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Elizabeth Grosz & Rebecca Hill

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Interview

ONTO-ETHICS AND DIFFERENCE: AN INTERVIEW WITH ELIZABETH GROSZ

Elizabeth Grosz and Rebecca Hill***

Abstract. Elizabeth Grosz is the author of ten books and an influential contributor to the elaboration of the philosophy of difference and feminist thinking on sexual difference. Rebecca Hill, one of the co-editors of this special issue, invited Grosz to speak further about some central concepts and themes in her two most recent books, *Becoming Undone* and *The Incorporeal* and the article ‘Irigaray, the Untimely, and the Constitution of an Onto-Ethics’. The interview was conducted in November 2016.

Rebecca Hill: Critique is foundational to feminist theory. Often feminism defines itself in terms of the task of pointing out sexism – of identifying the operation of sexism in a state of affairs, or in diagnosing sexism’s workings in a representational schema and then of criticising the sexism that it identifies. The labour of critique is frequently the pre-condition for the articulation of new values that would take us beyond patriarchy. For instance, critique is the pre-condition for the postulation of gender equality in liberal feminisms and critique is the pre-condition for the affirmation of sexual difference for Luce Irigaray and other scholars working in difference feminism. Critique is also central within the discourses of feminist theory itself. To name some of the most important trajectories of critique in which feminists address the blind spots and prejudices of one another’s scholarship, there are critiques of racism and

*Elizabeth Grosz is a world-renowned philosopher and feminist theorist. She is Jean Fox O’Barr Women’s Studies Professor in Trinity College of Arts and Sciences at Duke University. Her sole authored monographs are *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Allen & Unwin 1989); *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (Routledge 1990); *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Allen & Unwin 1994); *Space, Time and Perversion: The Politics of Bodies* (Allen & Unwin 1995); *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (MIT Press 2001); *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely* (Allen & Unwin 2004); *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Allen & Unwin 2005); *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (Columbia University Press 2008); *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections of Life, Politics and Art* (Duke University Press 2011); and *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics and the Limits of Materialism* (Columbia University Press 2017). The interview comments on her article ‘Irigaray, the Untimely, and the Constitution of an Onto-Ethics’ (2017) 43 *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 1. Email: elizabeth.grosz@duke.edu

**Rebecca Hill conducts research in feminist theory, decolonial theory, and continental philosophy. She is a Senior Lecturer in Literary Studies, School of Media and Communication, RMIT University. Email: rebecca.a.hill@rmit.edu.au

white-centrism, critiques of classism, of first worldism, of heterosexism, of cis-sexism, of ageism, of ableism, of colonialism and neo-colonialism, and critiques of anthropocentrism.

While you affirm the importance of critique to the evolution of feminism in the academy in the last few decades, you argue that critique has reached its limit in feminist theory. Critique-oriented feminisms focus on the states of affairs and representations that make up the present and on pointing out who and what is and is not represented and recognised. For you, for instance, an obsessive attentiveness to differences between women leads to a limitless regress because everyone is different from one another and even from ourselves over the time of our lives.¹

Rather than engaging in the diagnosing and judging of the work of others for failing to recognise and affirm the specificity of differences between women, you argue that the most promising directions for feminist theory lie in the invention of new modes of thought and life. To do this, you suggest that we focus less on different subjectivities and more on the forces of difference that generate (and undo) our subjectivities. Would you speak further about your argument that feminist theory should move away from critique? Would you also say more about the way that this sense of difference as the very ground of our subjective differences is the basis of invention?²

Elizabeth Grosz: OK, that is a very difficult and timely question – it summarises pretty much the dilemma of radical political thought and action today. There is a two-fold orientation to all kinds of political struggles in the present – those directed to sexism, racism, classism, xenophobia, nationalism, and other forms of oppression. There needs to be both critique and construct, as I have called them in an earlier moment.³ Without an earlier, even if implicit, form of critique the political motivation to produce new practices and modes of thinking isn't really there. These creative endeavours risk remaining vanity projects or merely forms of self-expression without an understanding of the forces of oppression that infuse all social orders with the need to move beyond them and provide alternatives to them. I am not here suggesting that all art, or all thought, or all social practices, need to be 'political' in any direct way, or even share a sense of what politics and political struggle may be,

¹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections of Life, Politics and Art* (Duke University Press 2011) at 89.

² 'We need to ask with more urgency now than in the past: if a subject strives to be recognized as a subject in a culture which does not value the subject in the terms that it seeks, what is such recognition worth? And once the subject is recognized as such, what is created through this recognition? To focus on the subject at the cost of focusing on the forces that make up the world is to lose the capacity to see beyond the subject, to engage with the world, to make the real. We wait to be recognized instead of making something, inventing something, which will enable us to recognize ourselves, or more interesting, to eschew recognition altogether. I am *not* what others see in me, but what I do, what I make. I become according to what I do, not who I am. This is not to ignore the very real differences between subjects and their various social positions, only to suggest that these differences, and not the subjectivity between which these differences are distributed, are the vehicles for the invention of the new.' As above at 84–5.

³ Elizabeth Grosz, 'Philosophy' in Sneja Gunew (ed) *Feminist Knowledge as Critique and Construct* (Routledge 1990) 147–75.

but all such practices always already do participate, in their history and using their contemporary forces, in such a politics. So I don't think that everyone in all circumstances should abandon critique in order to undertake the constructive production of the new; but I do think that, especially in the case of the development and production of ideas, critique has both its strengths and its limits. Its strength, as you suggest, is its ability to recognise problems, questions that address the inequities of what is given; but its limit is, as I have claimed in *Becoming Undone* and elsewhere, that critique must always give primacy and privilege to what it critiques, it must internally inhabit what it wants to overcome in order to discover inconsistencies or vulnerabilities from within. It does not provide us with an outside, an other, alternative strategies, or different ways to live. I am not sure that I want to spend my life considering how bad patriarchy, racism, electoral politics, or even leftist politics is! This is a fundamentally depressing project!

So rather than be preoccupied with the horror that is real and evident regarding women, minorities, indigenous peoples, refugees, a horror that others have devoted their lives to elaborating and archiving, a project for which I probably do not have fortitude, there are other activities that one might undertake in a manner of amelioration that is neither utopian, which is to say, impossible, nor simply critical. This is what I understand as the elaboration of difference as a positivity, the elaboration of a positive conception of difference. I don't think this is or should be the project that dominates or defines feminist theory or politics; but it is a significant project and deserves a place in the interrogation of patriarchal, racist, and xenophobic thought. The study of difference is a philosophical-artistic-cultural-biological analysis, one strand of feminist thought that is as significant, original, and provocative as any form of feminist politics.

To be clear: it is important that what we might call 'identity politics', the theorising of the position of the knowing and experiencing subject as a key condition for the production and contestation of knowledge and power, has a place in feminist thought. It was only under the conditions of a first emergence of 'identity politics' that feminism, or anti-racism, became possible, that is, it is only when a distinct group is recognised, and recognises itself in the systematicity of its negative treatment, that the new politics of the 1960s was possible, and continues to exert its appeal for each generation. In recognising oneself as a member of an oppressed category, one recognises that others are also in the same position and that something needs to be done about this systematic treatment. But it is also important that this is not the only factor or issue in play in feminist thought or practice. Identity is complicated by fissures, divisions, differences that we each recognise in ourselves, but that have not been adequately addressed, and we haven't yet developed the theoretical tools and models to adequately understand them – any given social-biological identity is itself always undergoing changes, transformations, events that mark and change it. It always exceeds itself. It is the exploration of these excesses or shortfalls in identity that interests me more.

RH: For many years, you have drawn attention to the importance, even the necessity, for feminists and other radical theorists of working in ontology. If I have read correctly, you are arguing for the importance of theorists articulating reality in our own terms rather than diagnosing the forms of reality given in this or that theoretical

approach to knowledge. For you, ontology designates the very stuff that makes things and beings what they are, reality in its most fundamental sense. In *Becoming Undone* you emphasise that ontology should not be understood in terms of static being but rather in terms of becoming.⁴ Reality is changing and the effort to think and to articulate ontology must take account of this moving reality. In your new book, *The Incorporal*, you argue for what you call ‘onto-ethics’, that is for ontology that describes not just what is (which is constantly changing) but also an ontology of what might become and what ought to happen. Can you speak further about this gesture of articulating ontology in terms of what ought to be?

EG: Thank you for this question. I am very happy to try to explain what I see as the link between ontology and the creation of an onto-ethics because it is the trajectory of my current work. It is not often one has the opportunity to reflect on the processes of change that occur in one’s writings. So I appreciate this opening you have given me. Ontology is, as I understand it, our conception of the real. It is, of course, not the real itself, but the real is the object which different ontologies, theoretical models of the real, contest and reframe, from time to time, as the limits of any particular epistemology become clear. Ontology, for me, was a kind of refuge from the endless contestations of truth claims that mark most forms of epistemology, including feminist epistemologies, and these epistemological claims quite rightly addressed the limits of knowledge and its very particular and limiting historical nature. But ontology too has its limits – any ontology describes, analyses, addresses, or contests what is. Ethics and politics, in different but related ways, address the question, not only of what is but also of what could be. And for me, this is really what drew me to ontology in the first place, not only what is, but how what exists or is might enable what doesn’t (yet) exist but could exist.

Now there are many ways in which we may address an onto-ethics: this is one of the continuing questions that occurs in the history of Western philosophy, in the writings of the Pre-Socratics, in Spinoza, in Nietzsche, and others. The question of ‘what is’ – or its variant ‘what becomes’ – is not addressed for abstract or merely philosophical reasons, but because it informs and helps to direct the more pressing and less abstract question: How am I, how are we, to act? What is this I or we that acts, and in what world(s) does it act? How are acts made possible by the world? And in what ways can our acts honour the world? In working on an onto-ethics, which no doubt comes in many forms, I am less interested in the conventional question that has regulated ethics since Kant: what general or universal principles should regulate all our acts, the actions that we all undertake? What principles should govern our behaviour? The question that may be more readily addressed is not ‘How do we all accept and act according to universal principles?’ but ‘How can I act for myself, and for a future, in a world that is as it is?’ Or in a more Greek fashion: ‘How can I be worthy of my fate, of the future that, unknown to me, awaits me?’ This fate, this entanglement with and as part of the world is less than agency as we usually use the term (a conscious agent making decisions about itself in the world) but more than determinism. Ethics is our manner of living in

⁴ Grosz above note 1 at 51.

the world with others. Politics is our mode of collective contestation of the ways in which such forms of living occur, and their costs, in the world. Ethics and politics are not two different levels of asking this question but two different dynamics by which to understand, find, and invent ways to live individually and collectively.

If I can say one more thing to qualify what I have just said: I am not sure that it is either an ontology, strictly speaking, or an ethics, in its more conventional sense, that draws me to the idea of an onto-ethics. Rather, it is the questioning of ontology and ethics as they are usually understood that is appealing about their union. So if, conventionally, ontology is concerned with being, and ethics with individual moral actions, then it is an ontogenesis, an account of the world as a world of becoming, a world of actions and passions, of things and living beings without clear-cut distinction, that is needed. Such an ontogenesis does not require a separate ethics, an external set of rules to regulate or direct its operations, for there is no one subject or agent of ontogenesis but the comings into being of different orders of agent and action, and of action and ideal. Actions without agents – such as the embryo’s capacity to make itself – are always directed by an ideal, that is, a plan, a manner of being oriented to a world. Ethics is the ‘ethology’, the modes of interaction, of action and passion, between agents (of various orders, including those above and below the level of the human subject) and ideals. Such an ethology, the study of the actions and passions, or as Spinoza calls them, the speeds and slownesses of living beings, cannot be reduced to the study of the behaviour of animals. More broadly, it must be understood, as by the founders of ethology – Jakob von Uexküll, Konrad Lorenz, Nikolaas Tinbergen – as the study of animals and the worlds that animal occupy. So it is the study of the actions and passions of animals, including the human animal, in their specific worlds, the worlds that in advance of their existence are already laid out in a manner that enables their existence – that is, in a manner that always already orients how they address their worlds. The individual can only produce ideals for themselves – and all individuals do – to the extent that such ideals pre-exist them, and direct the manner of their bodily and conceptual self-formation.

RH: ‘New materialism’ is a post-humanist theoretical position that emphasises the unpredictable behaviour of organic and inorganic matter as the basis for a new politics, a politics which affirms the openness of matter as the basis for agencies that function beyond the freedom that used to be restricted to human consciousness. While you share the new materialist interest in going beyond the human in thinking indetermina-tion, it seems to me that the openness of forces that your work emphasises pertains to forces that exceed, precede, and even condition materiality. For instance, in *The Nick of Time*, you privilege duration qua Bergson as that which is outside and before matter, as that which dynamises matter with virtuality. In *Becoming Undone* and especially in your new book, *The Incorporeal*, you emphasise the fundamental importance of the incorporeal as the very threshold of the untimely, of difference. How do you understand the incorporeal and how does this differ from materialism or new materialism’s emphasis on the unpredictability behaviour of matter?

EG: I have understood my work as materialist from the beginning. But the more I thought about questions of corporeality, and about the problems and limits of

Cartesian, that is, dualist, conceptions of mind and body, it was clear that most forms of materialism were either or both mechanistic or reductionist, either understanding matter as passive and requiring an external impetus, or as the 'real' cause of psychical and conceptual phenomena. We have in a lifetime observed the emergence of a fully blown materialist reductionism in the biological sciences, from psychology, which has reduced behaviour and experience to the brain, and reduced the brain itself to its cognitive structure to evolutionary biology, where living individuals and species are reducible to genes and their struggles for survival. There is something about a rigorous materialism that tends to reductionism, and reductionism (where the mind is really the brain, and the brain is really its neural networks, the body is really its genetic structure, etc) that always tends to explain away the mind, consciousness, the psychic, thought. What Descartes, in spite of evident limitations, makes clear is that thinking occurs, its characteristics are not the same as matter even as it is clear that there is some connection between the mental and the material.

The problem with materialism is its tendency to reductionism. This tendency means that materialism cannot be aware of its own conditions of existence, the pre- or immaterial conditions that enable what is material to emerge and moreover, enable us to think or philosophise about matter. These conditions I have called, following the Stoics, the incorporeal. By this they mean four things in particular, four immaterial conditions without which matter could not materialise itself. The Stoics understand these as the void, space, time, and sense (or the sayable). These are not material, insofar as they neither effect nor are effected by material relations. Indeed, it is not even clear that they 'exist' as such. Rather, they subsist as the incorporeal conditions which enable the universe of matter to come into being or destroy itself, to occupy space and time and to be sayable, to generate a world of language. This makes sense to me. Space and time are the conditions under which material objects exist, come into being, go out of being, and change themselves without these incorporeals changing themselves. And sense is the condition under which something material, including the actions and passions of a body, can mean something, have a sense that lasts beyond the material existence of these actions and passions, and even of this body. To be rigorous and committed materialists, as were the Stoics, is to also find oneself committed to the incorporeal conditions of matter.

Space and time are not so difficult to conceptualise as incorporeal. They exert whatever force they have not directly but only through the particular kinds of relations they enable between material things. This is also true of sayables, that is, of predicates. Insofar as the subject of a proposition is material, for the Stoics, the predicate is incorporeal. But let us say, for us, language is more than material, an excess of meaning over materiality. This idea of the unspoken, unacknowledged conditions of materiality drew me to the concept of the incorporeal which is the orientation or immanent conditions for matter to take the forms it does.

RH: In your thought materiality is of the present, it is the actually lived, whereas the incorporeal is no less real but of a different order, a virtual order, an order that exists between moments (of the present), that exists as becoming. Could you speak about the way that time pertains to the concept of the incorporeal and materiality?

EG: Complicated. I don't think that the virtual should be identified with the incorporeal. The incorporeal is unchangeable, given the abstract frame or frames for all of materiality. That is why it is to be identified not with things that exist, but as what subsists to uphold or enable things. Space and time, to take the two most straightforward incorporeals, are neither virtual or actual. Rather, they are the conditions under which the actual and the virtual make themselves, become, change. The process of actualisation is always a process of materialisation. The virtual is itself a push in materiality to some rather than other elaborations or developments. There is a point of conjunction, however, between the virtual and the incorporeals. The incorporeals are never present, never actual, always persisting in the infinite past and the infinite future. And similarly, the virtual is never fully in the present and never fully actualised, but always already there and always carried with what will become.

I think that these are the terms of two different discourses. The language of the virtual and the actual, as you know, is Bergsonian; the language of incorporeals and materialism is Stoic. They come together, sort of, in the writings of Deleuze, who addresses them both, though in different texts, and never directly (in *Bergsonism*, and *The Logic of Sense* respectively).⁵

To focus on the question of time more directly, it is very difficult to understand time as material. It may be impossible to do so. The more we focus on temporality in itself, the less able we are to understand it. We seem to confuse things that occur in time – events, historical changes, even ageing – with the time in which they occur. This is because there is something transparent, as it were, about time's forces. Indeed, it is not clear that time has any force, any more than does space: they are the conditions under which things have forces, and forces can be exerted. They are the conditions under which materiality materialises, engages with other forms of materiality, changes without materialising or changing themselves. They have no virtuality, nor any actuality, but, as the Stoics recognised, they half-exist, they uphold the existence of things without any qualities of things.

RH: Your new book, *The Incorporeal*, distinguishes between onto-ethics and politics. Would you speak more about the relationship between these two concepts?

EG: Another difficult question. For me, what differentiates ethics and politics, and this difference is more provisional than actual, is who and what they address. Politics is about collective life, life in common, life made with and perhaps against others. In this sense, it must address past, present, and future (as does any ethics worthy of the name). Ethics, in my particular use of this term, is about how a subject, a human subject, addresses its being and becoming in relation to its actions and their place in a larger world. Ethics, as I have mentioned, is not only about individual well-being, although that is one of its crucial dimensions: it is about addressing and living with the conditions of one's own existence, an existence dependent on a great chain of others on whom one's existence depends and which one's existence affects. It is not about the accomplishment of good or bad actions, for these require a form of judgment that is not necessary for

⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (trans Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam) (Zone 1992); and Deleuze, *Logic of Sense* (trans Mark Lester with Charles Stivale) (Althone Press 1990).

ethics to occur. Ethics, as I take it from the Stoics, is about addressing what it is in one's power to address, and understanding its difference from what we have no power to address. It is about living life in circumstances no one controls and trying to live up to ideals one chooses for oneself. Such an ethics is not an alternative to politics: in choosing one we do not thereby address the other. But what kinds of politics one commits oneself to undertaking is a question of ethics. I don't think that ethics is a pre-condition of politics or politics as it were, writ small; nor is politics collective ethics. But the relation of a self that questions its conditions of existence, that seeks its place in a larger world, is already a step towards political and collective possibilities of action. One may, in the real world, discover politics or ethics 'first'. But because they address different but related questions of how to live in a changing world, they are linked spheres, perhaps like Venn diagrams, that overlap a little in their orientations, but address them in sometimes different ways.

RH: Your current work also refers to onto-aesthetics – how is that distinguished from and related to onto-ethics?⁶

EG: I have become interested in the relations between ethics and aesthetics partly through the work of Gilbert Simondon, who sees them as parallel but different ways in which technologies and religions must augment themselves. If we think of ethics as the self-reflective manner of addressing the question, not of what is good but of how to live, we can understand aesthetics, no longer as a question directed to the beautiful, but of how to create, to make what has not existed before, and in that process, to bring into being a people, not just individuals or an audience but a constituency, that does not yet exist. Aesthetics in this sense does not replace ethics; rather, both consist in an attempt to address and bring into being a future that moves beyond us. Aesthetics is the capacity to understand production and the production of more than an object – the production of an object whose qualities function to generate affects, whose qualities are in excess of use, that is, the utility of the present. Both ethics and aesthetics address the untimely, what has not yet been brought into existence but is a virtuality in our present actions.

RH: Luce Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference is one of the most significant influences on your thought, even if you take your distance from the cultural and social concerns that are a focus of most of her recent work to focus on sexual difference as a pre- and post-human force of differentiation.⁷ In the terms of Irigaray's project, the individual is always sexuate – male or female – and this means that the individual has a sexed relationship to the world, to her or to his mother, to others of her or his sex, and towards others of the other sex.⁸ Your current work on the ontogenesis of individuals emphasises that the individual emerges from pre-individual forces.

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, 'Irigaray, the Untimely and the Constitution of an Onto-Ethics' (2017) 43(1) *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 15.

⁷ As above and Grosz above note 1.

⁸ For instance, see Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (trans Carolyn Burke and Gillian C Gill) (Cornell University Press 1993); and Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (trans Stephen Pluhacek) (Continuum 2008).

The relations which constitute us and our social and personal connections are ontological as much as and before, they are cultural. They *are* what we think and how we think. Before there are individuals, things, beings, forms of consciousness and human relations, there are real forces, real actions, real histories and geographies, forms and directions of sense, that make individuals possible and constitute their conditions of existence and flourishing. There is a pre-individual real, the forces that pre-exist any and all individuals, the forces that make life (and things) in all its differences, and through the relations of composition and decomposition that things and forms of life undergo.⁹

How would you conceptualise sexual difference in light of this concept of the pre-individual? Are these forces sexed, which is to ask, is sexual difference a pre-individual force of differentiation?

EG: This is another very difficult question!! I don't see how Simondon's concept of the pre-individual – the order of metastability whose slightest perturbations in a specific region begin to differentiate individuating processes as a mode of resolving tensions or incompatibilities between pre-individual forces – can be sexed insofar as it is differentiated but has no identities within it. It is the not non-sexed but also not-yet sexed conditions for the emergence of life, which becomes sexed at some point in its evolutionary complications, that is, at some level above the single-celled organism. Sexual difference as lived or morphological difference is a strategy, a very, very efficient strategy, that at some point simple organisms or rather, species, 'invent' to ensure the ever-increasing difference of offspring from their progenitors. It proved to be a remarkably successful strategy for the processes of individuating and elaborating the forces of lived difference, a strategy not invented by any one, but by the forces of the pre-individual itself. And once it emerges as a form of higher order individuation (an individuation that requires prior individuations), it never disappears but becomes the engine for the production of ever-increasing differences and forces of differentiation. The pre-individual in itself is not sexed; but each development and elaboration of the pre-individual is not itself separate from the potentials that the pre-individual, an ever-changing pre-individual, contains. It becomes sexed once sexual difference is 'invented' or emerges in evolutionary conditions. So to answer your question as directly as I can, the individual – and especially the human individual but also most forms of living individual – are, as Irigaray suggests, irremediably sexed. Nature is irremediably sexed, though not always in the bifurcated manner of human or mammalian sex, even if the pre-individual is, as it were, pre-sexed just as it is pre-individual. The pre-individual has no identity but is the condition under which an individuated being, an identity of any kind or complexity, can provisionally and temporarily make itself: as pre-individual, there can be no sex as such. But the germ of, the orientation to, sexual difference must be there as much as the tendency to physical, biological, psychical, and collective being. An individuated being has always already differentiated and individuated itself from the pre-individual through the generation of more and more complicated differentiations, of which sex is the most biologically simple (remembering that biology is itself an individuated and individuating order

⁹ Grosz above note 6 at 9.

of the pre-individual). The forces of sexual difference are the powerful conditions, not of single-celled organisms or the most elementary forms of life, but of all their evolutionary heirs, and to that extent, its tendency must also have been contained in potential, or virtually, in even the earliest and most simple life-forms. I think that life is always already sexed in the sense that sexual difference, in the various forms it takes for life on earth, is the elaboration of forces, tendencies, already there in all forms of life, perhaps even in the very forces of the universe that extract from chance alignments of chemicals the conditions under which life-forms may emerge and evolve.

RH: Thank you.