



REVIEW ESSAY

Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2017. Pp. xi + 322. ISBN: 978-0231181631. Paper. \$25.00.

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ABSTRACT

Critical theorist Elizabeth Grosz moves beyond the New Materialism she previously espoused and argues for a monism that avoids reductive materialism, holding that materiality is inconceivable without its immaterial frame. She also argues that this position ought to serve as the basis for an immanent and non-normative ontoethics. I give a summation and review of the book before offering an argument against such an approach to ethics. I also offer a related critique of the tendency, widespread within critical theory, to consider all transcendence oppressive.

Martin E. Turkis II

Elizabeth Grosz is an established feminist philosopher working in the area of cultural theory. She is often credited as a leading voice in the movement known as New Materialism, a perspectival shift within the world of critical theory which questions the traditional dominance within that field of linguistic and social constructivism, tempering such concerns with an increased attention to corporeality—the role of embodiedness, material objects, and matter generally construed—in the matrix of philosophical, social, and political concerns that are the core subject matter of critical theory. As an evolution within this milieu, the “new” marks the movement off more from the dialectical materialism of Marxism (which often tends to treat material objects as purely *economic* entities) rather than from the sorts of physicalisms that one finds in analytic philosophy.

I mention this as prelude because it sets the stage for Grosz’s latest book, *The Incorporeal*, in which she moves beyond the New Materialism by arguing that, in her lovely phrase, “materiality exceeds materialism” (5).¹ By this she means to draw attention to “the framing conditions of materiality that cannot themselves be material” (5), “the subsistence of the ideal in the material or corporeal” (4), or, alternatively, “an extra-materialism [understood as] the inherence of ideality, conceptuality, meaning, or orientation that persists in

relation to and within materiality as its...incorporeal conditions" (5). She explicitly disavows both idealism and dualism and as the text proceeds makes some positive gestures toward some forms of objective idealism. Nevertheless, one of her principal aims is to avoid privileging "ideality over materiality," preferring to "think them together, as fundamentally connected and incapable of each being...without the other to direct and support it" (12), a position which could potentially align with a Polanyian or post-critical orientation. Ultimately, she hopes that such an ontology will open the way for the development of a non-normative ontoethics "that addresses not just...interhuman relations, but relations between the human and an entire world, both organic and inorganic" (1).

The bulk of the book is dedicated to a historical and genealogical project of sorts, in which Grosz articulates an alternative, extramaterialist minority report existing within the larger Western philosophical tradition, which, on her reading, tends too much towards dualisms that favor the immaterial over the material or (later) become too reductively materialist as the fray moves to Quinean desert landscapes. The readings Grosz offers are rich, informative, generally fair to her subjects, and serve as an important resource to those interested in alternatives to reductive materialisms of any stripe.

Her genealogy begins with the Stoics, who come close to articulating a complete ontoethical system of the sort she wants to argue for by positing incorporeals that "are the modes...the conditions under which things exist, extend themselves, live in time, and come to produce effects or sense," and for whom the incorporeal, like the divine "is not of a different order than materiality but is coextensive with it" (32, 24). From there she dives into Spinoza, whom she argues is systematically "both a dualist and a monist simultaneously," advocating "a single substance that speaks in...two attributes," the corporeal and the incorporeal (80). In Grosz's view, Spinoza thus properly gathers together and mends the ontological damage done by influential dualists like Plato and Descartes. Furthermore, through his ethics of *conatus*—the striving toward self-enhancement of all things—his philosophy prepares the way for Nietzsche, the will to power, and *amor fati*.

While Nietzsche is often taken to be a materialist, Grosz argues that he is of a piece with Spinoza and the Stoics since wills, power, and the like are part of the incorporeal frame of materiality. Thus for Grosz, Nietzsche continues the development of an incorporeal position "which is both an ontology and an ethics inseparably" in which "the eternal return, Nietzsche's rewriting of the pre-Christian Stoic conception of providence" recovers Stoicism from its dualist appropriation by Christianity (112, 115). As will be seen later, however, it is not at all clear that right-minded people, Grosz included, will be pleased by the direction such a Nietzschean ethic may take.

Nevertheless, a critical element of Grosz's project is the emphatic claim that while there is indubitably an immaterial frame that suffuses material reality, this immateriality is not to be construed as transcendent or separate from the physical world. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the chronological end-point of the genealogy is Deleuze, whom she argues "is responsible for a new philosophy of presence (and...a new idealism) in which immanence is conceived as one" (136).

Before examining Grosz's treatment of Deleuze further, we must mention the last two chapters in her genealogy in which she explores the work of a pair of lesser-known French figures by whom Deleuze was influenced and who may well be of interest to scholars of Polanyi: Gilbert Simondon, with his concept of the preindividual and Raymond Ruyer, who conceptualizes the world as an embryo in the process of embryogenesis. Their role in the genealogy supports the more central figure of Deleuze; however, their presence is

helpful in making their work better known to Anglophone audiences working outside the sphere of continental philosophy. Simondon and Ruyer are fascinating in their own right.

Returning to Deleuze, Grosz argues that his plane of immanence, populated, as it is, “only by Spinozan/Nietzschean forces” (140), brings together the various incorporeal threads she has teased out of the interstices in the Western tradition and explains how “thought [and] concepts are possible both because living beings are capable of feeling, intuiting, perceiving and also because of the way the world is, the excess of order that also includes sense” (149). As with her analysis of the earlier thinkers on her list, this ontology of immanence purportedly gives rise to a non-normative ethical project in which the self achieves its highest good by first accepting its fate—that it (the self) is in essence an embodied will-to-power—and then by operating not under “a generalizable code of conduct,” but rather “a system of *self-assay*, in which one’s actions are undertaken and regulated according to principles *immanent to them...self-defined parameters* that individuals of all kinds may develop to regulate their encounters with others and the world in *the most positive manner*” (133, emphasis added).

Positive is the give-away, however, since it does not seem to be subject to the law of self-definition. There is always, as Polanyi recognized, a normative horizon tacitly at work in the ethical, even when the agent explicitly eschews normativity as a chimera. For instance, in Deleuze and Guattari’s *One Thousand Plateaus* a latent moral rage at hypocrisy is palpably, sometimes hilariously, present. Yet according to Grosz, “there is nothing prescriptive in [Deleuze’s] work, only an analysis...of what is and can become, nothing of the ‘should,’ but only the virtual ‘could’” (132). The ability of a formidable intellect of the stature of Grosz to overlook this latent normativity is important to consider, for it seems to indicate that the moral inversion that Polanyi saw as manifest in Nazi, fascist, Bolshevik, and other atrocities in the 20th century may yet be an imminent danger in the 21st.

Let us consider this from a somewhat different angle. Grosz’s book was published in 2017, which means that she was likely arranging the details of her manuscript at about the same time that Neo-Nazi Richard Spencer was working out the details of 2017’s white supremacist Unite the Right event in Charlottesville, the heinous rally where Heather Heyer, a woman participating in anti-fascist counter-protests provoked by Unite the Right, was tragically killed when another Neo-Nazi, James Alex Fields, Jr., drove his car into a crowd of people protesting the rally.

According to Spencer himself, he found the moral freedom to truly embrace Nazism and white nationalism by being “‘red-pilled by Nietzsche’” (Wood 2017). He then rebranded the white nationalist movement as the alt-right and proceeded to give it an aesthetic makeover (leather, spikes, and shaved heads were traded for suits and fashies—a high-and-tight haircut favored by hipster and *Hitler-jugend* alike). More seriously, reading *The Genealogy of Morals* sent him into a “vertiginous spiral of awakening and reassessment” whose “general effect, *an inversion of his moral universe*, was ‘shattering’” (ibid., emphasis added).

Participants in Unite the Right are often painted as uncouth roughnecks—and no doubt many are. However, Polanyi rightly noted that

It was [and is] a mistake to regard the Nazi as an untaught savage. His bestiality was carefully nurtured by speculations closely reflecting Marxian influence. His contempt for humanitarian ideals had a century of philosophic schooling behind it. The Nazi disbelieved in public morality the way we disbelieve in witchcraft. It is not that he had never heard of it; he simply thought he had valid grounds for asserting that such a thing cannot exist. If you

told him the contrary, he would think you peculiarly old-fashioned or simply dishonest... In such men the traditional forms for holding moral ideals had been shattered and their moral passions diverted into the only channels which a strictly mechanistic conception of man and society left open to them. We may describe this as a process of moral inversion. The morally inverted person has not merely performed a philosophic substitution of material purposes for moral aims; he is acting with the whole force of his homeless moral passions within a purely materialistic framework of purposes (*M*, 17-18).

This is an apt description of Spencer, a self-avowed atheist who dreams of a white, Christian ethno-state, a position whose coherence he defends by recurring to a Nietzschean ontoethics (Wood 2017). But whose Christianity would this be? It would most certainly not be recognizable to Dorothy Sayers, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Pope Francis, or the Christian anarchists who founded the cooperatives of Mondragón, in Basque Country.

I do not want to spend much more time on Spencer, a figure whose media moment has (hopefully) passed, and I most certainly do not mean to insinuate that Grosz's own politics are in line with Spencer's—I have no doubt that she and I would be united in standing against the likes of Spencer and his ilk. Yet for all that, it is crucial to note that on Grosz's account of an immanent ontoethics there are no resources beyond competing wills-to-power and their attendant immanent aesthetic preferences to adjudicate between Spencer's self-defined vision of a white ethno-state and any other set of self-defined aesthetic parameters. All are equally immanent, all may be equally consistent aesthetically (and if not, then consistency be damned—it is simply an aesthetic parameter itself which, if not self-defined, can be unceremoniously jettisoned). What would be required to adjudicate between such options would, of course, be some kind of transcendence, yet in *The Incorporeal*, as generally in the milieu of critical theory, any sort of transcendence is *verboden*, the marginalized other in a simplistic and unscrutinized binary opposition which sets it off against immanence, the binary pole always to be preferred, as Graham Harmon has pointed out.²

The fact that the identification and deconstruction of such axiomatic binaries is one of the classic methodological tools of critical theory makes this a particularly disappointing pill to swallow since it effectively cuts Grosz off from serious dialogue with a range of positions that could potentially enrich her project. This is because any position which a) overtly affirms transcendence in some form or another, and b) forms a part of what critical theorists take to be the dominant trends in Western thought will be unlikely to be taken seriously.

For instance, Grosz asserts that “the ancients could not conceive of an order that is neither stable nor unstable, neither being nor nothing,” (172) but this is clearly not the case, and one does not have to dive deep into esoterica to find counterexamples. After all, Plato himself, in *Republic V*, describes opinion, the noetic power we exercise over the things that make up the sensible world, as the power set over “what is intermediate between what purely is and what in no way is...[that which] is...and is not” (477a).

When he appears, Plato is always the villain in this tale, yet there is never any clear reference to anything he wrote beyond vague gestures toward potted histories of the theory of Forms. There is no indication of any awareness of the open scholarly debates over the separation of the Forms—debates which are very relevant to her project—nor of the fact that ancient conceptions of the immanent and transcendent arguably tended more toward a symbiotic relationship of superimposition rather than a reified binary either-or.

Similarly, Grosz dismisses Aristotelian hylomorphism as “separation and privileging of form over matter” and “a significant conceptual obstacle to...thoroughgoing understanding” (170). This would be a surprise to Aristotle, who thought he was doing precisely the reverse, since in his view Plato had indeed gone too far in elevating the immaterial and was thus in need of a corrective that would “conceive of ideality and materiality...beyond their representation in binarized forms” (249)—ironically, precisely the task Grosz has set for herself. It is fair enough to offer concrete arguments to the effect that Aristotle’s hylomorphism fails to do the trick, but to fail to recognize that one’s own metaphysical project is, to a significant degree, the *same one undertaken by Aristotle* is problematic, to say the least. Relatedly, Grosz seems unaware of the wave of current Neo-Aristotelian scholarship and that some established contemporary hylomorphists take themselves to be nonreductive monists—again, one of the descriptions she gives of her own position.

There are likewise possible fruitful connections to currents in contemporary analytic philosophy that go unexplored. Some which spring quickly to mind would be the debates arising from David Chalmers’ proposed hard problem of consciousness—explorations of terrain including but not limited to (again) contemporary hylomorphism, nonreductive physicalism, and contemporary panpsychism (this last is especially unfortunate, since Grosz comes to a number of panpsychist conclusions herself and points out panpsychist tendencies in Simondon and Ruyer) as well as debates between constructive empiricists, scientific realists, and ontic structural realists in analytic philosophy of science. Admittedly, an academic gulf lies between analytic philosophy and Grosz’s own domain of critical theory, yet she also overlooks potential resources in the recent wave of continental metaphysics known as speculative realism, fertile ground which lies much closer to her own area of expertise.

Thus Grosz, in her haste to lay out a philosophical project which must be opposed to what she takes the dominant dualist tradition to be, overlooks the nuances and complexity of that “tradition” and perhaps misses some allies and resources in the process. Nonetheless, Grosz’s offering does significant intellectual work insofar as it helps to set the stage for a more rigorous and thoroughgoing dialogue between critical theory and other movements of thought that tend to occupy separate silos in the academy. This is an important step because dissatisfaction with reductive materialism is widespread across a range of disciplines, and we are in need of high-quality interdisciplinary work that makes and interrogates rigorous metaphysical and ethical connections between the ancients, analytic and continental philosophy, cultural theory, current science, orthodox and heterodox political economy, the arts, and music. There is, after all, much to learn from one another and to agree on, and at the end of the day, it is difficult to disagree with Grosz when she affirms that

The good life is a wise life in which we address what we can control with thorough preparation, through the cultivation of our virtues and the appropriate actions it engenders, extending further and further, through our own body, into the social and collective bodies we share with others and through to all the bodies that constitute the universe (51).

ENDNOTES

¹All references to Grosz 2017 unless otherwise noted.

²According to Harmon, one of the axioms of new materialism and closely related positions is that “the world is purely immanent, and it’s a good thing, because any transcendence would be oppressive” (2016 location 281).

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