



Interview with Professor Elizabeth Grosz¹

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We would like to thank you for your lovely participation in this interview section of the dossier on *Deconstruction and Alterity* of *Sapere Aude* journal, from the Philosophy Department of Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Minas Gerais, Brasil. It is to us a real pleasure being able to establish a vivacious and contemporary philosophical dialogue with your thought.

¹ Elizabeth Grosz was born in Sydney, Australia and gained her BA (Hons) and PhD in Philosophy from the Department of General Philosophy, University of Sydney, where she taught as a lecturer and senior lecturer from 1978-1991. She moved to Monash University in Melbourne as Director of the newly formed the Institute of Critical and Cultural Studies in 1992, where she was Associate Professor and Professor in Critical Theory and Philosophy. She has been a Visiting Professor at University of California, Santa Cruz, University of California, Davis, Johns Hopkins University, the University of Richmond, George Washington University and the University of California, Irvine and The Duke University. She has several published books and articles, such as *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (1989), *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (1990), *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (1995), *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space* (2001), *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely* (2004), *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (2005), *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (2008), *Becoming Undone. Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics and Art* (2011).

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1. *Sapere Aude*: The relation between logocentrism and binary structure brings to bear correlations that confer value on some terms and, necessarily, relegate others to a marginal plane, forming pairs of opposites, such as presence and absence, positivity and negativity, etc. In creating this dual form of reasoning, you point out, in your 1986 essay "Derrida and the Limits of Philosophy", that from Derrida the history of logocentrism is also a way of verifying how "logocentrism has, in certain texts, deconstructed itself" (1986, p. 28). If on one hand, "Deconstruction is thus neither the critical destruction of logocentrism, nor is it merely an attempt to 'correct' it: both these alternatives are impossible. The 'end of metaphysics' is simply another metaphysical concept. Deconstruction does not offer a depth to the superficiality of metaphysics, nor a metatheoretical understanding of its lacunae," on the other hand, "Its aim is the more provisional one of exploring the limits of tolerance of these metaphysical systems, pressing them to a point of cracking."

Relating this analysis to feminist criticism – as can be seen on pages 38 and following – deconstruction is said to have radically changed the logical structure of philosophy as well as the role that Feminism played from then on. In this regard, do you think that the expression *difference* used by Derrida is still significant nowadays to qualify the various current feminist perspectives?

Elizabeth Grosz: Absolutely, I think that Derrida's work is still relevant for feminism, and perhaps even more relevant now than ever before. In a similar way, his work is crucial for any critical reading of the history and present of philosophy itself, from which feminist theory takes many concepts and to which it may direct a number of criticisms. In my opinion – and this is certainly not a dominant or major position within feminist theory – the concept of difference, invented by Ferdinand de Saussure in establishing structuralist linguistics a century ago, and elaborated in very different directions in the work of Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (among others) remains the most single significant philosophical concept in feminist thought today. Without the concept of difference which complicates, affirms and problematizes all sorts of concepts of identity, political struggles, and philosophical projects revert to seemingly given concepts of identity, individuality and consciousness that Derrida (and the others) have so convincingly shown cannot be given but must be invented, produced, and which in turn

generate forms of power and modes of exclusion. Difference has barely been thought, even a century after it was named as such. When this concept can be thought, its relations to one's 'identity' as a man or a woman, as a migrant or a native, as working class or as bourgeois must transform our very understanding of politics, of democracy, and of thinking itself.

2. *Sapere Aude*. How would you combine – or try to establish on a relational plane, even if outside a binary structure – the concepts of Essentialism and Deconstruction? There are some philosophers who do not see Deconstruction as the end stop to feminist demands. However, the variation of perspectives in Feminism is not highlighted by means of a concern for interlocution, but rather by an opposition that resonates in various ways. From Drucilla Cornell to Mac Kinnon, from Robin West to Deborah Rhode, to name only those who discuss a feminist jurisprudence, there cannot be found among them a unitary or homogeneous form of thinking about the problems concerning readings of Essentialism and Deconstruction with respect to feminist questions. We therefore ask you: do you consider pertinent that dynamics of feminist interlocution are addressed alongside interpretative particularities? And among these particularities, which are those that you assume today are the most relevant?

Elizabeth Grosz: I am not sure what you are asking here. If you are asking about the distinction between essentialism (the belief in a fixed or given essence, whether biological or psychological) and deconstruction, then this relation is more complicated than it seems. Deconstruction does not aim at the transformation of essence, but rather, at its own self-undoing. I don't see how we can do without a concept of essence, especially if we are committed to some kind of theory of social constructionism (the belief that biological and psychological characteristics are socially created): to construct anything, we must have raw materials. It is deconstruction that makes it clear that, to the degree we want to expel a concept (like essence) is the degree to which we remain bound up in it. Or to put it another way, without some unarguable assumptions, no theory, no model, no understanding, can develop.

But perhaps you are asking a different question, a question about differences among feminist theorists, in jurisprudence or elsewhere. This is a much more complex question. There have been various debates raging in feminist theory for several decades, at the least: the dispute between those deemed essentialists and those who consider themselves constructionists; relations of sexed oppression and their relation to other forms of oppression (race, class, ethnicity and so on); and which (male) models inform feminist theory. These disputes are no easier to resolve than any other political and intellectual differences. In some cases, claims are incommensurable, that is, unable to be addressed from certain conceptual positions; in other cases, there are very real differences between feminists as to how to proceed in any particular endeavour. Deconstruction is seen by some feminists (myself included) as an essential technique for feminist thought; no doubts others regard it as just another form of patriarchal thought and therefore deserving of suspicion.

My own position in these various debates is not easy to state. I always tend to be attracted to concepts that many feminists want to most severely criticize (like thinking about nature, or essence, or materiality, or questions of the animal as relevant to feminist thought). Or concepts that were very powerful at one moment in feminist thought but that have become less relevant in the present (like Valerie Solanas or Shulamith Firestone). Derrida's work, for me, is immensely important, but so is the work of many in my field (continental philosophy), whom one can read against the grain, or in different terms than others. So rather than criticize various feminist positions that I don't particularly agree with, I would prefer to see what is useful, what singularity or insight an author might offer, however problematic his or her work might be, and even if I disagree with his or her claims.

3. *Sapere Aude*. Still elaborating on the previous question, would you please comment on the old theme of the complex interplay between the body and its cultural context? Do you establish interlocutions on this theme with 21st century feminists? Furthermore, have you assumed it as a theme that is always – more so every day – up to date?

Elizabeth Grosz: The relations between living bodies, especially human bodies, and culture, socially and historically variable relations has been an 'old theme' but, like

difference itself, it is still not well understood. Bodies, whether material or living, are always linked to nature as much as to culture. Cultures vary greatly in how they produce a culturally specific and appropriate social being through the regulation of bodies and through them, consciousness. But even so, cultures are inevitably connected to, and a part of, a nature that they don't adequately control. What the specific relations between bodies and societies at particular historical moments tells us a great deal about both body and culture. This will continue to be a central theme for all of us who live in the conjunction of nature and culture.

4. *Sapere Aude*. In more recent texts such as *Volatile Bodies* (1994), and in a certain way also in *The Nick of Time* (2004) and in *Time Travels* (2005), you bring back the body issue to philosophy in a very emphatic way. The deconstruction of dichotomies plays an important role in this ambience, especially in dichotomy between nature and culture, bringing to bear the vivacity of the natural, even understanding that "nature is the ground, the condition or field in which culture erupts or emerges as a supervening quality not contained in nature but derived from it", as can be read in *Time Travels – Feminism, Nature, Power*, published in 2005.

In addition, it might be said that from the combination of Derridean (with his *différance*) and Irigarayan (with her irreducibility of sexual difference and reconceptualization of space) perspectives, you rework the notion of *chora* in search of a feminist ontology of female subjectivity that is not enslaved to the formation of masculine disembodied subjectivity. In this regard, you reread Darwin's theory from a non-dichotomized standpoint, withdrawing from the essentialist view of nature commonly addressed in philosophy. In this way, you actually propose a new idea of indeterminacy instead of relying on hegemonic natural and social determinism, linking nature and culture in a rather innovative way. What would you say are the consequences of your view for feminist thinking? How can this re-appropriation of Darwinian theory interact with Feminism nowadays and replace fixed dichotomized thought?

Elizabeth Grosz: Darwin is one of the most under-rated thinkers in feminist thought. Although with Marx and Freud – their influence on feminist thought is incontestable –

Darwin forms the horizon of the great shift in thought in the nineteenth century, away from the human subject as the center of thought, Darwin's influence on feminist thought is very minor. What he shows, as no-one else does, is that the force of sexual selection – a force that differentiates the two sexes from each other more and more over the passage of time – is a force at least equivalent to the force of natural selection, or the survival of the fittest. He has shown that long before the evolution of man, indeed before the evolutionary separation of plants from animals, that sexual selection is a force on life that is irreducible to natural selection, and which complicates and renders natural selection unpredictable. For him, sexual selection helps to explain not only the generation of various species, but also the existence of characteristics that may problematize life by intensifying beauty or attractiveness. In other words, and rather ironically, if we return to Darwin's own writings, we see confirmation of the work of Irigaray on the irreducibility of sexual difference and one of the most powerful forces operating in the production and transformation of life. More than that, Darwin also makes clear that no species, including the human, has an ideal form, one perfectly suited to its environment; rather, each species is made up of differences without norm or ideal, variations that are as wide as possible, including racial, class, geographical and national differences. He provides us with a way of rigorously thinking of difference as the engine of all of life, not just of human forms of representation. In this, he opens up new questions for feminist theory, just as Marx and Freud did for previous generations of feminist thinkers. It is now up to us to rethink how we understand nature and the animal species from which we have come. This is part of a feminist project to understand the place of the human – in all its variations – in the world and of rethinking the divisions that characterize the human.

Sapere Aude: Dear Professor Elizabeth Grosz, we thank you dearly for your disposal and amiability. It is really a great honor for us to have you here for this interview.

Sapere Aude's questions to Elizabeth Grosz.

(Reference text: Elizabeth Grosz. *Derrida and the Limits of Philosophy*. Thesis Eleven No. 14, 1986).