



DISCOURSE ON THE CHALLENGES OF CARTESIAN DUALISM IN FEMINIST THOUGHTS AND ELIZABETH GROSZ's PERSPECTIVE OF CORPOREALITY

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Abstract

*The framework of Cartesian dualism rigidly separates *res cogitans* and *res extensa* and has historically reinforced gendered hierarchies by associating masculinity with rationality and femininity with corporeality. This binary opposition marginalizes women's embodied experiences and perpetuates essentialist views, limiting feminist discourse on identity and subjectivity. The paper critiques Cartesian dualism's limitations and explores Elizabeth Grosz's corporeal feminism as an alternative framework that emphasizes the inseparability of mind and body. The paper aims to examine the challenges posed by Cartesian dualism in feminist thought and to highlight Grosz's contributions in reconfiguring the body as an active site of resistance and transformation. The study employs a critical theoretical analysis to propose a more integrated understanding of gender and embodiment. Key findings reveal that Cartesian dualism perpetuates gendered hierarchies and oversimplifies the complexity of human experience. Grosz's corporeal feminism, particularly her Möbius circle model, challenges these binaries by illustrating the fluid, interconnected nature of mind and body. However, her approach faces criticism for potentially oversimplifying gender identity and neglecting structural inequalities. The paper recommends bridging the gap between corporeal feminism and materialist feminist perspectives to broaden the understanding of gender and embodiment. It concludes that while Grosz's framework offers a transformative alternative to Cartesian dualism, feminist discourse must continue evolving to address the diverse and fluid realities of lived experiences.*

Keywords: Cartesian dualism, feminist thought, Elizabeth Grosz, corporeality, binary opposition

Introduction

The philosophical legacy of Cartesian dualism has had profound implications for the conceptualization of identity, subjectivity, and gender within feminist discourse. Descartes' distinction between *res cogitans* (thinking substance) and *res extensa* (extended substance) created a binary opposition that has historically positioned the mind as superior to the body. This framework has perpetuated gendered hierarchies, wherein masculinity is associated with rationality and intellectual superiority, while femininity is relegated to the realm of the physical and emotional. Feminist theorists have long critiqued Cartesian dualism for its role in reinforcing essentialist views that marginalize women's embodied experiences (Castelnuovo & Guthrie, 1998; Mackenzie, 2014; Fischer, 2016; Grosz, 2020; Robinson, 2023). Critics of Cartesian dualism, particularly within feminist circles, assert that its rigid separations oversimplify the intricate dynamics of gender and human experience. This binary thinking fosters essentialist views that categorize women predominantly as physical or emotional beings, often sidelining their intellectual and rational capacities (Smullyan, 2002; Lennon, 2017). In response to these critiques, Elizabeth Grosz offers a corporeal feminist perspective



that challenges traditional dualistic thinking which has emerged as a critical framework that emphasizes the inseparable connection between the body and consciousness, advocating for an understanding of identity that transcends traditional dualistic constructs (Grosz, 2018; Fox, 2023).

Grosz's work, particularly her seminal text, challenges the marginalization of corporeality in feminist discourse by reconfiguring the body as an active site of experience and identity formation. She critiques the historical relegation of the body to the periphery of philosophical inquiry and urges a reevaluation of how gender and embodiment intersect. Her advocacy for a more integrated understanding of the mind-body relationship seeks to dismantle the essentialist categorizations that have long dominated feminist thought (Bellatrixsy, 2011; Adams et al, 2011). While Grosz's theories offer a significant departure from traditional dualistic frameworks, they are not without controversy. Some contemporary feminist theorists caution that her corporeal model risks oversimplifying the spectrum of gender identity by adhering to circular rather than pluralistic frameworks. This ongoing debate underscores the necessity for a broader conceptualization of gender that reflects the diverse and fluid nature of human experiences, further enriching the discourse on the challenges posed by Cartesian dualism in feminist thought (Adams et al, 2011; Yusoff, 2014).

This paper explores the limitations of Cartesian dualism within feminist thought and highlights Grosz's contributions to corporeal feminism. By emphasizing the inseparability of mind and body, Grosz seeks to dismantle essentialist categorizations and propose a more fluid, dynamic understanding of gender. Her work reconfigures the body as a site of resistance and transformation, offering an alternative framework that moves beyond the constraints imposed by dualistic philosophies. Through a critical examination of Grosz's theories, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender, embodiment, and subjectivity within contemporary feminist philosophy.

The Concept of Dualism in Cartesian Philosophy

Dualism is a philosophical idea that asserts the existence of two fundamentally different sorts of reality or substances. In metaphysics, dualism often refers to the division between mind and body, spirit and matter, or good and evil. This framework has been influential in various fields, including philosophy, religion, and psychology. One of the most prominent forms of dualism is Cartesian dualism, rooted in the René Descartes's philosophy in the 17th century. Descartes argued that reality consists of two distinct substances: *res cogitans* (the thinking substance, or mind) and *res extensa* (the extended substance, or body) that adhere to the laws of nature and mechanics (Grosz 2020; 1995). Descartes maintained that the mind, being non-material and rational, is separate from the body, which operates under physical laws. This strict separation laid the foundation for debates on consciousness, identity, and the nature of human existence (Grosz, 2020; Robinson, 2023; Smullyan, 2002; Lennon, 2017). Despite its influence, Cartesian dualism has been widely criticized, particularly in feminist and postmodern discourses. Critics argue that the mind-body dichotomy reinforces hierarchical structures, often privileging rationality (associated with masculinity) over corporeality (linked to femininity). Thinkers like Elizabeth Grosz challenge this dualism, advocating for a more integrated view of body and mind in understanding identity and subjectivity. Cartesian dualism framework has profound implications not only for philosophical discourse but also for feminist theory, as it creates a dichotomy that can marginalize the lived experiences of individuals, particularly women.



Descartes' influential work, particularly in his "*Meditations*," established a clear separation between the mental and the physical dimensions, arguing that the body functions as a mechanical entity governed by causal laws, while the mind is free from such constraints (Grosz, 2020). This perspective has been a foundational element of Western philosophy, shaping the understanding of consciousness and existence for centuries. Descartes' dualism has led to substantial debates about the interaction between mind and body, raising significant questions about their relationship and the possibility of reductionist explanations (Grosz, 1995). Within the context of Cartesian dualism, property dualism emerges as a relevant concept, suggesting that even if the mind and body are distinct substances, they can possess different properties. This distinction has been a subject of considerable scrutiny, particularly in contemporary discussions that seek to reconcile mental phenomena with neurological processes. The attempts to correlate mental states with physical states have largely failed, indicating the challenges inherent in dualist frameworks (Grosz, 2020; Grosz, 1995).

Feminist Critiques and the Impact of Cartesianism

Feminist theorists have critically engaged with Cartesian dualism, highlighting its limitations in addressing the complexities of corporeality and identity (Reichert & Scholz, 2006; Howson, 2005). They argue that the rigid separation of mind and body often leads to an undervaluation of bodily experiences and the socio-cultural implications of corporeal existence. This critique is particularly relevant to discussions around the representation of women, who are frequently positioned within the dualistic framework as being closer to the 'natural' and, thus, less rational than their male counterparts (Grosz, 2020; Robinson, 2023). In the work of Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, there is an emphasis on the entanglement of nature and culture, challenging the Cartesian view that seeks to isolate the mental from the physical. Grosz argues for a more integrated understanding of the body that recognizes its role in shaping consciousness and experience, advocating for a perspective that acknowledges the lived realities of individuals as inseparable from their corporeal existence (Mambrol, 2018).

The feminist theory has engaged critically with Cartesian dualism, which posits a strict separation between mind and body, often reinforcing gendered hierarchies that prioritize the intellect typically associated with masculinity over the corporeal often linked to femininity. Feminists argue that this dualistic framework contributes to the objectification and marginalization of women's experiences and bodies in philosophical discourse (Grosz, 2020; Smullyan, 2002). Critics of Cartesian dualism highlight its implications for understanding identity and subjectivity. The separation of mind and body creates a binary that simplifies the complexity of gender and human experience, leading to the essentialization of women's roles as primarily physical or emotional beings (Lennon, 2017). This has prompted feminists to question the adequacy of dualistic thinking in capturing the nuances of women's lived realities and the interplay between the mental and the corporeal (Smullyan, 2002).

Elizabeth Grosz's Corporeal Feminism

Elizabeth Grosz presents a corporeal perspective that seeks to transcend the limitations of Cartesian dualism. In her work, she introduces the Möbius circle model as a means of illustrating the intertwined relationship between masculine and feminine elements, suggesting that these identities are not merely oppositional but rather exist within a dynamic continuum (Lennon, 2017). The Möbius circle model is a framework Grosz uses to challenge the rigid dualisms that dominate Western philosophy, particularly Cartesian dualism. She introduces this model to illustrate the inseparability and dynamic interrelation of mind and body, nature



and culture, as well as masculinity and femininity. The Möbius strip is a mathematical structure with only one continuous surface, meaning that if you travel along its path, you will eventually return to your starting point without crossing an edge. Grosz employs this model metaphorically to argue that mind and body, or masculine and feminine identities, are not separate entities but rather exist in a continuous, interwoven relationship. The model suggests that gender and identity are fluid, shifting, and inseparably connected to corporeality. It moves beyond traditional binary thinking, proposing instead that subjectivity is shaped through ongoing interactions between the body and cultural or social influences. Grosz's Möbius model provides a compelling alternative to dualist thinking, reinforcing the idea that subjectivity, identity, and gender are continuously shaped through lived, embodied experiences. It serves as a powerful tool in feminist philosophy for dismantling hierarchical structures and embracing more fluid, interconnected understandings of identity. Such a model allows for a more fluid understanding of gender that avoids the pitfalls of binary classifications inherent in both dualism and monism (Lennon, 2017).

Despite the progressive nature of Grosz's theories, they are not without criticism. Some argue that while her framework offers a significant departure from traditional gendered philosophical thinking, it still risks oversimplifying the spectrum of gender identity by adhering to a circular model (Lennon, 2017). Contemporary feminist theorists continue to call for a re-evaluation of how gender is conceptualized, advocating for models that reflect a broader spectrum rather than binary distinctions (Lennon, 2017). Hemmings (2011) points out that Grosz's approach risks oversimplifying how social and political structures shape embodied experiences. Butler (1993) contends that Grosz's emphasis on corporeality does not sufficiently account for the performative and discursive nature of gender identity. Wilson (2015) argues that Grosz's model remains largely theoretical, lacking clear pathways for addressing material inequalities such as economic disparities, healthcare access, or institutionalized gender discrimination. Fraser (2009) critiques Grosz's focus on subjectivity and embodiment, arguing that feminist theory should place more emphasis on structural inequalities and power relations rather than abstract conceptual models. Braidotti (2002) warns that focusing on corporeality may reintroduce biological determinism in feminist thought.

Elizabeth Grosz's Perspective

Elizabeth Grosz's work critically engages with Cartesian dualism, particularly its implications for feminist thought. She argues that the mind/body dualism, prevalent in much of Western philosophy, has historically marginalized the significance of the body in shaping identity and experience and seeks to displace the centrality of the mind, psyche, or consciousness by reconfiguring the body as a focal point of inquiry. This reconfiguration is essential for understanding sexual differences and the materiality of existence (Grosz, 2018; Bellatricksy, 2011). In her seminal work, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (2020), Grosz emphasizes the importance of embodiment, advocating for a feminist approach that considers the body as a dynamic site of experience rather than merely a passive vessel (Fox, 2023). She contends that a focus on corporeality can reveal how societal structures and power dynamics shape the lived experiences of individuals, particularly women. By prioritizing the body, Grosz aims to challenge the epistemological assumptions that have dominated feminist theory and offer new avenues for understanding identity and difference.

Grosz's engagement with various philosophical traditions, including the works of Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze, further enriches her perspective on corporeality. She explores concepts



such as desire, temporality, and affect to interrogate the intersections of power and the material world, eventually advocating for an ontological and ethical framework that recognizes the complexities of embodiment in feminist discourse (Fox, 2023). Her contributions have significantly influenced contemporary feminist theorists and geographers, who draw on her insights to address issues of space, identity, and the inhuman forces that shape human experiences.

Furthermore, Grosz's work significantly challenges traditional feminist discourses by emphasizing the importance of corporeality in understanding gender and identity. She critiques the dualistic frameworks prevalent in Western philosophy that separate mind and body, culture and nature, which she argues have contributed to a hierarchical construction of gender. In her analysis, Grosz advocates for corporeal feminism that foregrounds the physical, embodied experience of individuals as central to the discourse on gender and sexuality (Yusoff, 2014; Adams et al, 2011). The scholar also rejected the idea of passivity in gendered bodies. Contemporary feminist theories often portray bodies as passive entities subjected to sociocultural norms (Grosz, 2020). In critiquing this view, the scholar suggests that it oversimplifies the complexity of the relationship between biological and sociocultural dimensions of gendered bodies. By likening this relationship to that between a writing tool and writing material, she emphasizes the need to recognize how specificities of the body influence and shape identity rather than merely being inscribed by external forces (Adams, et al 2011) and proposes a more dynamic understanding of corporeality that resists reduction to passive raw material.

On the other hand, Grosz attempted to overcome dualistic philosophies. In her inquiries, Grosz emphasizes the necessity to move beyond binary oppositions, such as mind/body and culture/nature, that have historically structured Western thought. By critiquing foundational philosophers like Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes, she exposes how their frameworks have reinforced gender hierarchies, positioning rationality, masculinity, and culture as superior to femininity, bodily experience, and nature (Adams, et al 2011). Grosz argues that a shift in perspective, focusing on the corporeal and the specificities of gendered bodies, allows for a richer understanding of subjectivity without falling into the traps of dualism.

Nevertheless, in redefining feminist analysis, Grosz posits that corporeality should serve as the foundation for discussions of identity and subjectivity. This approach allows for a nuanced conversation about sexual differences that avoids deterministic and essentialist categories. By advocating for a framework that acknowledges the embodied experiences of individuals, she aims to dismantle the traditional dichotomies that have historically shaped gender discourse (Yusoff, 2014; Adams, et al 2011). Grosz's philosophy highlights the necessity of considering the corporeal as an active site of resistance and transformation in the ongoing struggles against patriarchal constructs.

Challenges to Cartesian Dualism from Grosz's Perspective

Elizabeth Grosz's critique of Cartesian dualism challenges the entrenched binary oppositions that have historically influenced Western philosophy, particularly concerning gender and the body. She argues that traditional dualistic thinking, exemplified by the separation of mind and body, culture and nature, serves to reinforce hierarchical gender structures and the objectification of women (Adams, et al 2011; Lennon, 2017). Grosz posits that this dualistic framework is rooted in the philosophies of figures like Plato, Aristotle, and Descartes, whose discourses have long associated masculinity with rationality and culture while relegating



femininity to the realms of irrationality and nature (Adams, et al 2011). Grosz emphasizes the need to move beyond the confines of de/constructionist feminism, which tends to prioritize sociocultural gender over the corporeal realities of the body. Instead, she advocates for a feminist analysis of subjectivity that begins with corporeality, recognizing the body and its diverse, sexed, racialized, and sexualized specificities as foundational (Adams, et al 2011). By centring the body in feminist discourse, Grosz contends that it is possible to discuss sexual differences without succumbing to the essentialist and deterministic frameworks that often characterize traditional dualistic thinking (Adams, et al 2011).

Moreover, Grosz critiques the implications of Cartesian dualism on the production of knowledge, arguing that it relegates the philosophy of bodies to the periphery of intellectual discourse, often viewed through a masculine lens that treats female corporeal experiences as mysterious or inferior (Lennon, 2017). She calls for a metaphysics of fluidity that transcends rigid conceptualizations of gender and body, suggesting a new model termed the Möbius circle, which allows for a more nuanced understanding of gender identities as inherently interconnected and dynamic rather than oppositional (Lennon, 2017; Fitz-James, 2016).

In her exploration of the body as a sociocultural artefact, Grosz aligns with thinkers like Spinoza, who rejects the binary dichotomy by framing the body as a series of processes rather than static categories (Lennon & Fischer, 2024). This reconfiguration paves the way for recognizing the body as a site of meaning-making and expression that defies reductive binaries and highlights the embodied experiences of individuals within sociocultural contexts. By embracing this approach, Grosz aims to dissolve the limitations imposed by dualism and foster a richer, more inclusive understanding of gender and identity.

Influence of Grosz on Contemporary Feminism

Elisabeth Grosz's contributions to feminist theory, particularly through her seminal work *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, have had a lasting impact on contemporary feminist discourse. Her approach, which emphasizes the significance of corporeality and sexual difference, challenges the traditional sociocultural constructions of gender and advocates for a focus on the specificities of bodies (Adams, et al 2011; Fitz-James, 2016). By engaging with philosophical perspectives from both male theorists and feminist gender de/constructionists, Grosz positions the female body as a critical site of analysis, pushing against the historically male-centric narratives that dominate philosophical discussions surrounding the body and corporeality (Adams et al, 2011; Lennon, 2017).

Grosz's theoretical framework has paved the way for a richer understanding of embodiment in feminist theory. She asserts that a thorough examination of corporeality is essential for elucidating constructions of sexual difference, thereby influencing feminist theorists to consider intersections with race, class, and disability (Lennon & Fischer, 2024; Mambrol, 2018).

This interdisciplinary dialogue reflects a growing recognition that the experiences of different marginalized groups cannot be understood in isolation from one another and that a comprehensive theory of embodiment must account for the complexities of lived experiences.

Moreover, Grosz's work has inspired contemporary feminist thinkers to re-evaluate the performative aspects of identity and how they interact with the material realities of the body. Scholars such as Judith Butler, while initially critical of the performative approach, engage



with Grosz's ideas about materiality, highlighting the intricate relationship between bodily existence and identity formation (Lennon & Fischer, 2024; Mambrol, 2018). This ongoing conversation underscores the necessity of incorporating corporeal experiences into feminist analyses, moving beyond binary interpretations of gender towards a more fluid understanding of identity (Lennon, 2017).

Conclusion

The challenges posed by Cartesian dualism in feminist thought underscore the need for alternative frameworks that recognize the intricate relationship between mind and body. Descartes' philosophical legacy has long influenced gendered identity constructions, reinforcing hierarchical distinctions that privilege intellect over corporeality. Feminist critiques highlight how this dualistic perspective marginalizes embodied experiences, limiting the scope of feminist discourse on subjectivity and gender. Elizabeth Grosz's corporeal feminism presents a compelling response to these limitations by advocating for a more integrated understanding of identity. Her work disrupts traditional dualistic binaries, positioning the body as an active site of meaning-making rather than a passive receptacle of cultural norms. By emphasizing the fluidity and dynamism of corporeal experiences, Grosz challenges essentialist notions of gender and offers a more inclusive framework for feminist analysis. Despite its transformative potential, Grosz's approach is not without critique. Some theorists argue that her emphasis on corporeality risks oversimplifying the complexities of gender identity and subjectivity. Nevertheless, her contributions remain invaluable in pushing feminist thought beyond Cartesian constraints. As feminist discourse continues to evolve, integrating corporeality into discussions of identity and power dynamics will be essential in fostering a more nuanced and holistic understanding of gender and embodiment.

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