."³²

How can one acknowledge the discursive moves that the publishers of this image make without implying that the people who did this to Aisha are to be absolved in any way? *How* can one inquire into the conditions that frame some women's lives in Afghanistan without exonerating those who use their lives to advance conservative politics?

Jodi Dean charges Butler with weak politics. She reminds us that while Butler offers an alternative response to ethics, she says nothing about a political response to those who reject this ethics. As Dean puts it, "It's almost as if Butler's account of the context of address presumes an other who shares this context or who can and will accept her account of it, as if the other answers the call to give an account in necessarily the same way, without a fundamentally different ethics of his own."³³ Although Dean's charge that Butler falls prey to weak politics is debatable, Dean raises an important question about how Butler returns to judgment in situations

of radical conflict and whether she considers cases in which her ethics, her understanding of critique, might be rejected.

A second (and related) lingering question revolves around the ways in which definitions of critique have historically functioned to constitute a secular–religious binary that operates to make religious practice unintelligible. Is Butler’s understanding of critique immune from this charge? According to Saba Mahmood, discourse around critique is often embedded within an alleged conflict “between secular necessity and religious threat” in which “religious extremism” is perceived as unreflexive and politically dangerous. Mahmood objects to the discursive association of “religious extremism” with a series of practices and images that are deemed irrational — “from suicide bombers, to veiled women, to angry mobs burning books, to preachers pushing ‘intellectual design’ in schools” — which are then constituted in opposition to secularist critique that is deemed rational.³⁴ Like Butler, Mahmood stresses that description must be “cleaved apart” from judgment and that this task has “bearing upon how one thinks about the project of critique and its various forms of practice.”³⁵

Mahmood refers to the 2005 controversy around some Muslims’ angry responses to the publication of the satirical cartoons of Mohammed in a Danish newspaper to illustrate her point. Dominant western narratives explaining those responses were that Islamic law prohibits the production of the image of Mohammed and that Muslim immigrants do not appreciate the value of free speech (that is, they are antimodern). Yet, these narratives misconstrue the response and prevent an understanding of religious affect and conviction. According to Mahmood, such narratives obscure the intelligibility of the largely silent but peaceful rejection of these images by millions of Muslims around the world that was a result *not* of violating a law against representations of the Prophet but rather the result of the moral injury, unintelligible in dominant discourse, that is a consequence of someone who was loved, revered, and emulated being insulted.

In her response to Mahmood’s essay, Butler acknowledges the existence of divergent frames of evaluation and that translation must precede judgment. She emphasizes that the point of such translation is

Not simply to expand our capacities for description or to assert the plurality of frameworks.... Nor is the point to embrace a cultural relativism that would attribute equivalences to all moral claims and position oneself as an outsider to the normative issue at hand.... In my view, the point is ... not only to see why we evaluate (and value) certain norms as we do, but also to evaluate those very modes of evaluation.³⁶

Butler insists that her notion of critique is consonant with interrogating the conditions that make religion unintelligible. Yet, what remains unaddressed in Butler’s work is how to return from translation back to judgment, especially since Butler insists that translation does not entail relativism nor does it mean taking on other frameworks as one’s own. As she notes,

Of course, to suggest that there may be other normative frameworks for understanding the problem of blasphemy or offense *is not the same as saying that one ought to adopt those other frameworks or that those frameworks ought now to become the ones within which normative judgments are made.*³⁷

Moreover, it is clear that Butler does not support “culturalist” translations of practice. Rachel Aldred reports that Butler pressed Amnesty International to condemn how gays and lesbians are treated in Jamaica, *in opposition* to organizations that insisted homophobia is part of Jamaican culture and thus is outside Amnesty’s jurisdiction.³⁸ The question remains: how does one return to judgment after suspension and translation?

I raise these questions not in any effort to minimize the importance of Butler’s work but on the contrary, because her work is so valuable. The point is not to provide a formula as to how to return to judgment after suspending judgment, but rather to address the complexities such a return can entail even when translation and dialogue precede it. I also acknowledge that it is important to interrogate why these questions are important to me — what are my investments in such questions?

Poststructuralist conceptions of critique are especially useful for the task of exposing systemically privileged students to the ways in which they are implicated in the discursive effects of their everyday beliefs and practices. Such students often not only have beliefs about race, gender, and sexuality that they believe are foundationally true, but they also take for granted the conditions that make these beliefs seem necessary. Moreover, systemically privileged students’ seemingly progressive practices are regularly protected from critical analysis by invoking good intentions. By encouraging students to critically inquire as to who benefits from such beliefs and practices, often unthinkable questions for them, they can examine this type of foreclosure and what it prevents them from hearing. Focusing on *both* causes and conditions may encourage new forms of responsibility. Not only must educators *exclusively* focus on developing students’ rationality, but they must also encourage questioning how we came to understand what is logical, what is true, what is good.

Butler’s notion of critique can inspire classroom practice by encouraging students to pose the questions needed to expose the limits of their most certain ways of knowing. Yet, some lingering questions remain. These questions must be explicitly addressed if educators are to be well prepared to promote this type of criticality in their classrooms. My hope is that this essay will provoke discussion that strengthens what Butler can offer educational practitioners and researchers.

1. Nicholas Burbules and Rupert Berk, “Critical Thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, Differences, and Limits,” in *Critical Theories in Education*, eds. Thomas S. Popkewitz and Lynn Fendler (New York: Routledge, 1999), 45–65.

2. *Ibid.*, 47.

3. *Ibid.*, 61.

4. Gert Biesta, “The Right to Philosophy of Education: From Critique to Deconstruction,” in *Philosophy of Education 1998*, ed. Steven Tozer (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), 476–84.

5. Gert Biesta, “Jacques Derrida: Deconstruction = Justice,” in *Futures of Critical Theory: Dreams of Difference*, eds. Michael A. Peters, Mark Olssen, and Colin Lankshear (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003), 143.

6. Biesta, “The Right to Philosophy of Education,” 481.

7. Gert J.J. Biesta and Geert Jan J.M. Stams, "Critical Thinking and the Question of Critique: Some Lessons from Deconstruction," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 20, no.1 (2001): 68.
8. Gert Biesta, "What Can Critical Pedagogy Learn from Postmodernism? Further Reflections on the Impossible Future of Critical Pedagogy," in *Critical Theory and Critical Pedagogy Today: Toward a New Critical Language in Education*, ed. Ilan Gur-Ze'ev (Haifa, Israel: Haifa University Press, 2005), 147.
9. Biesta, "Jacques Derrida," 143.
10. *Ibid.*, 144.
11. *Ibid.*, 152.
12. Judith Butler, "What Is Critique? An Essay on Foucault's Virtue," in *The Political*, ed. David Ingram (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 212–26.
13. *Ibid.*, 212. Butler is referring to Michel Foucault when she writes this but it is clear that this is consonant with her own thinking.
14. *Ibid.*, 213.
15. *Ibid.*, 215.
16. Gary Olson and Lynn Worsham, "Changing the Subject: Judith Butler's Politics of Radical Resignification," *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory* 20, no. 4 (2000): 728.
17. Judith Butler, "Dynamic Conclusions," in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*, Judith Butler, Ernest Laclau, and Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2000), 264.
18. Judith Butler, "For a Careful Reading," in *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*, Seyla Benhabib, Judith Butler, Drucilla Cornell, and Nancy Fraser (New York: Routledge, 1995), 127–28 (emphasis added).
19. Butler, "What is Critique?" 213.
20. *Ibid.*, 214.
21. Judith Butler, "Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 1–18.
22. *Ibid.*, 11.
23. Clive Barnett, "Violence and Publicity: Constructions of Political Responsibility after 9/11," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 12, no.3 (2009): 369.
24. Butler, "Explanation and Exoneration," 16.
25. Judith Butler, "The Sensibility of Critique: Response to Asad and Mahmood," in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury and Free Speech*, Talad Asad et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 106.
26. Butler, "Explanation and Exoneration," 9.
27. Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," 40.
28. *Ibid.*, 15 (emphasis added).
29. *Ibid.*, 40 (emphasis added).
30. Aryn Baker, "Afghan Women and the Return of the Taliban," *Time*, July 29, 2010, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2007238,00.html>.
31. *Ibid.*
32. <http://www.rawa.org/rawa.html>.
33. Jodi Dean, "Change of Address: Butler's Ethics at Sovereignty's Deadlock," in *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters*, eds. Terrell Carver and Samuel A. Chambers (New York: Routledge, 2008), 125.
34. Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" in *Is Critique Secular?* Asad et al., 65–66.

35. Saba Mahmood, "Is Critique Secular?" <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2008/03/30/is-critique-secular-2/>.
36. Butler, "The Sensibility of Critique," 105–06.
37. *Ibid.*, 10 (emphasis added).
38. Rachel Aldred, "In Perspective: Judith Butler," *International Socialism* 103 (Summer 2004), <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=39>.