



# Masculinity: Phallogocentrism and Performativity. A Philosophical Analysis Based on the Studies of Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler and Raewyn Connell to Counter Patriarchal Hegemony

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## Abstract

Feminist considerations have induced a rethinking of many aspects of our contemporary world, such as the concept of gender and power relations. This has led to a re-examination of the entire previous tradition of thought, finding in phallogocentrism the paradigm of reference. This term indicates, starting with Derrida's considerations, the Western tendency to have centred not only the *logos*, but also the phallus, weaving an intricate relationship between masculinity and language. It's precisely this bond that makes man the archetype on which society is founded, placing his supremacy in the *natural* order, defining power relations and nailing pre-established categories. A being-nailed in the Lévinasian sense, thus an adherence between the agreement of voices and being, which produces 'category-beings' in which pre-delineated social identity is concealed in a condition of 'nature', such as the 'being-male'. It's precisely this naturalness, discursively produced, that has made man universal. Consequently, man has convinced himself that he can speak for all humanity, becoming the *logos* through which he declines the rest. Declinations that have produced rigid and hierarchical categories that precede and define each person, prescribing 'consonant' ways, rhetorically assumed as 'human nature'. The "nature" of being man or woman does not, in fact, concern monolithic essentialisms, but rather movements of intertwined meanings in a process that Derrida defines as *différance*. A process, therefore, in becoming, which has over time produced unequal power relations, justifying them as "natural", and which daily reiterates a hegemonic and sexist social model. The aim of this analysis, hence, will be to bring phallogocentric masculinity and consequent hegemonic structures into the field of philosophical reflection, with the purpose of redirecting praxis towards *performative* processes of *characterisation* the person, rather than a pre-delineated *categorisation*. Thus, to release being from socio-cultural categories, which historical-performative praxis nails to each body.

**Keyword:** logocentrism, phallogocentrism, queer, performativity, *différance*

## 1. Introduction

Gender studies have produced various critical reflections around philosophical and social issues such as identity, 'roles' in the gender order (Connell 1995: 80-89) and power relations. In these analyses, language became a central aspect, particularly after philosopher John L. Austin's elaborations contained in *How to do things with words* (1962: 7-120). He, in fact, emphasised how language is not just a *saying*, but a *doing* of reality through linguistic acts defined as *performative*. This view was later adopted by the queer philosopher Judith Butler, through whom she elaborated the notorious theory of gender performativity, exposed in *Gender Trouble* (1990: 183-200). In this theory it's argued that gender is *created* from the stylisation of the body and the daily repetition of socially legitimised acts, which therefore indicate a prescribed path in relation to the anatomical body. Acts, however, that are not only characterised in the externalisation of attributes, but are fused in relations of power, in the exercise of force that retranslates into permitted or denied possibilities. Gender is, therefore, the result of a historical-political praxis that moves from bodies, in (power) relations to each other. Masculinity, in this dynamic, occupies a central position, as it is intricately connected to language and the constituent exercise of force. A position, a *centre*, upon which the Western philosophical tradition has been built and welded (Derrida 1967: 359-377), reiterating specific visions and relations.

In this paper, I would like, therefore, to focus on the relationship between (hegemonic) masculinity, language, and consequent relations. In particular, with the aim of framing the foundational elements that serve as solid monoliths for both patriarchal praxis and consequent hegemonic masculinity. This, in order to question, then, what other directions social praxis itself can take; so, reflecting on new processes of identification that make people free from pre-established hierarchical constraints. Hence, attempting to move towards a queer paradigm that counteracts patriarchal hegemony not through new categorical impositions and power relations, but, on the contrary, by deconstructing existing constructs in order to provide freedom to "being" and "relating".

The analysis will, therefore, focus in a first section on the link between the gendered subject 'male' and language, starting with a quick re-examination of some pillars of the Western metaphysical tradition. Indeed, in order to deeply understand the concept of masculinity in Western culture, it's essential to analyse some philosophical fundamentals that have shaped thought and society since the dawn of human civilisation. This's because masculinity, as closely linked to a specific portion of humanity, has been present from the beginning, emerging and, simultaneously, shaping the paradigm of reference. Assuming the Derridean perspective, I will therefore trace three central elements: logocentrism, phallogocentrism and finally their resultant, phallogocentrism.

From here, the focus will shift, in the second section, to the consequent hegemonic practices, particularly in relation to the perspective of "being-category" - which I reread from the Lévinasian nail - applied to gender issues. This perspective will indicate the process by which identities are fixed through language, creating ontological categories that appear natural and inevitable. These categories are, in fact, nailed to bodies through linguistic acts such as naming, defining identities such as "being-male" or "being-female" and legitimising power relations then assumed as prediscursive and prepolitical inevitabilities.

Finally, the focus will move to the proposal of fluid perspectives that can subvert the classical paradigm. Perspectives based on characterisation processes in opposition to the categorising processes of male hegemony. This reflection will intend to emphasise that, since individuals are socially directed and shaped through generic attributions, deconstructing these latter could generate the possibility of being perceived and considered primarily as specific individuals rather than social categories. In this way, many discriminatory stereotypes, such as

the presumed lesser aptitude of women for leadership, could be challenged by altering the underlying social perception.

At the methodological level, this work will see the use of philosophical-linguistic conceptual and theoretical tools, useful for the critical analysis of the Western tradition in relation to gender dynamics. In particular, I will use the Derridean neologism of *différance* and Butlerian performativity to explore the implicit power structures of phallogocentrism, questioning binary essentialism and highlighting the performative nature of gender. In particular, the paradigm of the Western philosophical tradition will be explored, rereading it under two theoretical keys: the deconstructivist and the queer approach. Moreover, although the philosophical lens will be the primary one, interdisciplinarity will support deeper investigation in some sections of the work, reflecting from sociological perspectives, mainly with Connell's studies, but also psychological ones. The latter will draw on the research of Italian psychologist Chiara Volpato (2013: 24-56), in particular her studies on stereotyping: providing useful insights into how these processes produce direct discrimination in multiple social spheres, including work. All of this with the aim of presenting a queer perspective as an act of contrast and deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity.

In summary, this research aims to offer an in-depth understanding of the interconnection between language and gender, critiquing the philosophical structures that support male dominance and proposing a critical reflection on the power dynamics inherent in language and Western culture.

## 2. The *logocentric* paradigm between Derridean *différance* and Butlerian performativity

In order to frame masculinity, it's essential to reflect on some of the cornerstones of Western culture, as it has been present in human civilisation from the very beginning and is an integral part of it. Masculinity, in fact, emerges from the paradigm that can be defined as *logocentrism*, a term made famous by Derrida, in other words, the philosophical tendency to privilege the *logos* as the main means of expressing truth. This implies an elevation of spoken language (*phonè*) and the immediate presence of meaning as central to the production of knowledge:

The *phonè* is the signifying substance that is given to consciousness as intimately united to the thought of the signified concept. From this point of view, the voice is consciousness itself; when it speaks, it's not only consciousness of being present to what I think, but also of keeping as adherent as possible to my thought or concept a meaning that does not fall into the world I intend at the very moment I utter it and that seems to depend on my pure and free spontaneity. Of course, this experience is a deception, but a deception on the necessity of which a whole structure or an entire era has been organised (1972b: 77).

Such phonocentric positioning is, however, according to Derrida, problematic: indeed, a deception. One of the main criticisms concerns the assumption of the existence of stable and fixed meanings that can be fully represented, without being influenced, through language. During his deconstruction work, the philosopher challenges this idea, in particular through the 'bundle or knot' (understood as a tangle of lines of meaning) of *différance* (1972a: 30). With this neologism it argues that meaning is always in motion, deferred to other signs and meanings, thus making the full *presence* of meaning impossible. The latter, in fact, is never completely present or absent, but always in a state of continuous deferral and transformation (1967: 312-313) - thus shattering the dualism, central to Western metaphysics, presence/absence. Such a 'bundle', therefore, destabilises the conception that sees the essentialist 'presence' as stable,

*binary* complementary monoliths. Furthermore, it highlights how the logocentric view not only places a centrality on the *logos*, representing immutable external truth, but also requires a perspective of reality that is Manichean. The last is another important aspect present in Derridian criticism. According to the philosopher, the metaphysical tradition develops symbolic thought precisely on relations of reciprocal functionality, operating through binary oppositions - presence/absence, orality/writing, masculine/feminine - being then assumed as pairs, clear and distinct, producing stable meanings (1967: 372). In other words, logocentrism rests on essentialist dual structures that are *narrated* as something unchangeable and fixed. In the field of gender, for instance, we might say that masculinity and femininity, in this logic, are 'autonomous spheres', distinct *categories* whose internal *meanings* are inevitable, *stable* and specific; hence, which are self-produced *independently*. Precisely because they are external and independent, moreover, such dual structures - and their meanings - are defined as 'neutral'. Consequently, as Irigaray argues, never fully questioned, especially in language. The philosopher writes: 'yes/no, true/false, being/non-being, masculine/feminine and all other dichotomies remain the opposites from which the subject bases its entry into the world, where they are subjected to the *principle of non-contradiction* (1991: 282)'. Alternatives thus all evaluated, compared, and determined in a dual way, affirming the identity of a subject that infinitely reiterates the same game from the firm ground of its language (Ivi: 283). A 'neutral' language purified by the characteristics of the subject expressing it and not influential with respect to the external meaning it merely proffers. Thus, an 'enunciating machinery' is produced to which an impartial code has been assigned: a *language* that does not depend on gender, although male or female connotations are found in it, even though gender is inscribed in it at a second time (Ivi: 167). However, this codification only works as a game of cross-references, of differences that would be *neutral*. Differences necessary to make the dichotomous parts take on meaning. Indeed, binarisms, as anticipated through Derrida's 'bundle', are maintained precisely through a system of differences - deferred - rather than stable presences (1972a: 27) - although these differences are then rhetorically assumed to be stable presences. Accordingly, within the gender context, masculinity needs femininity, and vice versa, within a binary (heterosexual) system in order to make sense, to exist. This relationship is, in fact, based on meanings related to each other from *comparatives*. For example, the *strength* of the masculine and the *emotionality* of the feminine are logocentrically narrated as *essential* characteristics of these categories. However, the meaning of these characteristics does not arise from them independently, but is the outcome of a relation of difference and comparison. Saying, for example, 'the male is strong', in order to gain meaning, requires a comparison with something else considered *less* strong, in this case the 'female'. Therefore, asserting that 'the male is strong' in general, implies that the 'male is stronger than something else (the "female")'. Without the '*er*' (strong-*er*) and without 'the female', this characteristic would not have the meaning it has today, since it could not be compared and, therefore, *normalised* as an *essential* characteristic of 'being-male'. Thus, what is perceived as a natural essence of the masculine - in this case, strength - is the outcome of a comparison that functions in the dichotomous-*differential* man/woman relationship. A relationship that is produced from a graphic sign (/) that separates and distinguishes the two halves, placing them in a *différance* relationship. Thus, a caesura - linguistic - (man (/) 'slash or bar' woman) that allows the 'text' to operate. Derrida writes about this:

In principle and in law, and not merely due to an empirical or technical inadequacy, the so-called phonetic writing can only function by incorporating non-phonetic 'signs' (punctuation, spacing, etc.) in relation to which one could quickly realize, upon examining their structure and necessity, that they poorly accommodate the concept of sign (1972a: 31).

Therefore, it is that 'graphic sign' that allows the functioning of the 'enunciating machinery' (logocentric) that, retroactively, makes certain meanings take on certain meanings as natural and immutable essences. Meanings that are, however, precisely the outcome of that caesura, of the dichotomous-differential relationship.

In summary, the Derridean *différance* perspective challenges the essentialist view of the gender order (Connell 1995), as it emphasises how the meanings of the two sides are not the result of a 'natural inevitability', but are always in flux, are thus the outcome of a relational *process* that continually shifts the limits, as well as the boundaries, of the bar (slash /) of differences. In other words, the neologism of *différance* emphasises how the parts of binarisms are not solid and independent 'spheres'; but, on the contrary, are the outcome of a network of interwoven meanings. A network that can continually be 'woven' differently, precisely in relation to the movements of the relational *process*. A process that is enlivened by each person starting from their 'performances', which we will now explore in more detail.

### **2.1. Gender performativity as a relational process: The relationship between performativity, performance and *différance***

As a conclusion to the previous paragraph, we argued that the neologism of *différance* is what allows us to perceive the relationship, in constant movement, of meanings - including those of gender. A relation that, precisely because it is in constant movement, refers to a process that, in accordance with Butler's reflections, we could call *performative*. According to the Butlerian perspective, in fact, gender is a sequence of repetitive acts within a rigid socio-cultural regulation, which establishes the appropriate way of being 'male' or 'female' through education, permissions, possibilities (1990: 45); thus creating a series of descriptive and prescriptive stereotypes, based on multiple *comparatives*. The iteration of these acts *creates* gender and does so beyond the awareness and intention of the subjects involved in the action. Butler, therefore, rejects the idea of an original or authentic gender, arguing that it is constantly evolving according to historical, social, and political movements. In relation to the Derridean view of *différance*, we could, so, argue that gender does not view the terms male or female anchored to stable and fixed meanings, but is the result of relational movements based on difference. It's therefore the outcome of a language, a bodily style that is implemented through specific '*performances*'. This repetition is, on one hand, the re-enactment of a set of socially established meanings, on the other, the ritualised form of their social legitimation. A game of references and differences of meaning that weave a web in the relationship with other signs, signifying themselves precisely through the relationship they have with each other. These performances thus refer to dichotomised elements that establish both attributions and power relations between the parts; reiterating the praxis precisely through the enactment of those performances. Indeed, the same happens with normative or 'natural' values used to propagandise certain visions of power. Heterosexuality will thus be natural while homosexuality unnatural; and it will be precisely the unnaturalness of one that will guarantee the naturalness of the other. Furthermore, the 'voice' of the *logos* in dichotomising won't only draw the line of differences (/) from anatomical or behavioural elements, but also symbolic and political ones. In the former binarism, therefore, not only different sexual orientation will be present, but also diverse social possibilities: as, for example in Italy, marriage. This already highlights one of the critical objectives of this work, namely the fact that social reality is organised around *categorisations* that contain, in them, both specific attributions and social possibilities. On the contrary, these categories, rhetorically propagated as 'natural' and 'essential' monoliths, are, in the reading of *différance*, the result of pre-established but mobile concatenations of meanings. Meanings that can, therefore, be re-concatenated in different ways or, in a queer perspective, allowed to flow in specific *characterisations*. Metaphorically, we

could say, meanings *woven* in such a way as to produce tailor-made, rather than uniform, clothes (*habitus*).



Figure 1

To summarise, as shown in the figure, there is a circular relationship between performativity, understood as the *potential* and constantly evolving flow of historical and socio-cultural movements, and performances, that is, the (linguistic) acts produced by each individual, which enable the movement and *signification* of performative praxis itself. However, such performances, precisely as linguistic acts (understood as verbal, corporeal, etc.), must refer to meanings in order to acquire significance. From the perspective of the logocentric paradigm, these meanings have been outlined and *categorised*, originating from specific voices<sup>1</sup>, in order to *normalise* and establish the 'correct' way of being 'male' or 'female'. Such normativity is dictated precisely by the rigidification of meanings produced in *différance* and retroactively established - as well as assumed - as *essences*. In this way, performances will continue to act in accordance with those 'essences', moving the process always in the same direction - risking punishment and/or discrimination when they attempt to produce an alternative meaning. For this reason, in the explanatory image, the term 'performance' is crossed by the arrow, because the set of meanings, irrigated in the paradigm, are assumed and internalised, in the collective vision, as the appropriate way of 'being' and acting, seeing different performances as 'abnormal' or 'unnatural'. In other words, the performative flux, charged with socio-culturally regulated meanings (naming this set, 'performative flux + specific meanings', as the *paradigm*), flows through each person, shaping them. This flow, therefore, will influence the performance produced, disciplining it in such a way as to reiterate the paradigm itself. However, anticipating the conclusion, the Butlerian hope in this circularity implies that, acquiring *consciousness* of the process and, so, altering the performance of many people, one will come to break and weave new ties in the network of *différance*; hence, one will come to modify the paradigm.

However, the reflection conducted so far on performativity theory, in relation to Derridian *différance*, not only indicates the process of creation and assumption of gender, challenging metaphysical essentialism, but also criticises the logocentric idea that language is something non-influential in relation to social reality. Already Austin in *How to do things with words* (1962) highlights this potential through the factual (performative), illocutionary and perlocutionary, capacity of language. And in the field of gender, this aspect is even more evident. If, in fact, gender is something that moves and changes on the basis of linguistic repetition, it means that the parts of man/woman dualism are not such by 'nature', but the outcome of certain voices that have established characteristics and power relations, then retroactively assumed as a natural essence of being a man or a woman (Butler 1990: 38). In other words, voices that have irrigated and crystallised specific meanings, 'extracting' them from the network of *différance* and rhetorically making them essences. The performative perspective, therefore, also destabilises the presumed neutrality - or inevitable legitimacy - of the binary positions that traditional metaphysics has attempted to unify. If, in fact, it is in the language-*logos* that such perspectives were formulated and delineated, those who had more 'right', more 'presence', to exercise it, inevitably had more power to centralise.

Therefore, the logocentric paradigm hides within itself unequal power relations, reiterating them daily through a very specific male symbol: the *phallus*.

<sup>1</sup> Refer to paragraph 2.

### 3. The phallogocentric paradigm: The force-violence of the phallus-man

As a result of the conclusions drawn in the previous section, we can argue that the reference paradigm has from the origins created hierarchies, privileging some binary 'halves' over others. In this regard, Irigaray emphasises how language is not only anthropological, but also *andrological*. It's in fact a gendered subject that imposes its imperatives as universally valid, the only ones capable of defining the forms of reason, of thought, of meaning, which always refers to the same logic, to the only logic of the 'One' (Irigaray 1991: 279). This enacts a sexually oriented form of Derridean *archi-violence*; namely, the act, through language, of founding meaning, of unification that excludes other possibilities. Violence of which the 'One' represents the principle of stability, unity, and coherence in the Western philosophical tradition, delineating the dichotomous boundaries. In consequence, the various binarisms cannot be neutral, but charged with hierarchical and subordinating power decided by the male-One and its positioning. In this sense, the *centrality* in Western philosophy is not exclusive to the *logos*, but also to the male, to the *phallus*: thus it is not only logocentric but also *phallogocentric*. The phallus, a social symbol of male force-violence, thus becomes the nucleus of origin for meaning and value, hidden within the metaphysical tradition. This centralization is inherently hierarchical as well as binary, establishing the masculine as the normative 'neutral' and the feminine as derivative or secondary. Phallogocentrism and logocentrism are therefore interconnected as ways in which Western philosophy has sought to establish stable centres of meaning, directing performative praxis. These centres are elevated to immutable presences, *archè*, principles of nature, universalizing the voice that establishes them and, above all, exempting it from the 'game' of Western metaphysics:

The concept of a centred structure is in fact the concept of a grounded game, constituted on the basis of a *founding immobility* and a reassuring certainty, which is also removed from the game. On the basis of such certainty it is possible to dominate the anguish that always arises from a certain way of being involved in the game, of being caught up in the game, being from the beginning inside the game (Derrida 1967: 360).

It's the voice of the phallus-logos, therefore, that has produced the hierarchising dichotomies and irrigated certain meanings, while obscuring the *phallus* from the process, making it neutral<sup>2</sup>. From this follows a whole series of attributions, possibilities and attitudes that guarantee the domination of the man and the subordination of the woman (non-man) through the exercise of *force-violence*. Masculinity, in fact, is not just about a series of attributions linked to specific bodies, but rather an exercise, a performative enactment through 'virile' actions culturally legitimised as 'natural' as *essential* in the male. An aspect on which masculinity has been etymologically inscribed from multiple voices throughout history, most notably that of Isidore of Seville<sup>3</sup>. In fact, the term masculinity derives from the Latin *masculus*, which can be traced back to the Sanskrit root *ma* or *man*, meaning to 'think', from which the Latin *mas* denotes strength and virility. The latter - from the Latin *Vir* - implies a real *exercise* of force, culturally sanctioned and naturally inevitable, towards the woman. This act is exactly what enables man to become *vir*, thus to assume the *masculum* (Chiricosta 2019: 43). A force that is not only physical, but symbolic. From the Sanskrit root, in fact, the masculine-man is

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<sup>2</sup> To explore the relationship between masculine and neuter see: A. Grandi, *Language, Neuter, and Masculinity: The Influence of the Neuter-Male in the Reiteration of Social Models, A Philosophical Analysis Starting with Cavareno, Irigaray, and Butler*, in «Proceedings of the 4th International Conference on Gender Studies and Sexuality», Vol. 1, n.1, pp. 1-11, 2024: <https://doi.org/10.33422/icgss.v1i1.363>

<sup>3</sup> Isidore of Seville was a 7th century archbishop and scholar, known for his vast encyclopedia '*Etymologiae*' compiling much of ancient and medieval knowledge.

inscribed in thinking even before physical violence. Therefore, throughout history, masculinity has always defined itself as the - natural - possessor of strength, understood in the dual sense of bodily and thought-*logos*, elevating itself above everything else. This implies, that it is the 'voice' of masculinity which has established both: what is *meant* by 'essence' (i.e. something unchangeable and stable), as the masculine itself embodies the *logocentric* paradigm that reads reality through essentialist binarisms; and what is meant as the essence of masculinity, finding it in the (*greater*) bodily and *linguistic (logos)* 'strength', in relation to the feminine.

The centralisation of the man-male, therefore, is the outcome of centuries of domination history - culturally legitimised as 'natural-essential' - both physical and rhetorical-political, which has led to the association of *phallus* and *logos*. An association which, as we will explore in the next section, sees the universalisation of man and his transformation into a social canon, directing the circular movement between performativity and performance<sup>4</sup>.

#### **4. The phallogocentric paradigm: The dominance of the man-logos following the invisibilisation of the phallus**

As argued in the concluding previous section, the male-man defined himself as the possessor of strength and *logos*, positioning himself at the top of a hierarchy he had established. Consequently, it saw itself as the canon on which societies were founded, establishing its dominance as something natural. This *naturalness*, discursively produced and performed, is precisely what made it possible to render the *phallus* invisible, thus making it vanish in the logocentric paradigm. Such dissolution is a decisive aspect of his power and linked, paradoxically, precisely to 'seeing': to the evidence of being 'seen', daily, in that position and representation. This not only legitimises the exercise of his power, but also allows the possibility of decorporealisation and, therefore, universalisation. The feminist philosopher Gasparri emphasizes this aspect, underlining a stimulating intertwining of bodies and visibility. In Greek political and social life, in fact, as for many centuries thereafter, those who are seen and recognised are only male bodies, whether in the political, military, or theatrical dimension (Gasparri 2024: 25) - today we might also add, predominantly, corporate. This *homosocial* behaviour is what performed a specific *hexis* (habit) that has not only an educational purpose (Ivi: 26), but also universalising and invisibilising. A seeing that makes invisible, transforming such 'usual' bodies into models, into decorporealised canons. This link with sight does not stop at the creation of a *hexis* but is elevated to the only bodily aspect deemed adequate for doing philosophy. It was in fact 'sight' that allowed the thinker access to the world, both the tangible and the non-material, "from time to time identifiable as the good, the truth, the reality of things" (*Ibidem*). Therefore, in the Western thought tradition, one of the most important approaches is that which passes through the figure of the eye. In this *logocentric*, but in itself also *optiocentric* system of thought, from Plato to Husserlian phenomenology, the attainment of truth is a visual matter. Arriving at truth, immutable and extra-linguistic, always means directing the gaze correctly. A seeing, however, that is closely shaped and oriented, by and in the male gaze; a phallogocentric optiocentrism. Consequently, the performative function is equally applicable here; what is seen and shown is not simply something 'given', but something 'constructed', actively produced by tools and devices that are, says Derrida, hierarchising and selective. Thus, the 'eye', as well as the 'voice', of the universalised masculine becomes invisible and what it 'says' and 'sees', in a way, is the natural order of things. The invisibilisation of the gendered character of these bodily but decorporealised actions - seeing and saying - is a necessary feature of male hegemony; allowing him to direct his gaze without being looked at. The eye that sees hides itself to enable what it sees to be seen.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. figure 1 in 1.1.



It is akin to what Derrida, in *Spectres de Marx*, names as the 'visor effect' or 'that unparalleled power which is perhaps the supreme insignia of power: the ability to see without being seen' (1993: 16).

However, placed in that model, the various thinkers throughout history have considered the masculine as universal human gender, thus without the need to think, and think of themselves, in terms of gender. In this way, the male has convinced himself that he can speak for all of humanity, becoming the logos through which the rest declines (Cavarero 1991: 43): ζῶον λόγον ἔχον. The logos is therefore not, as anticipated, an a-sexual and incorporeal element; on the contrary, it is completely adhered to the masculine, incarnating itself from time to time in its voices. Consequently:

All that concerns language, modes of predication, the dominion of the concept, forms of judgment, etc., have never been interrogated as produced by a sexed being. Throughout different historical epochs, the relationship of the speaking subject has been interrogated with nature, with the given object, with the creating God, with other intramundane beings, but it has never been questioned a priori that it always concerns a universe or world of man. A law long tacit prescribes every realization of language, every production of discourse, every constitution of language according to the necessity of a perspective, a point of view, an economy: those of man, supposed to represent the human species (Irigaray 1991: 279).

In short, the Western metaphysical tradition has not only oriented itself in reality through essentialist and stable visions, seeing in the *logos* the way to unveil and describe them, but has also placed the masculine as the prince and invisible element, as the sexed holder of the *logos* itself: as its voice and its gaze. Therefore, the paradigm of reference is not only logocentric but is, as Derrida argues, *phallogocentric*.

Resuming the picture shown in *figure 1*<sup>5</sup>, therefore, the direction of the arrow through the performances is directed by a paradigm that sees man's domain fused into a web of meanings that he crystallises and uses hierarchically. Therefore, in order to reflect on masculinity and active policies to counter it, one must, in my opinion, initiate a deconstructivist procedure of the entire paradigm in which masculinity is fused. It becomes necessary, thus, to work on the *meanings* that invest each person, each 'being', *categorising* it hierarchically and transforming it, therefore, into a '*being-category*'. Otherwise there is only a risk of reiterating phallogocentric hegemony in ever new and 'normed' forms, keeping the same praxis in movement.

## 5. The reiteration of the phallogocentric paradigm and the emersion of category-beings

Patriarchal practice as well as the categorization identifiable as hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995: 77) are thus the outcome of phallogocentric perspective, set in motion over millennia of Western history. The category of 'masculinity' will then exhibit a series of specific characteristics in relation to time and space, yet consistently aligned with this paradigm. This means that over the years and across different geographic contexts, the more 'superficial' elements that characterize masculinity may change, while leaving the foundations intact. Therefore, as indicated by sociologist Connell, different modes have emerged over decades in representing the 'real' man, from the stoic figures of Western films (1995: 212) to the more emotive New Age Men, all united by deep-seated aspects: power, subordination of the 'non-

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. figure 1 in 1.1.

man,' and self-universalization (1995: 214). However, this does not imply that every subjectivity necessarily adheres to all traits of hegemonic masculinity of its time, even though all individuals are subject to patriarchal practice. Masculinity, in fact, is a complex dynamic founded on binary power relations, assuming facets in relation to categorizations produced by practice. Therefore, as emphasized by Connell (1995: 76-80), there exist several types of masculinity, outcomes of intersecting traits such as ethnicity (marginalized masculinity) or sexual orientation (subaltern masculinity). Traits, however, that have already been categorized and defined by those who 'hold' language-power, starting from intersectional attributions rendered 'normative': being white, heterosexual, cisgender, etc. The discourse thus becomes more complex by adopting an intersectional perspective and shifting it towards personal responsibility. Indeed, the hegemonic phallogocentric exercise may not necessarily occur from individuals who adhere to each of those characterizations, but from those who 'perform' certain actions. For example, a homosexual person may engage in practices that produce racist hate speech. This would be done without awareness that such actions reinforce and perpetuate a pattern that discriminates against hypothetical individuals as well. Fuelling hatred through the dichotomous structure means loading the practice with violence ready to spill over into new dichotomies and hence, new individuals. This is because, precisely as a 'tangle of lines of meaning,' various binary oppositions are interconnected in a fabric - 'textile' - of *différance*. In this sense, summarizing, hegemonic masculinity appears more about producing performances in line with the phallogocentric view than merely *being* (possessing specific anatomy). A *doing* will consequently create a series of characteristics in line with that hegemonic exercise, namely all those attributes today definable as *agency*: competition, aggression, control, leadership, autonomy, and so forth.

The power dynamic of hegemonic masculinity, fused in patriarchal praxis, thus finds its way to movement, tracing a series of elements considered 'normal' that, intersectionally, will generate multiple hierarchies of oppression. From a performative perspective, then, masculinity is about *doing* rather than *being*. A specific acting concretised in the exercise of the power of one half over the other, on a physical, symbolic, and political level. Half, however, that has already been delineated by those in power, categorising people into hardened signifying categories in relation to their anatomical bodies. This exercise is, then, what nails these signifying categories to 'beings', producing different 'being-categories', which we will now explore in more detail.

### **5.1. The nailing down of phallogocentric meanings to anatomical bodies: The 'category-beings'**

The various dichotomisations are, as argued, the outcome of the relations produced in patriarchal practice, bringing benefits for some subjectivities and subordination - or worse - for others. This has produced a series of categorical attributions that are nailed to specific anatomical bodies through the exercise of language and naming. Butler argues:

The matrix of gender relations is prior to the emergence of the 'human'... In naming, the girl is 'made a girl,' brought into the domain of language and kinship through the gendered appellation. But 'making a girl' does not stop there. On the contrary, that original attribution is reiterated by various authorities and on various occasions to reinforce or contest the naturalized effect. Naming is both the definition of a boundary and the reiterated assertion of a norm (1993: 7).

There are thus bodies to which are nailed, through language, attributions full of cultural symbolism and political power, penetrating so deeply as to adhere to them and retroactively

assume as natural. A procedure similar to what Lévinas frames as the creation of the 'being-nailed' (*être rivé*). In other words, the *Stimme*, an 'accord of voices' that irrevocably binds the body to being, predisposing it to be that being, generates an identity nailed to the biological body, causing various 'similar' bodies to recognize themselves as an 'us.' The facticity of biological existence becomes, at the political level, a moment of glorification for some and condemnation for others. Thus develops a 'weight' of one's identity perceived as a fate from which escape is impossible (Lévinas 1996: 209-215; 215-221), operating even to a transposition of it onto a speculative plane: where 'being-Jewish,' 'being-woman,' hence 'being-category,' appear as ontological categories and thus naturally 'damned' compared to those who rhetorically define them as such, subordinating them (phallogocentrically).

In some cases, such categories become the fulcrum prediscursive means by which biological and bodily difference is rendered intelligible and conveyed as apparently prediscursive, prepolitical and, therefore, as dogmatic (Butler 1997b: 14). This is the case of gender, which in this discourse becomes precisely that element that is nailed to the body - "being-male" or "being-female" - allowing the incorporation of conditioned possibilities as well as, exactly through the body, the repeatability of those possibilities; in fact, it's possible to perform it in a "true and false" or "right and wrong" way, implying in the first case a sort of confirmation of essentialism or, in any case, of the ontological category that has been nailed, while in the second case the need to apply corrections and punishments as wrong. Hate speech is one of the most punitive ways in which people are educated to the established social model, penetrating the flesh, and defining the 'naturalness' of their living:

Consider only how the history of being called an injurious name becomes embodied, how words enter into the limbs, shape gesture, bend the spine. Consider only how racial or gender insults live and thrive in the flesh of the person to whom they are directed, and how these insults accumulate over time, concealing their history, assuming the appearance of naturalness, configuring and restricting the doxa, which stands as reality (Butler 1997a: 233).

In relation to punishment and so fear, it's interesting the perspective of the *Stimmung* of horror that, in the Lévinasian reading, is contrasted with the Heideggerian *angst* (anxiety). A horror in my view that is, in a sense, constitutive and produced by the bar of differences (*/*) as a limit and constraint of what one can or cannot be. In *De l'existence à l'existant* Lévinas writes: "The horror of being is opposed to the angst of nothingness; it's a fear of being and not for being." (Lévinas 1947: 88). A being "cooked" by the symbolism of language, signified through repetitions and exclusions, possibilities allowed and denied, confined on this side of the bar to the point of "fearing" the possibility of going beyond and thus becoming that "other" being. This fear is a decisive aspect in the creation of masculine identities in line with hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995: 78). It's in fact the result of social recognitions that establish how a 'real' man should behave, therefore, attitudes falling within the feminine or homosexual sphere, for example, *deny recognition* (Butler 1997a: 6), generating fear and hatred. In this regard we could take as an example, in the Italian panorama, the difficulties in externalising homosexuality, leading to numerous cases of repression of the self. This is, of course, the outcome of a phallogocentric perspective that places naturalness-heterosexuality in a hierarchical position respect to unnaturalness-homosexuality; as pointed out in the report by "Gay Help Line" (2022)<sup>6</sup>. Another example might concern the complexities in men (beings to whom the category 'masculinity' has been nailed) to express their emotionality - as it's

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<sup>6</sup> [https://gayhelpline.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2023/05/Report\\_GHL\\_2022.pdf](https://gayhelpline.it/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2023/05/Report_GHL_2022.pdf)

stereotypically considered part of the feminine - by castrating themselves and developing multiple and profound consequences (Connell 1995: 244-256).

To summarise, being nailed implies the assignment of attributes that penetrate the body, but which, in themselves, only make sense as far as they are related to each other. These attributes then, through the daily ritualised repetition of phallogocentric norms, are retroactively assumed as natural and inevitable, thus legitimising male hegemony. However, according to the performative perspective, precisely because there is no ontological nucleus of being 'man' or 'woman', in those same bodies is inherent the possibility of performing something new, re-signifying and subverting the dominant model. To counteract the phallogocentric paradigm, it's therefore necessary to 'stage' new relational modalities that surpass the monolithic and essentialist perspective of Western metaphysics. In this dynamic, each person can have influence by beginning to perform new 'languages' that subversively alter the dominant praxis. It's in this regard that Butler cites the example of 'drag' (1990: 139), emphasising how their performance was a veritable subversive activity of bodies that, through parody, became political struggle.

## 6. The queer perspective to counter phallogocentric praxis

In view of these reflections, we could argue that the Butlerian political hope is the most promising for rewriting and deconstructing hegemonic power relations, thus counteracting phallogocentric praxis. Indeed, if gender - and the relations between them - is performative, thus the outcome of a concatenated 'tangle of lines of meaning' and not an inevitable monolithic essence, it means that it can be deconstructed. Therefore, its symbolic attributes can be eliminated or re-signified through new 'languages', new performances that alter the social flow. This with the aim of achieving a praxis that produces queer identities: so, identities that emerge from *characterisations* rather than *categorisations*. Identities that can choose to perform and assume elements that they consider more appropriate to their being-*person*, rather than their being-*category*, at that specific and transitory moment in life. Clearly, as pointed out by Butler (1997b: 173), this cannot only happen intentionally, as we are immersed in a symbolic world that has already begun:

The interpretation of 'performativity' as an intentional and arbitrary choice thus overlooks the fact that the historicity of discourse and, in particular, the historicity of norms (the 'chains' of repetition invoked and disguised in imperative expression) constitute the power of discourse to enact that which it appoints. To think of sex as imperative means that the subject is interpellated and produced by that norm, and that the norm - and the regulatory power of which it is a pledge - materialises bodies as the effect of that injunction (Butler 1993: 251).

So, gender is not something one wears in the morning and freely removes in the evening. On the contrary, it's something that enters deeply, shaping interiority from the performative repetition of traits constructed in and through the symbolism of language. This is why today, in social psychology, one speaks of *autostereotyping* (Volpato 2013: 35), in that one assumes, *acritically*, the stereotypical category that is socially - and rhetorically - narrated as the only 'natural'.

However, a queer perspective would allow for a constitution of self that is not socially fixed and, in particular, not hierarchically prescriptive, precisely because it re-signifies the symbolic world produced and reiterated by language: thus deconstructing the binary and subordinating root of the archetype of the 'real' man or woman. Feminist and LGBTQIA+ movements emphasise precisely the will to break free from stereotypical characters, showing, through their bodies and actions, how discriminating social constructs they are. However, as Chiricosta said,

citing Braidotti, in order to concretely and stably implement this resignifying process, it's essential to free oneself from the fixity of the force-violence - etymologically masculine - and allow oneself to flow, becoming *nomadic subjects*. The paths thus found cannot be absolute or absolutized, but must be re-actualised by each entity that travels along them, modifying them. This is why *nomadicity* alludes, indicates, does not define, does not entify, goes beyond identity and non-contradiction, speaks in the conditional (2019: 122). Philosopher Chiricosta, in her analysis *Un altro genere di forza (Another Kind of Strength)*, deeply reflects on concrete practices that can serve as useful tools for this purpose. For instance, the practice of martial arts from a transfeminist perspective; thus, the possibility of acquiring new self-directions, "rediscovering strength (2019: 107)" in a manner different from the force-violence of hegemonic masculinity. In other words, 'weaving' new meanings into the tangle of *différance*.

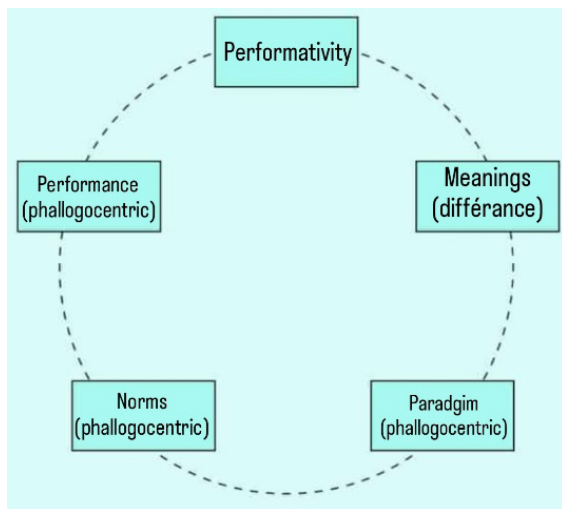


Figure 2

Identity, then, in a performative sense, seems to be something one *does*, rather than something one *is*. And, as doing, it is a *process*, it is an identification towards - in the phallogocentric paradigm - specific *categorical* attributions established in that place and time. Categories which, in the phallogocentric dimension, will always be charged with subordinating power, thus becoming the 'categorical beings' and continually reiterating the same paradigm from the consonant performances (figure 2).

On the contrary, moving towards *characterisation* unbound by categories would allow for the assumption of non-prescriptive possibilities. Characterisation, in fact, is what allows the creation of multiple voices and, therefore, multiple performances capable of re-directing performative praxis by weaving new relationships of *meanings*. Meanings, such as 'strength', 'care', etc., which remain fluid and 'embraceable' by every person, regardless of their anatomical body, sexual orientation and so on. Consequently, as shown in figure 3, the whole paradigm and the consequent norms will be resignified. Crucially, however, it is emphasised that the 'new' paradigm is not rigidly intended. The aim is not to replace the phallogocentric paradigm with a new 'queer' paradigm hardened and established by a few people. On the contrary, it means something in constant becoming, in a *nomadic* movement. Therefore, unlike the closed circularity of the phallogocentric paradigm, the one indicated here can be perceived as a *spiral* movement, always creating *new* circularities. For this reason, in figure 3, 'new' is indicated in parentheses, as it is something *potentially* always different.

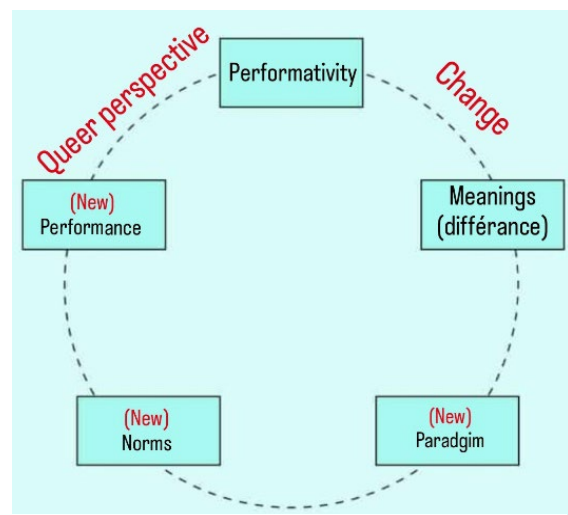


Figure 3

To concrete this change, it is therefore necessary to create new performances, new languages that alter the current web of meanings. This can be done in multiple dimensions and through multiple possibilities: from a new school education, to new corporate languages.

### 6.1. An example of the practical application of queer re-signification: The corporate case of leadership

In order to better understand the *spirality* of the queer perspective, as well as the risk of reiteration of the phallogocentric paradigm, it is stimulating to give a concrete explanatory example. Some of the reflections produced by *diversity management* in the workplace, in fact, often propose an attempt to rebalance inequality through the elevation of a form of leadership defined as 'feminine'. This latter form emphasizes characteristics categorized as "communality" (care, cooperation, emotionality, and so forth), arguing that these can be an innovative resource - of women - for human relations and corporate production. In my view, however, this approach merely reiterates the (phal)logocentric structure at its core, thus perpetuating hegemonic practices in new forms. By employing this type of rhetoric, one first assumes a binary structure that is, by definition, exclusionary and discriminatory (for example, for non-binary individuals); subsequently, it leads to a reiteration of being-categories, seeing a form of naturalization or essentialization of characteristics established as feminine and masculine, thereby also reconfirming the *agency* of masculinity. *Agency* that, as a (possible) way of exercising force-violence, will always reiterate a hierarchising vision: as the Italian psychologist Chiara Volpato (2013: 37) wrote, reporting on numerous data collected in various Italian companies, the qualities of communality lead to being more loved, those of agency more respected; therefore, the perception of authority and competence (fundamental in cases of leadership) will never be achieved by keeping the agency/communality binary model alive. In other words, this attempt to 'rebalance' by means of new category placements does not go so far as to break the web of meanings, maintaining the same direction of praxis. Of course, this does not imply that specific characteristics within the category 'communality' cannot be positive in relation to leadership. But that it's a mistake and a risk to keep them *categorised* by nailing them to specific anatomical bodies. Therefore, in the queer perspective, a person (woman) will not be more, or less, suitable for leadership because she is *naturally* inclined to care. Rather, she will be a person who is able - or not - to *characterise* herself in the way she considers most appropriate to the specific context and to her being-person rather than being-categorised. One could therefore speak of forms of leadership based on characteristics rather than on stereotypical gender; hence of collaborative and democratic leadership rather than female leadership. Forms, then, that can be characterised according to context in infinite directions - 'nomadically' - and be assumed by all people, regardless of anatomical sex; thus producing ever new 'spirals'.

The fluid vision, which centralises the person instead of the category, can therefore help not only to overcome situations of personal discrimination, but also to re-concatenate, in a potentially non-hierarchical way, relationships, giving more equal opportunities to every person in every social sphere: an aspect underlined by research<sup>7</sup>, but also by organisations<sup>8</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the queer perspective, in line with Butlerian performativity, is therefore, in my opinion, one of the best to deconstruct the hegemonic power relations that patriarchal masculinity has been reiterating for centuries. For it works to deconstruct the millenary

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-021-00166-0>

<sup>8</sup> <https://gaycenter.org/>

paradigm rooted in the tradition - philosophical and scientific (Derrida 1972a: 33) - of the West. This is why it is important to define gender, and consequently identity, as a process, as an identification of free and deferred, non-prescriptive and hierarchical traits. This could lead to future anti-discriminatory and equal implications, helping each person to express themselves, being able to build a life, family and career without socially prescribed obstacles. The queer approach means, therefore, a fluid opening of thought and meaning, finding possible consequences in every sphere of reality: from social justice to the development of creative and adaptive thinking<sup>9</sup>.

To counter patriarchal masculinity and allow the emersion of a fluid perspective, therefore, one must question the entire phallogocentric structure with which reality has been categorised. It is, therefore, necessary to break some ties in the network of *différance* in order to weave new ones. This can find its practical application in every social and daily context but, in order to create effective policies and actions, in my opinion, it is essential to acquire consciousness of the entire performative process. In fact, every action, every phrase that refers to hierarchised and discriminated categories will always lead to the movement of this practice, regardless of intention or context. This can, so, be the case whether by saying an overtly racist phrase or by producing policies that replicate gender stereotypes. On the contrary, becoming conscious of the process opens up the possibility of inserting oneself to interrupt the mechanism and produce something new. Something subversive, something that challenges the 'authorised' phallogocentric discourse and allows the 'spiral' of processes that are always adaptive, free and equal. As the philosopher Butler wrote: 'it is precisely the expropriation of the dominant "authorised" discourse that constitutes a potential site of its subversive resignification' (1997a: 157).

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/OTH-03-2021-0049/full/html>

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