Idealism: A Conversation with Elizabeth Grosz

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This conversation focuses on ideas related to Elizabeth Grosz’s recent book *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (2017). She has written with power and grace on a wide range of other important philosophical topics, from feminism and sexual difference to Darwinian evolution and temporality, and from Luce Irigaray and Jacques Lacan to Henri Bergson and Gilles Deleuze, just to mention a few. The (epistolary) conversation was conducted at various points from fall 2019 to fall 2020. – JP

Justin Prystash: As a way to begin, I’d like to draw our readers’ attention to a wonderful conversation you had with Vikki Bell, published in *Theory, Culture & Society* in May 2017, where you discuss your most recent book, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism* (Columbia UP, 2017). In that interview you state: “Idealism, the existence of a work of ideas, affects, thoughts, is in many ways one of the most repressed and underrepresented traditions in philosophy, since the work of Marx.” Why do you think idealism has been and continues to be disavowed and misunderstood? Is it solely because idealism is “associated with femininity and its attributes,” or are there additional reasons?

Elizabeth Grosz: Idealism has been rather strongly represented in philosophy from the Greeks through to Kant and Hegel. I don’t think that they could be considered feminine or feminist, not at least without some argument. When it is a dominant tradition, as idealism was until basically the nineteenth century, it tends,
with rare exceptions, to privilege pure ideas, ideas that are either “clear and distinct” as in Descartes, or ideas in their most unambiguous, clearest and most minimal form, as in Plato or in Aristotelian logic. This purity can be guaranteed or made more likely only through rigorous training in logic, in clarifying ideas, drawing out their essences, looking at their clearest expressions—in other words, in a process of testing, checking, regulating, and organizing ideas into an ordered system. As it has appeared in a lot of the history of philosophy, idealism is capable of being just as phallocentric as its other, materialism. Access to ideas has been guarded in the history of philosophy, to those with reason, or capable of being trained in it, those for whom the body does not interfere too much with the functioning of clear ideas. In reducing the body to a form of interference with rational thought, clarity, or knowledge, idealisms of various kinds initiated Western philosophy into the philosophical phallocentrism that has marked more or less all of the philosophy that comes after. Idealism feminizes the material as materialism feminizes the idea. I would not suggest that an untrammeled and uncriticized idealism is more valuable or less problematic than even simple forms of materialism.

This is perhaps a background that helps explain the true revolution that Marx’s work undertook. In turning upside down the ontologies of social and cultural life, he invented a more sophisticated and nuanced, that is, a less mechanical or Newtonian, conception of matter. Matter was that which is transformable naturally or through labor, not simply that which was causally connected to what comes before it. Matter, in other words, is that which could be utilized, made available, and changed. In the following decades, both scientific or Newtonian mechanical materialism and Marxist historical materialism flourished in their very different directions. With the transformation of physics that came with the Einsteinian revolution, and Bohr’s opening up of the sub-atomic order, a new kind of materialism replaced or augmented Newtonianism. And with the development of neo-Marxisms, from Lenin and Trotsky to Althusser, a less reductive dialectical materialism came to dominate cultural and political analysis, including elements or factions of feminist thought. These materialisms, now associated with knowable epistemic systems, generate their own feminized other—ideality, idealism, the idea itself, which is now construed as a passive effect of active forces (of labor, of the material world, of elementary particles). I was attracted to rethinking idealism, or at least some more rare forms of it, in the light of a century-old domination by materialism. Neither are in themselves feminist or anti-feminist. It is a question of how each sets up its other, explains that which it excludes from its own operations, how each is implicated in the other without adequate acknowledgement, or, more explicitly, how each is impossible without
some form of the other, and implicitly relies on some of what its binarized other provides.

**JP:** How do you see the rise of analytic philosophy fitting into this history? At around the same time as the emergence of Einsteinian physics, G. E. Moore famously “refuted” idealism as part of his articulation of the new analytic style, while Bertrand Russell engaged in a decades-long dispute with the British Idealist F. H. Bradley. Much is made of the distinction between the analytic and Continental traditions in philosophy. Is it fair to say that the latter has been more open or indebted to idealist approaches and insights?

**EG:** This is a very difficult question. That Russell, G. E. Moore, Gottlob Frege, the early Wittgenstein, and others invented what is today called “analytic philosophy” is true. And it is true that it set itself up in opposition to a more idealist philosophy that began earlier yet continued alongside of and in opposition to Russell’s reduction of philosophy to logic, a distinctively British philosophy that was inspired by Hegel. It is also true that the antagonism between analytic philosophy and a more Continental, or somewhat idealist philosophy, was already present in Russell’s critique of Bergson, developed after their meeting in London in 1911. Russell critiqued Bergson—in the briefest terms, he critiqued his work for being “feminine,” unrigorous—a number of times, and focused quite viciously on the British Idealists of a more Hegelian bent—Bradley, T. H. Green, Bernard Bosanquet, R. G. Collingwood, and others. Given that there is a quite long and distinguished tradition of British idealism, most of it post-Hegelian, it is important not to reduce British philosophy to its analytic proponents, just as it is important not to reduce Continental philosophy to its more idealist proponents. Materialisms, of both empiricist form in the United Kingdom, and dialectical form, in Germany, France and elsewhere on the Continent, have flourished alongside of and in contestation of these various idealisms. They have produced different forms of idealism and of materialism, forms that are perhaps not entirely commensurable.

**JP:** In that same interview with Vikki Bell, you remark, “I suspect that *The Incorporeal* may be considered idealist in the opinion of some.” I admit to being one of the some, but it seems you do not share this opinion; rather, you are careful to insist on integrating materialist and idealist concerns in a non-dualistic manner. I wonder if you can give us your definition of what “idealism” or an “idealist approach” means, insofar as we can gloss a vast tradition with countless variations and contradictory positions. Does idealism necessarily entail the subordination or dismissal of material reality, or is this merely one of the mischaracterizations that has
led to its disavowal? How do you see yourself fitting in, or not, to the idealist tradition(s)?

**EG**: That is a difficult, indeed possibly even a tricky, question! Clearly not all forms of idealism subordinate or dismiss materiality, but most of them do imply that there is a hidden or latent order in the material that is itself non-material and that may have some regulatory or formative relation to particular modalities or expressions of materiality. Obviously there are also idealists who do want to subordinate the material world—Descartes’s *cogito*, for example, could be and has been read as an affirmation of the suspicion that the world is a dream or an hallucination, and that solipsism, or deism, are somehow better explanations of the world than what perception might provide us. Hegel implies that history is not the play of material forces, whether productive forces or material struggles, but the operation of an implicit logic, a world-forming idea, that underlies and evaluates historical acts. From Plato to Hegel and beyond, the privilege of the idea over the material has been systematic; it has acquired theological associations and a history of Western colonial reason that assured it a privilege in the Western canons of knowledge. But, as *The Incorporeal* argues, there is another, more suppressed history of idealist thought that does not diminish the material, or even consider itself separate from the material, but as the latent order or direction of the material. As the book claims, this history can be marked by key figures, like the Stoics, who as materialists were nevertheless driven to develop a concept of order and organization that directs the material and enables it to partake of the divine. Nietzsche could also be considered a materialist who, in disdain of the concept of causation that has so dominated materialist reductionisms, affirms an excess over the material, a will within all materiality that directs it to what it becomes. All of the figures I have explored there—Deleuze and Guattari, Gilbert Simondon, Raymond Ruyer, as well as the Stoics, Spinoza, and Nietzsche—have been interested in a kind of idealism that inheres in materiality rather than one separate from it. That is what attracted me to their works—they aimed to develop a non-reductive materialism that acknowledges the reality of ideas, of time and space, of the frames by which the material is located, oriented, and understood.

I myself have always held a soft spot for certain idealisms, even as the rage for materialism within Marxism and post-Marxist feminist, queer, and anti-racist politics erupted—I guess this is an occupational hazard for someone trained in philosophy, which is itself the study of texts separate from the actions they entail. I wanted to find a way of maintaining a commitment to the value of the idea, the concept or thought—that is, to philosophy itself—while also acknowledging the necessity of material struggles of many kinds (often unrecognized or actively excluded from the discipline
of philosophy). But these material struggles cannot occur without ideas, aims, directions, orientations. These fringes of materiality, which are not entirely material, are what interested me in writing the book, the excess of thought, orientation or sense that materialism, or at least reductive materialism, cannot explain.

**JP:** The trajectory of your own work may appear counterintuitive at first glance: from “corporeal feminism” and Darwinian evolution to an interest in the ideal and incorporeal. I suspect that many people might find these various approaches antithetical, but (as you say) there is a continuity in your philosophy, even as it evolves in (if I may say) surprising and magnificent ways. To me, the most vivid example of this impossible (dis)continuity is your relation to the recent philosophical movement known as “new materialism,” which attempts to conceptualize matter and the immaterial in a non-dualistic fashion. In 2010, you published a chapter entitled “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom” in Diana Coole and Samantha Frost’s edited volume, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Duke UP). Later, in *The Incorporeal*, you write, “With the rise of so-called new materialism, it is perhaps necessary to simultaneously call into being a new idealism, no longer Platonic, Cartesian, or Hegelian in its structure, that refuses to separate materiality from or subordinate it to ideality, resisting any reduction of the qualities and attributes of each to the operations of the other.” You then suggest that by investigating “the material constitution of an [ideally] ordered world,” we can develop “a new new materialism in which ideality has a respected place.” But there are many “old idealists”—I’m thinking particularly of those who can be placed within the long panpsychist tradition—who take a similar tack to the new materialists. Is it possible to resolve this aporia, where old and new, materialism and idealism mix and cross? Or are these “so-called” distinctions merely nominal?

**EG:** I agree that my trajectory may appear counterintuitive or unexpected. But, looking back, my work on corporeality was also trying to find a way of understanding living bodies, human and animal, as more than just bodies—that is, as centers of meaning and oriented action, perhaps even intentionality.

I don’t think these differences, between materialisms and idealisms in their current forms, are merely nominal—there are real differences in these ontologies. But I also think that you are right to suggest that the most wayward and strange of the panpsychists may have an affinity, if not with “new materialism” then perhaps with a new “new materialism”! This partly depends on how one understands the term “old.” There are a number of thinkers writing from the late 1890s (through to the present) who have in different ways provided ingredients for a “new idealism” or at least a post-Hegelian idealism—Uexküll, Bergson, the Pragmatists, Simondon, Ruyer,
Deleuze and Guattari, and no doubt many others who perhaps fall short of panpsychism—the belief that all of the world and its contents are or have a consciousness of sorts. Instead, they have attributed a continuity or resemblance between all forms of life, a claim that falls short of panpsychism. All of these thinkers resist the impulse to blur the distinction between the animate and the inanimate, even though there are liminal cases, viruses, RNA strands, chemical compounds, that must have enabled the evolutionary elaboration of the animate from the inanimate.

The problem is a difficult one and that is how to think terms that have never been properly combined or thought together precisely because of the binarization of thought that has marked all our received knowledges. We can think mind and body together, but only as still separate entities or processes as it were next to each other or side-by-side. We have no language by which to talk of an embodied consciousness, a mind-body continuity, because of the pervasiveness of their mutually exclusive qualities. There are no terms that are not themselves bifurcated (embodied mind, mind-body, etc.) to think their belonging. This is not a new observation or a new task—it is as old as philosophy itself! It may be the problem that articulates the very task of philosophy: to think of bodies in their differences and interactions.

As much as I have tried to address this very problem in *The Incorporeal*, I do not think there is a ready or easy solution. As Derrida reminds us, binary terms cannot simply be reversed or undone, but continue to haunt each other even as they function separately. They have a quantum-like investment in each other however far apart—or close together—we try to position them.

**JP:** In *The Incorporeal*, you mention panpsychism as a potential site for reinvigorating our understanding of material and incorporeal reality. Panpsychism—the idea that all things, even stones and electrons, must have some rudimentary mind or experience—has become an increasingly respectable position to take: a short list of recent philosophical advocates would include Philip Goff, Freya Mathews, Steven Shaviro, David Skrbina, Timothy Sprigge, and Galen Strawson. Is Elizabeth Grosz on this list? What strengths make panpsychism appealing, and what are its weaknesses?

**EG:** I would not call myself a panpsychist. This is what attracted me to Raymond Ruyer’s work—consciousness, or as he understands it, primary form, forms in touch with themselves with no external position or perspective, do not coincide with all of materiality. Stones are not the same as electrons. Stones are formed piece-by-piece or step-by-step—that is, mechanically, from the outside; electrons form themselves, as do atoms and molecules. We do not understand how primary forms, self-forming and self-regulating entities and processes, function
because they seem to operate magically, or at least, non-mechanically. An atom is in touch with itself, even if its components are separated by considerable distances, and even if we cannot understand how it can remain in touch with its components. An embryo makes itself in ways that even the most cutting-edge obstetricians cannot yet comprehend; every cell in a living body replaces itself in maintaining its bodily cohesion, and we do not understand how these cells know how and when to do this. The distinction between primary forms and secondary forms (things formed by aggregation, such as clouds, oceans, crowds, bridges, and cars) defines the limit of consciousness, mind or self-creation, and thus the limits of scientific or quantitative knowledges. I do believe in a continuity of primary forms. But this is far short of panpsychism.

**JP:** Panpsychism certainly raises all sorts of fascinating ontological and epistemological questions (and problems), but what makes all this even more interesting are the ethics that it and other idealist positions entail. Indeed, you merge these strands in your book, calling for an “ontoethics,” or an ethics immanent to ontology, that has more in common, I think, with the eudaimonistic tradition than the deontological one. How do you see ethics emerging from an idealist-inflected conception of reality?

**EG:** I would not call ontoethics either eudaimonistic or deontological. It is not eudaimonistic insofar as ethics, in my understanding—and here I follow the Stoics—is not directed to the goal of happiness or well-being. To live well is not the same as well-being! It is to make the most of one’s situation, to live up to one’s situation or position. This is how I understand the Stoic idea of affirming one’s fate. This living well need not bring happiness but rather satisfaction, a smaller accomplishment. I would also not understand it as deontological insofar as such an ontoethics is not normative, is not generalizable, nor is it dutiful. I can’t provide a direct answer to how an ethics might emerge from an idealist ontology. I don’t think that I am working with an idealist ontology. My hope was to provide an ontology that is somewhere, perhaps an impossible somewhere, between or across idealism and materialism, somewhere that refuses or complicates the opposition between them—or better, that affirms their inherent belonging together.

**JP:** A question about the past: which philosophers should we be thinking about (or not) when it comes to refreshing our conception of material and incorporeal reality? In your book you examine the Stoics, Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze, Simondon, and Ruyer. Are there other schools or philosophers that warrant attention? What about those who have led or will lead us astray? In the quotation I give above, you seem to suggest that Plato, Descartes, and Hegel all “separate materiality from or subordinate
it to ideality.” Hence thinking about materiality and ideality in dualistic or hierarchical ways is a major error to avoid, in your view. Do you think dualism and/or hierarchy are essential to these philosophers’ work, or is it possible to read them against the popular grain? For example, Plato is commonly thought of as a dualist, but in their book *Idealism: The History of a Philosophy* (McGill-Queen’s UP, 2011), Jeremy Dunham, Iain Hamilton Grant, and Sean Watson argue for a “one-world” Platonism in which the Ideas are “of a piece with the world of becomings, or nature.” They note that this monist reading of Plato was shared by British Idealist philosophers in the early twentieth century and indeed by the entire Neoplatonic tradition. I wonder if Plato, Descartes, and Hegel are or could be made relevant to the new idealism you call for.

EG: Well, of course they could. Texts are precisely what can be read or reread from any number of different perspectives or frameworks. And the great philosophers, those we continue to read and learn from even as we may disagree with some or all of what they say, are open to many revivifications. But the question remains: to what extent one imposes on them, or any other philosophers, what one wants to see in them—a not uncommon tendency! The task is to read them closely, carefully, in order to find something new, but not something alien or outside their positions. One could argue that Plato, Descartes and Hegel affirm one and only one world or the connectedness of mind and body. But I am not sure that I would be convinced by such a reading!

To answer the first part of your question second: There is a whole network of philosophers in Western history, some well known, others less so, who are capable of providing us inspiration and support for our rethinking of dualism. Not only those characterized as idealists. But often they are writers who are marginalized or overlooked by being over-shadowed by a more well-known or popular writer. The Epicureans, along with the Stoics, address and question dualism in their own ways; as does Leibniz, Freud, and, as mentioned, the Pragmatists. As we enter the twentieth century, this tendency proliferates, even as it becomes harder to recognize, in the work of Bergson, Prigogine and Stengers, even Irigaray, who remain worth exploring for the ways in which they problematize dualism.

JP: Finally, a question about the present and future. There have been many theoretical “turns” over the past few decades, so many that one can easily feel lost. Given that there are many “we’s” with many interests, I will nevertheless ask: where are we? Are we in the midst of a turn away from something, or are we turning to something new, or returning to something anew? What are the crucial philosophical, political, and ethical questions of the present that we need to confront? Although you
have argued extensively that the future must remain surprising and unpredictable, I hope you can suggest where we should go from here, even if we never arrive. It’s the idealist in me.

**EG:** I don’t know where we are, or where we go from here, except that philosophy follows life and its complications, addressing questions that life encounters. We are clearly in an extended moment of political and ecological crisis, and questions of globalization or “worlding” are increasingly fraught and tension ridden. As we complete this interview, we are in the grips of a global pandemic. If philosophy does not address the very real questions faced at each particular moment of history, including what is imminent or pressing on us socially and culturally now, then it has no purpose at all. I cannot predict who or what will represent the next “turn” (though I don’t really like the language of “turns”). But it is already clear that these social, political, economic, and ethnic crises—Brexit, US nationalism, the movements of nationalism and racism in Europe, Asia and the Americas, the vilification of migrants and refugees, climate change, global warming, rising ocean levels, the increasing sweep of coronavirus contamination, and so on—must have some effect on the kinds of philosophies we will need to invent. That is, if philosophy is to remain dynamic and relevant. There are now very clearly many “we’s” and thus many histories to unbury and bring back to life, make dynamic and relevant for our future needs. We cannot anticipate these needs; but without the possibilities of careful self-reflection and criticism, we cannot adequately address what is to come, whatever that might be.