There is a dilemma at the heart of feminism. Should women get into shoulder pads, think rationally, break through the glass ceiling and take on the boys on the level playing field? That would be to fall for gung-ho masculist criteria of success. Or would it be better to play up the traditionally feminine, get in touch with emotions and bodies, and transform the world with quilting and yoga? That would be to accept the old masculine definitions of what is women’s business, and end up in ghettoisation and irrelevance, leaving the public realm to men.¹

Those outside philosophy will naturally think of a dilemma as in some way a bad thing. If politics is one’s concern, a dilemma is a bad thing. It causes splits, enmities, loss of zeal, as activists and potential activists take up their positions. In philosophy, it is the opposite. There is nothing that feeds philosophy like a good dilemma, and a truly irresolvable one is a philosophical Magic Pudding. The more monographs, critiques, PhD theses and talkfests that have been carved out of it, the more there are left.

Feminism’s dilemma can spawn fierce debate on virtually any issue. Fat is a feminist issue, but it is undecided whether slimming is an approved taking of one’s destiny into one’s own hands or a capitulation to male conceptions of female beauty. Women philosophers can either join in the disputes of traditional philosophy, or set up a ‘feminist philosophy’ sub-industry at the risk of diverting their graduate students into an intellectual sheltered workshop. But the

most distinctively philosophical debate concerns the relation of women and ‘reason’.

Descartes and many other philosophers have praised reason at length and regarded it as one of the supreme attributes of humanity. They have spoken of the faculty of reason almost as if it were disembodied, and as if it is threatened by too close association with the passions and the body. Genevieve Lloyd, in her much cited book, *The Man of Reason*, and many other feminist thinkers, are against this image of reason and believe it has contributed to women’s oppression.

Why exactly does a view of reason as independent of the body contribute to the oppression of women? A naive view might hold the opposite: that the more independent reason is from the body, the less that bodily differences between men and women should matter to it, and hence the more opportunity there would be for women to simply pursue science and reason on the same terms as men. It is admitted that this is what Descartes intended. Feminist philosophers are not impressed. They object to ‘a “sexlessness” which, as many feminists have pointed out, is often a covert way of privileging maleness.’

Why does it privilege maleness? The idea is that our ideals of ration-

---


ality have been symbolised in ways that are traditionally associated with the male. The main evidence provided for this assertion is a list of dualities attributed to the ancient Pythagoreans: light versus darkness, right versus left, mind versus body, odd versus even, male versus female. The first of each pair is said to be valued over the second. Not much evidence has been supplied for the prominence of these dualities in Western thought between the time of Pythagoras and women’s studies courses in the 1980s, but they are presumed to have somehow infected Western thought at a deep level. The other evidence is that some men in several past centuries sometimes used masculine metaphors like ‘conquest’ in talking about the advance of reason.

Despite the tenuousness of the evidence, later and more radical feminists take these conclusions to have been firmly established, and assert without further argument: ‘Within philosophy, for example, the presumably timeless values of the discipline — Truth, Reason, Logic, Meaning, Being — have been shown by feminists (such as Lloyd, Irigaray) to be based on implicit but disavowed relations to their “others” — poetry, madness, passions, body, non-sense, non-existence. These “others” are defined as feminine ...’

Not all feminists were happy with demonising logic. Some noticed the awkward fact that showing that pursuing a norm of reason harms women does not thereby prove there is anything mistaken with it. Instead it invites the question, what is wrong with women that norms of reason are a problem for them? The assault on reason was especially trying to those feminists capable of writing intelligible prose. Kate Jennings says, ‘Here I was wanting “to know more than I did yesterday”, lead a sane life, and write lucidly, and my feminist peers were deeming all knowledge suspect and finding rationality to be “complicitous with male privilege” and clarity “a male strategy” ... It has been a jolting experience to be repudiated by my peers; to be bundled up in a job lot with Margaret Thatcher and Leonie Kramer.’

5 Lloyd, The Man of Reason, p. 3.
8 K. Jennings, Bad Manners (Melbourne, 1993), p. 64; cf. pp. 80, 43–5; cf. A. Summers, Ducks on the Pond (Melbourne, 1999), p. 284. (Leonie Kramer’s evil is taken as read among feminists; one writes that she is ‘seeming proof that gender is socially constructed rather than biologically determined’. P.
Nevertheless, in feminist philosophy the debate has moved on. If it is agreed that reason is a bad thing, what is the alternative? There are two possible moves to make. The first is to find out something about logic and make some alternative suggestions. The second is to change the question altogether, and praise some opposite of reason. The first alternative has been taken by some unusual work by the ecofeminist Val Plumwood, who had earlier done some work on alternative logics. Writing on ‘Classical logic as the logic of domination’, she objects to the way in which logic defines the negation of a proposition \( p \), not-\( p \) (symbolised \( \neg p \)) in terms of \( p \):

Such an account of \( \neg p \) specifies \( \neg p \) in relation to \( p \) conceived as the controlling centre, and so is \( p \)-centred. The very features of simplicity which have helped to select classical logic over its rivals are implicated here. In the phallic drama of this \( p \)-centred account, there is really only one actor, \( p \), and \( \neg p \) is merely its receptacle.\(^9\)

But, she says, there are non-classical logics available which are not so arrogantly dualistic.

This plan, whatever may be said for or against it, at least requires some knowledge of logic, which arguably involves too much of a concession to reason. A purer, not to say easier, strategy is to simply attack an undifferentiated reason and talk about some opposite of it. Since reason is done by the mind, the opposite of it must be ‘the body’. There is a whole Australian school of ‘corporeal feminism’.\(^10\)


What ‘the body’ means in this discourse is, needless to say, problematic. Someone actually asked one of the school at a Canberra conference whether ‘the body’ as here spoken of had anything to do with actual biological bodies. ‘Deciding that I must still be immersed in a precritical notion of the body, the speaker dismissed me with a revealing theatrical gesture. As if to underline the sheer absurdity of my question, she pinched herself and commented, “Well, I certainly don’t mean this body.”’ This no doubt explains why the ‘body’ of feminist discourse never seems to be sick or old, much less newborn, or unborn. Nor does it seem to have as many parts as real bodies: ‘there is surprisingly little feminist criticism’, writes one author, ‘on the nature of the stomach, the bowels, or the internal cavity of the mouth.’ One point of the exercise is explained thus: ‘It is an unavoidable (and welcome) consequence of constructing an embodied ethics that ethics would no longer pretend to be universal.’ (That is, what’s not all right for men is all right for women.) Another outcome is that it saves learning anything about biology — any suggestion that biological differences between men and women may have any relevance can be met with a smokescreen of abusive words like ‘biolo-


gism’, ‘reductionism’, ‘essentialism’ and so on. This in turn explains the strange absence in the debate of any mention of the nature-nurture question. Whether men and women have biological differences that cause psychological differences in, for example, their intellectual skills, is a question that is not allowed on the table. The scientific evidence on the question is indeed not always clear, and it is possible to argue about its meaning — but feminist thought is so constructed that it is a thought-crime to examine it. Meanwhile, feminist theorists are always on the lookout for such scientific ‘discoveries’ as that lactation is not the sole prerogative of the female.

Corporeal feminism is a part of a wider movement that calls itself the feminism of ‘difference’. The notion of difference as used here is a product of the original dilemma of feminism. The older feminism which demanded equal rights for women is condemned as a ‘feminism of equality’, where equality is identified with uniformity, and uniformity in a male mould at that (‘the right to be the same as men’). ‘Difference’, by contrast, is intended to have the cachet of an openness to diversity, in the way ‘multiculturalism’ does. It is not supposed to be a simple denial of the demand for equality, since that would be to accept the terms of the debate given by earlier male thinkers. Since there is not in fact much conceptual room between equality and non-equality, it is necessary to develop the complicated conceptions of various continental thinkers to resolve the dilemma — or if not to resolve it, at least to keep the debate going between the two sides of the apparently immortal dichotomies of Western thought, like sameness and difference, male and female, mind and body, and so on.

14 Wilson, _Neural Geographies_, pp. 14–16.
18 Gatens, _Feminism and Philosophy_, pp. 92–4; Braidotti, _Patterns of Dissonance_, pp 128–30, 141, etc; P. Deutscher, _A Politics of Impossible Difference_ (Ithaca,
The Australian leader of the school of corporeal feminism is Professor Elizabeth Grosz.\textsuperscript{19} We saw in chapter 11 that her initial appointment at Sydney University provoked complaints about her assertion that feminist theory was a strategy aimed at gaining power, not an attempt to say something true. In later work, she has emphasised this theme several times. She begins one article with a quote from Nietzsche, ‘A woman does not want the truth; what is truth to women?’ She agrees:

Lloyd, Le Doeuff, Irigaray, Daly and others have questioned philosophy’s commitments to the following patriarchal beliefs.

1. The belief in a single, eternal, universal truth independent of the particularities of observers, history, or social conditions. In aiming towards a truth based on correspondence between a proposition and a part of reality, philosophy seeks a position outside of history, politics and power.

2. The belief in objective, that is, in observer-neutral, context-free knowledge ...

3. The belief in a stable, reliable, transhistorical subject of knowledge, that can formulate true statements and construct objective knowledge.\textsuperscript{20}

(Nevertheless, feminism has the right to judge and supersede patriarchal beliefs.\textsuperscript{21}) ‘Rather, instead of aspiring to the status of truth, a feminist philosophy prefers to see itself as a form of strategy ... To deny that a feminist philosophy aspires to truth is not to claim that it is content with being regarded as false; rather, the opposition between truth and falsity is largely irrelevant for a strategic model’.\textsuperscript{22}

Naturally, Grosz is against science. In her contribution to Crossing Boundaries, the 1988 book that represents the Australian founding of the ‘francofeminist’ school based on Parisian high theory, she takes it that philosophers of science like Popper and Kuhn have done away with ‘naive adherences to a notion of science as pure truth’.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Grosz, ‘Philosophy’, p. 167
\textsuperscript{22} Grosz, ‘Philosophy’, p. 168.
\textsuperscript{23} E.A. Grosz & M. de Lepervanche, ‘Feminism and science’, in Crossing Boundaries: Feminisms and the Critique of Knowledges, ed. B. Caine, E.A. Grosz & M. de Lepervanche (Sydney, 1988), pp. 5–27, at pp. 17–19; later on
is masculine, and the mark of its coming from a masculine point of view is its pretence of not coming from a point of view: ‘Irigaray suggests that man effaces his masculinity and particularity to proclaim instead the global relevance and perspectivelessness of his construct.”

Some of Grosz’s analysis of science does however lack a certain intimacy of acquaintance with the originals. She says of James Watson’s view of Rosalind Franklin, his colleague and rival in the DNA research that led to the discovery of the double helix: ‘Watson even speculates that she was “the product of an unsatisfactory mother who unduly stressed the desirability of professional careers that could save bright girls from marriages to dull men”’. That is not quite what Watson says. In fact, it is the opposite. The quotation from Watson’s book actually reads, ‘So it was quite easy to imagine her the product of an unsatisfactory mother ... But this was not the case. Her dedicated, austere life could not be thus explained — she was the daughter of a solidly comfortable, erudite banking family.’ On the same page, Grosz presents Watson’s criticism of Franklin’s boss for forcing her to go elsewhere as Watson’s own attempt to get rid of her. And the whole DNA project is taken to be a search by men for reproduction without women. Grosz, it is true, has not made up these misunderstandings herself. They are taken uncritically from another feminist ‘scholar’. As the postmodernists say, texts refer only to other texts.

In any case, having rejected science, Grosz is not shy about suggesting alternatives. In a remarkable piece of prose, she writes:

To formulate different conceptions of corporeality, it may be necessary to:

1. Explore non-Euclidean and non-Kantian notions of space. If Euclidean, three dimensional space organises hierarchised perspective according to the laws of point-for-point projection, then different ‘pre-oedipal’ or infantile non-perspectival spaces, for example, may provide the basis for alternatives to those developed in dominant representations of corporeality. This may entail research in post-Einsteinian concepts of space-time; or, in an altogether different vein, psychological or fantasmatic concepts of space, for example, the kind experienced by the infant before vision has been hierarchically privileged and coordinated the information provided by the other senses into an homogeneous totality. This is necessary if the

feminism and science in special issue of Australian Feminist Studies 14 (no. 29) (Apr 1999).

25 Grosz & de Lepervanche, ‘Feminism and science’, p. 15.
Protest in favour of the feminist course in philosophy, University of Sydney Quadrangle, 28 June 1973 (Newspix)
representational grid which produces conventional patriarchal representations of the body is to be superseded. Exploring other conceptual schemas which rely on different initial premises and different forms of argument prove useful in showing at the least, that Euclidean/Cartesian conceptions are not the only possibilities.27

Grosz has been at the forefront of corporeal feminism, especially in her 1994 book *Volatile Bodies*. The ‘bodies’ here are, of course, not the natural objects sometimes called by that name: ‘the body, or rather bodies, cannot be adequately understood as ahistorical, precultural, or natural objects in any simple way; they are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products, the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself.’28 Her special contribution to the theory of corporeality lies in her lengthy discussions of bodily fluids, which are ideologically sound because they transgress the boundaries between the body and the outside: ‘The tactile is related by Irigaray to the concept of the mucus, which always marks the passage from inside to outside, which accompanies and lubricates the mutual touching of the body’s parts and regions. The mucus is neither the subjective touching of the toucher nor the objectivity of the touched but the indeterminacy of any distance between them.’29 ‘What is disturbing about the viscous or the fluid is its refusal to conform to the laws governing the clean and proper, the solid and the self-identical, its otherness to the notion of an entity — the very notion that governs our self-representations and understanding of the body. It is not that female sexuality is like, resembles, an inherently horrifying viscosity. Rather, it is the production of an order that renders female sexuality and corporeality marginal, indeterminate, and viscous that constitutes the sticky and the viscous with their disgusting, horrifying connotations.’30

If fluids are politically correct, it follows that organs, which insist on maintaining a fixed shape, are incorrect. Grosz’s praise of Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the ‘body without organs’ is another high point of her work:


30 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 195, also p. 203.
The BwO is a tendency to which all bodies, whatever their organization, aspire. Deleuze and Guattari speak of it as an egg, which instead of being composed of three kinds of substances is fluid throughout (neither Lacan’s scrambled egg of a subject, the ‘hommelette,’ nor the egg in its differential properties, hard shell, clear white and yellow yolk), an unimpeded flow: ... ‘That is why we treat the BwO as the full egg before the extension of the organism and the organization of the organs’ ... it refuses the sedimentation and hierarchization required for the movement of transcendence, resists the stratifications and layerings and overcodings that produce the three great strata or identities: the union constituting the organism, the unification that constitutes the subject, and the structure of significance. It refuses all propriety.  

There is more to Grosz’s philosophy than that, but it would take too long to give attention to her aperçus like ‘philosophy is best undertaken dancing’ and ‘Power can be thought of as running around and through us, like honey, in various degrees of fluidity and sticky congealment’, to her objections to AIDS advertising on the grounds that it encourages women to look after themselves, to her love of plurals, and to her many articles on such subjects as hermaphroditism, the necessity of lesbianism, lesbian fetishism, the fascination of men with animal and insect sex, freaks and so on.

As early as 1989, the Bulletin included her in an article on six of ‘Australia’s top thinkers’. From Sydney she moved to Monash University, becoming Professor and Director of the Institute for Critical and Cultural Studies. **Volatile Bodies** won a (New South Wales) Premier’s Literary Award, being praised by the judges for its ‘strong contribution to intellectual thought in the area of philosophy,

---

31 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, pp. 169–70.
34 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 197.
feminisms, and cultural studies’. She has moved on to a prestigious appointment in the United States.

It is not easy to understand either why anyone would write such things as Grosz, or why anyone who did would be taken seriously. Grosz is not given to revealing personal detail about her motives, though there is perhaps evidence of a misunderstanding of more common experiences than hers in her remark that the space of heterosexuality is ‘where it’s hardest to imagine an actual coming together of the two sexes in a mutually rewarding context ... certainly your average normative heterosexuality.’ She does however reveal the image she has of her own work. She contrasts a paper she regards as more experimental with her usual writings:

I figured that at least once in my professional life I could — indeed I must — take the risk of being totally wrong, of committing some heinous theoretical blunder, of going way out on a limb, instead of being very careful, covering myself from rearguard criticism, knowing in advance that at least some of my claims have popular support or general credibility.

The question of why Grosz’s views do have so much popular support or general credibility is no easier. It is like trying to explain the Children’s Crusade or any other outbreak of mass irrationalism: ultimately, there is nothing to explain it in terms of. Nevertheless, it is not hard to see in general terms what interests are served by such work. In politics, there is a permanent tension between reform and revolution. Revolution is simpler, purer, easier to explain and express in slogans. But there is pressure against it, in that one aim of politics is to get things done, and everyone understands that that needs compromise. In philosophy, it is the other way round. ‘Radical critique’ is what one goes to philosophy for, in much the same way as some churchgoers feel purified by listening to hellfire preachers whose views they do not literally agree with.

What exactly Grosz’s work offers to the appetite for purity of critique can probably best be seen by noticing what things stand as unexamined presumptions for her. One is that ‘transgression’ as such is something one can congratulate oneself on. Whenever Grosz uses words like ‘problematise’, ‘unsettle’, ‘destabilise’ and so on, there is always an unargued-for payoff, a buzz of naughtiness which the reader is invited to share. (I question, you are complicit, he privileges.)
When ‘unquestioned’ is a term of insult, there is no space left in the discourse for the possibility that something should be questioned, and found to hold up pretty well. ‘Questioning’ is a process with a pre-determined answer; it is ‘no’. Anyone who grew up in the Sixties will understand.

The other unquestioned assumption of Grosz’s work, which gives it an appeal in some quarters, is that everything is to be evaluated according to whether it is useful to feminism (not useful to women; useful to feminism). Her attitude is the direct opposite of the one well expressed by Helen Garner: ‘The struggle for women’s rights is ... not a matter of gender loyalty. It is a matter of ethical principle, and as such, it does not dictate automatic allegiance to the women’s side in any given argument.’

But while francofeminism has been hogging into the trough, a spectre has appeared at the feast. It is the spectre of Women’s Liberation. This ghost from the past has found its voice in Jean Curthoys’ book, Feminist Amnesia. Curthoys was one of the founders of academic feminism in the days when it was still Women’s Liberation, and before it got ‘theory’. Her book breathes the spirit of a member of Cromwell’s New Model Army who has seen the revolution taken over by careerists and bureaucrats, or one of the idealistic men of 1917 about to be shipped off to the Gulag. Postmodernist academic feminism, she says, has suppressed the moral force that drove Women’s Lib and buried it under a mountain of garbled theory. It has caricatured earlier feminists as enmeshed in simplistic liberal demands for equality for women, which is taken to be a position hopelessly naive and superficial. Yet it depends for its appeal on presenting itself as radical, as challenging power, questioning boundaries, and so on; that is, it is parasitic on the morality of liberationism. Curthoys finds the development of feminist theory beyond comprehension:

[The book] developed out of a curiosity about the kind of thinking which, as a university teacher, I saw all around me and which seemed to more than accidentally involve conceptual muddles and basic ignorance. I was deeply puzzled about how my peers could think that way, how they could present such thinking as profound, innovatory and involving great learning and about how such thinking could have appeal for keen, intelligent and apparently genuinely ‘socially concerned’ young students.”

---

Keen young students are always ready to be corrupted by high-sounding theory, so there is nothing hard to understand there. But as to why those teaching them should also fall for it, the simple answer, Curthoys says, is that the ‘surrationalism’ of writers like Grosz is ‘a means for acquiring power which is appropriate to a movement whose moral credibility depends on the perception that it opposes power.’

Francofeminism pretends to be the heir to the high moral hopes of Women’s Liberation, while actually denying there are any of the universal moral values like equality that Women’s Liberation depended on; at the same time it purports to add profundity to its analysis by concentrating on alleged deep ‘dualisms’ of Western thought (mind/body, same/different, male/female and so on). The interests served by the work of feminists like Grosz are those of radical feminist bureaucracy, which it protects from accountability to the claims of both reason and humanity.

Curthoys develops the parallel between francofeminism and the Lysenkoist biology imposed by Stalin. According to Lysenko, there were two sciences, bourgeois and proletarian. Like Grosz, Lysenko criticised the philosophical form of bourgeois (that is, orthodox) genetics. As Curthoys explains, ‘This will turn out to be the necessary ideological move because it will enable ideas to be rejected (“dismantled”) without any critical discussion which even pretends to meet them in their own terms. This is because once such a thesis is accepted it is no longer the content of ideas which is at issue but their form ... It is then only necessary to ... identify this form of ideas as intellectually and politically pernicious and we have at hand an easy means for rejecting and denouncing ideas, one which requires no demanding critical engagement at all, at the same time as it could, to those new to theoretical discussion, have the appearance of theoretical sophistication.’ She adds, ‘I am not sure that it is in fact much less crazy to think of political conflicts taking place between categories of “sameness” and “difference” or between “bourgeois formal logic” and “proletarian dialectical thought” than it is, say, to believe that one

45 Curthoys, Feminist Amnesia, p. 70; on Diprose and Ferrell’s evaluation of DNA as politically incorrect, pp. 87–92.
Jean Curthoys (front) about to be dragged from the path of President Johnson’s motorcade, Sydney, 22 October 1966 (Fairfax photos)
is being pursued by Hitler around one’s local neighbourhood. But it
does look a lot less crazy.’

A remarkable feature of Curthoys’ book, and one which contrasts
greatly with most feminist writers, is its robustly objectivist account of
the morality of the liberation movements of the Sixties: ‘It can be
shown that the morality as such is objectively grounded with refer-
ence to a conception of the intrinsically or essentially human. In other
words, it can be shown that the idea of irreducible respect for people
is not good because it is the only one which might work, but that it
might work because it is morally sound.’ Liberation theory in this
sense, she says, is an answer to Socrates’ ancient quest for the virtuous
life. ‘If we do regard liberation theory in this way as a modern re-
sponse to this ancient philosophic quest, the simultaneous appro-
piation and denial of its truths by what now passes as sophisticated “the-
ory” would count as the kind of ignorance parading as wisdom which
Socrates understood as a part of the inevitable attempt to suppress
philosophy.’ The re-appearance of objective moral values and quests
for virtue is certainly a surprise. It is easy to see why Curthoys calls
herself a dinosaur.

Feminists outside philosophy who are interested in projects like re-
covering the female voice in history or restraining male violence
should listen carefully to these warnings. It is tempting to give an easy
solidarity to sisters who are working on ‘deep’ theory that one does
not really understand. But the truth is that feminist philosophical
‘theory’ is anti-women because it is anti-human. Any feminists who
feel their maternal instincts being tweaked by this strange growth in
their nest should remember: it’s a full egg the cuckoo lays.

46 Curthoys, Feminist Amnesia, p. 117.
167–8.
48 Curthoys, Feminist Amnesia, p. 32.