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**Article: Evaluating Elizabeth  
Grosz's Biological Turn**  
**Proposal: Figures of Maternity in  
the Ethics of Generosity**

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I hereby declare and assure that I, Rose Trappes, have drafted this thesis independently, that no other sources and/or means other than those mentioned have been used and that the passages of which the text content or meaning originates in other works—including electronic media—have been identified and the sources clearly stated.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Rose Trappes', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Rose Trappes

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## Research Article

# Evaluating Elizabeth Grosz's Biological Turn

### Abstract

Elizabeth Grosz's interpretation of Darwinian evolutionary theory to ground a feminist ontology of biology has been particularly controversial. Most critics have understood Grosz to support her theory with empirical evidence, and they criticize her for being either inaccurate or uncritical of and overly dependent on science. In contrast, I argue that Grosz reads Darwin as a philosopher in a Deleuzian and Irigarayan sense, and that Grosz's project is therefore better understood in terms of its ethical and political goals rather than in terms of empirical adequacy. I conclude that Grosz fails to deliver an entirely satisfactory feminist ontology of biology, but that her work is valuable for the way it maintains ethical and political considerations in feminist ontological debates.

Keywords: ontology of biology, feminist ontology, methodological naturalism, Elizabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray, Darwinian evolutionary theory, Gilles Deleuze

Elizabeth Grosz's work since the late 1990s has exhibited what one could call a "turn to biology". Using the work of Charles Darwin, in addition to that of Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Luce Irigaray, Grosz develops an ontology of biology as dynamic, unpredictable, and sexually differentiated. Grosz's effort to develop a feminist ontology of biology has been rather controversial. In this paper I argue that Grosz's critics generally understand her turn to biology to involve a simultaneous turn to methodological naturalism. In other words, by using Darwinian evolutionary theory as the basis for an ontology of biological matter, Grosz seems to uphold the belief that philosophy should align itself with science and thus ground itself on empirical data. Based on this interpretation of Grosz as a methodological naturalist, her account has been rejected either as empirically inaccurate, or, alternatively, as insufficiently critical and overly dependent on empirical facts. In contrast, by reevaluating Grosz's methodological approach I argue that her ontology of biology must be evaluated according to ethical and political standards, not empirical ones. In this way, I develop a novel criticism of Grosz's ontology of biology, namely that it is not ethically and politically sound.

Before I begin, it is necessary to clarify the terms of Grosz's project. First, it is worth noting that "biology" is an ambiguous term, referring both to the science that studies living matter and to living matter itself. In this paper I use the terms "biological science(s)" and "biological matter" to disambiguate. In constructing an ontology of biology, Grosz is concerned not with the biological sciences, but rather with biological matter itself. In drawing this terminological distinction I diverge from Grosz: though she acknowledges the ambiguity of the term, she chooses to persist in using "biology" to refer to biological matter, leaving the study of the biological sciences to other feminist theorists.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Elizabeth Grosz, *Time travels: Feminism, nature, power* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005), 13; cf. Maureen McNeil, "Post-Millennial Feminist Theory: Encounters with Humanism, Ma-

It is also worth noting the scope of Grosz's ontology that I consider here. Tuija Pulkkinen points out that Grosz uses Darwin for a general ontology that could apply to all being, a "grand project of ontology".<sup>2</sup> Grosz does actually state that through Bergson and Deleuze she extends Darwin's conceptualization of life as continual unpredictable change to materiality in general.<sup>3</sup> Be that as it may, here I focus only on the more restricted ontology of biological matter which Grosz develops through her use of Darwin's theory of evolution. This more restricted focus allows me to develop an understanding of Grosz's ontology of biology as well as her methodological approach in a way that sheds new light on her project in general.

I begin by summarizing Grosz's general ontology of biology as the continual, unpredictable generation of difference. I then consider Grosz's introduction of sexual difference to her ontology of biology, and discuss the controversy this has sparked amongst her critics. Common to all of Grosz's critics, I argue, is an interpretation of her ontology of biology as naturalistic. In contrast, I suggest that Grosz's Deleuzian and Irigarayan heritage inflects her methodological approach such that she aims not for scientific accuracy but rather for ethical and political effectiveness. Finally, I briefly evaluate Grosz's project in light of her ethical and political goals and conclude that she perhaps misses the mark in attempting to construct a feminist ontology of biology. I conclude by suggesting that despite its drawbacks, Grosz's work represents a valuable contribution to the current wave of new feminist ontologies due to its explicitly feminist ethical and political character.

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terialism, Critique, Nature, Biology and Darwin," *Journal for Cultural Research* 14, no. 4 (2010): 436.

2. Tuija Pulkkinen, "The Role of Darwin in Elizabeth Grosz's Deleuzian Feminist Theory: Sexual Difference, Ontology, and Intervention," *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (2017): 289.

3. E.g., Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art* (Durham / London: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

# 1 Grosz's Ontology of Biology

Elizabeth Grosz has long been interested in the matter of biology. Already in *Volatile Bodies*,<sup>4</sup> Grosz claimed that constructing a feminist philosophy of the body that can challenge biological determinism and essentialism requires rethinking biological matter and the category of the natural. Aside from her claim to its importance, however, Grosz's early work devotes little attention to biological matter as such. Instead, Grosz's analysis is focused overwhelmingly on the way that psychology, social institutions and cultural norms affect and produce bodies as we know and live them.

In the decade following *Volatile Bodies* Grosz reconsidered her early inattention to biological matter. In developing an ontology of biology, Grosz states, she seeks to understand “how the biological prefigures and makes possible the various permutations of life that constitute natural, social, and cultural existence.”<sup>5</sup> A primary resource for her ontology of biology throughout her turn to biology is Charles Darwin's evolutionary theory. As it forms the basis of Grosz's ontology of biology, it is worth giving a brief sketch of the theory.

Darwin's theory of how species evolve and change over time revolutionized the contemporary understanding of biology. Though Darwin was not the only theorist to posit the gradual change and development of species as we currently know them, his theory of evolution by natural selection was one of the most comprehensive and coherent theories of evolution at the time, and it certainly proved to be the most influential.<sup>6</sup>

Darwin's theory is often summarized as “the survival of the fittest.” Though crude, this captures the basics. Essentially, for Darwin, there are many different

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4. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism* (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

5. Elizabeth Grosz, *The nick of time: Politics, evolution, and the untimely* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2004), 1.

6. Eva Jablonka and Marion J Lamb, *Evolution in four dimensions, revised edition: Genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and symbolic variation in the history of life* (Cambridge, MA / London: MIT press, 2014), chapter 1.

individuals, each with a different ability to reproduce themselves within a certain environment, that is, each with a different fitness level. The individuals who can reproduce themselves better (who are more fit) have more offspring than the others. If this fitness is heritable (if it is passed on to the offspring more than would be dictated by chance) the offspring, too, are more likely to have more offspring than themselves survive to produce ever more offspring. So over successive generations, the better-producing types of individuals (the fit ones) start to outnumber the others.

Eventually, the fitter type of individuals come to dominate a population, meaning that the norm for that population becomes whatever characterizes the fitter type. In this way, the characteristics of a species change over time. Moreover, since there are many different environments and fitness is relative to environment, different species will evolve differently depending on where they are and what is available to them. Hence the great diversity of life on the planet.

This kind of model of evolution, as I have roughly sketched it, is debated extensively in the philosophy and theory of biology, and Darwin's theory is usually not accepted without at least addition or modification of some of aspects, and often with far more significant alteration.<sup>7</sup> But for Grosz the details are less important than the basic principles and the understanding of biological matter that can be derived from them.

Specifically, Grosz highlights two features of life in Darwin's theory that she finds particularly significant. The first is that his theory of evolution is premised on the existence and continual production of difference.<sup>8</sup> Without differences between individuals there could be no differential survival and reproduction of certain individuals and thus no evolution. As well as requiring diversity, evo-

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7. Peter Godfrey-Smith, *Philosophy of biology* (Princeton / Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014), chapter 3; Jablonka and Lamb, *Evolution in four dimensions, revised edition: Genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and symbolic variation in the history of life*.

8. Grosz, *The nick of time: Politics, evolution, and the untimely*, 18.

lution often produces difference: species often become more different through evolution—though it is worth noting that this is not always the case, since there is convergent evolution where organisms become *more* alike.<sup>9</sup> The second feature Grosz picks out is that evolution for Darwin is based on probability. Fitter individuals are only likely to produce more offspring than less fit individuals, but they may not, and offspring are only likely to inherit the fitness of their parents, but they may not. Evolution therefore includes an element of unpredictability.<sup>10</sup>

Grosz suggests that the continuous, unpredictable production of difference evidenced in Darwin’s theory is the essence of biological life, that is, what sets biological matter apart from nonliving matter. Biological matter is characterized, for Grosz, by “the dynamism, growth, and transformability of living systems, indeed the impossibility of stasis and mere reproduction, the impulse toward a future that is unknown in and uncontained by the present and its history.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, Grosz concludes, “it is only differentiating, distinguishing, rendering more distinct, specializing and adapting that characterize life in its essence. Its essence is in differentiation, in making a difference.”<sup>12</sup> This, then, is the basis for Grosz’s ontology of biology: biological matter is the dynamic, unpredictable production of difference.

Grosz carries her interpretation of Darwin through into her later work *Becoming Undone*.<sup>13</sup> In this work, one of Darwin’s most valuable insights, for Grosz, is the way in which he understood life as the elaboration of difference. In particular, and more explicitly than in her earlier work, Grosz stresses the way that difference for Darwin is not organized around a principle of identity

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9. Convergent evolution is the process whereby species with different backgrounds come to resemble one another due to the selective advantage conferred by a particular form in a shared environment. For example, the Australian sugar glider and the American flying squirrel both separately evolved to have remarkably similar wing-like flaps between their fore and hind legs to enable them to glide between trees in densely forested areas.

10. Grosz, *The nick of time: Politics, evolution, and the untimely*, 33.

11. *Ibid.*, 32.

12. *Ibid.*, 46.

13. Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*.

since species identities were only developed through difference. Again, based on her reading of Darwin Grosz maintains that “life must be understood as the ongoing exploration of and experimentation with the forms of bodily activity that living things are capable of undertaking.”<sup>14</sup> Biological materiality, for Grosz, is about unpredictable, exploratory changes and the production of difference over time.

The centering of biological matter on dynamism and change is itself already a significant basis for an ontology, but Grosz does not stop there. Turning to Darwin’s work on sexual selection she expands her ontology to also incorporate sexual difference as an essential aspect of biological matter. This move has been heavily criticized in the literature and in the following section I briefly review her argument and the criticisms it has received. Following her critics, I conclude that Grosz’s ontology of biology lacks empirical support. From this conclusion, in the following section I turn to consider whether scientific accuracy is really the right standard by which to evaluate Grosz’s theory.

## 2 Sexual Difference and the Critical Reception

Grosz reads Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, as well as arguments about the evolution of sexual reproduction, as support for the ontological primacy of sexual difference. Her argument is reasonably straightforward, if at times alarming for the reader trained in biology. I will briefly explain it here and review some of the criticisms in order to show that Grosz’s claims ultimately lack empirical justification.

Grosz’s primary reference points for her discussion of sexual difference are two theories about the evolution of sexual reproduction and differentiation. The first theory concerns the evolution of sexual reproduction. Sexual reproduction

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14. Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 22.

brings two different gametes, the egg and the sperm, together to form a new individual. In contrast to clonal reproduction, in which there is only one parental organism that replicates itself in the next generation, sexual reproduction produces novelty through the combination of two sets of parental inheritances. This means that sexual reproduction generates offspring that are more likely to differ from their parents and from each other than the offspring produced by clonal reproduction, all other things being equal. The production of increased variation is thought to have lent an evolutionary advantage to what would otherwise be a restrictive and thus largely unfavorable mode of reproduction. And since sexual reproduction requires two sexes (two kinds of gametes), Grosz infers that “sexual bifurcation provides better resources with which natural selection can work because it induces more variation.”<sup>15</sup> For Grosz, then, the theory about the evolution of sexual reproduction already links sexual difference with the ontology of biology as the production of difference.

The second theory about sexual difference that Grosz draws on is Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, which provides an additional and probably stronger role for sexual difference in inducing variation. Rather than the competition for resources (food, shelter, and so on), as in natural selection, sexual selection concerns the competition for mates. Darwin hypothesized that the great variety of forms in nature, and especially the existence of certain extravagant forms like showy feathers or complex bird calls, could only be fully explained if one sex exerted a selective pressure on the other by choosing only certain kinds of mates. The organisms who are more appealing to the choosy sex will be more likely to have more offspring, and if they pass their appeal onto their offspring then the appealing organisms will start to become more and more common, thus changing the norm for the species. In each species this happens differently, so

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15. Grosz, *The nick of time: Politics, evolution, and the untimely*, 69.

that each species starts to acquire different characteristics. Hence the great diversity of life on the planet.

Sounds familiar? In fact, it is now common to assimilate sexual selection into natural selection, as just another kind of criteria for reproductive success. But for Darwin, and for Grosz reading Darwin, sexual selection is a different mechanism with distinctive results. Grosz highlights three aspects of sexual selection that are particularly relevant for her ontology. First, sexual selection drives even more production of difference than plain old natural selection. Second, sexual selection generates a wide variety of unpredictable innovations, since there is no predicting what will come to be considered attractive in a given species. Third, though maintaining that sexual selection relies on binary sexual difference, Grosz suggests that this binary is non-categorical and that sexual selection can indeed drive the generation of more varied sexual differences: “Sexual selection differentiates all species touched by its trace with an irreducible binarism that itself generates endless variety on either side of its bifurcation, and indeed produces variations—the intersexes—that lie between bifurcated categories.”<sup>16</sup> Grosz therefore concludes that sexual difference, being the basis for both sexual reproduction and sexual selection, is a crucial factor in generating unpredictable differences in life.

After positing its role in generating unpredictable difference, Grosz makes two claims to support her belief that sexual difference is ontologically fundamental to biological matter. First, she states that “evolution never reverses itself”,<sup>17</sup> that is, that it never goes from more to less complex or diverse. In other words, once life has got a hold of sexual difference as a way to generate more unpredictable differences, it won’t get rid of it. Second, Grosz states that asexually reproducing organisms are “rare cases”<sup>18</sup> that have traded reproduc-

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16. Grosz, *The nick of time: Politics, evolution, and the untimely*, 67.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 69.

tive stability for less development, specialization and diversity. They therefore presumably don't count in the ontology of biology with which Grosz is concerned. Grosz concludes that sexual difference is an ineliminable and universal feature of biological matter. It is in this way that sexual difference is introduced into Grosz's ontology of biology.

As may already be clear, the grounds for an argument that sexual difference is part of the ontology of biology are rather shaky, and Grosz has been challenged on a number of points. First there is the simple fact that asexually reproducing organisms are not rare cases at all. As Myra Hird points out, Grosz's "big like us" perspective leads her to overlook the sheer diversity of modes of reproduction and the various ways of generating differences that non-sexually reproducing organisms have developed.<sup>19</sup> It is quite common, for instance, that bacteria exchange genetic material with one another, creating new combinations of genetic material directly rather than through reproduction.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as anyone who has seen bacteria acquiring antibiotic resistance on a petri dish could attest, the rapid rate at which bacteria reproduce means that any small genetic change can easily proliferate exponentially and generate further differences. It makes little sense, then, to claim that sexual difference is the only or even the most privileged form of biological matter's continual, unpredictable production of difference.

It can also be objected that evolution can indeed "reverse itself", and that it is possible that certain kinds of evolved features can cease to be reproduced over evolutionary time. As Luciana Parisi comments, citing Stephen Gould as well as empirical studies on all-female colonies of ants, the evolution of sexual reproduction was itself an evolutionary accident that therefore implies no necessity, meaning sexual reproduction could very well cease to be dominant in the

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19. Myra Hird, *The origins of sociable life: Evolution after science studies* (Basingstoke / New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 111.

20. *Ibid.*, 93.

future.<sup>21</sup> Thus, even if sexual difference were a privileged form of the production of difference, it is not justified to claim that sexual difference is an irreducible and ineradicable feature of biological matter.

Grosz's assertions about the ontological primacy of sexual difference in biological matter thus seem to be empirically unfounded. This has led commentators who might be sympathetic with Grosz's general ontology of biology to reject her claims regarding the ontological primacy of sexual difference.<sup>22</sup> According to such approaches, Grosz's claims about biological matter more generally might be valid, but her claims about sexual difference are simply inaccurate.

Given the lack of empirical support for Grosz's theory,<sup>23</sup> what value does Grosz's theory have? Should Grosz's ontology be marked down as another well-intentioned but hopelessly misinformed theory of nature? In the following sections I consider Grosz's Deleuzian and Irigarayan understanding of philosophy, arguing that she takes ethical and political standards, rather than empirical accuracy, to be key for her ontology of biological matter.

### 3 Not Another Naturalism

There is a general consensus that Grosz's ontology of biology is grounded on the facts revealed by the biological sciences. In other words, Grosz is usually taken to subscribe to some form of methodological naturalism, the belief that philosophy is just like science in that it aims to construct "synthetic theories about the natural world, answerable in the last instance to the tribunal of *a posteriori*

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21. Luciana Parisi, "Event and evolution," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. s1 (2010): 153, 161.

22. E.g., Parisi, "Event and evolution"; Hird, *The origins of sociable life: Evolution after science studies*; Gill Jagger, "The new materialism and sexual difference," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 40, no. 2 (2015): 321–342.

23. Though critics so far have focused their attention on Grosz's ontology of sexual difference, it is not difficult to also raise the objection that Grosz's ontology of biology more generally should be rejected as scientifically inaccurate. Regularity and stability are familiar features of biological matter, and to deny these features in favor of an ontology in which biological matter is entirely unpredictable and always changing, it could be argued, is to fall foul of basic empirical evidence.

empirical data”.<sup>24</sup> Now, as we have seen, critics of her incorporation of sexual difference into the ontology of biology typically accept Grosz’s methodological naturalism as appropriate and justified. Indeed, these critics typically contest Grosz’s claims by referring back to empirical data. In contrast, a number of other critics take methodological naturalism itself to be the weak point of Grosz’s theory.

For instance, Tuija Pulkkinen<sup>25</sup> objects to Grosz’s approach of using scientific theory to ground ontology. Pulkkinen argues that by making ontology dependent on a specific account of the facts, Grosz opens herself up to defeat by scientific findings and reinforces the widespread domination of the humanities by the natural sciences. In addition, Maureen McNeil<sup>26</sup> correctly points out that in Grosz’s affirmative approach to biological theory, “the entanglements of discourse and the social practices and structures of biological science do not get a look in.” Grosz seems to endorse and rely on facts revealed by the biological sciences, failing to pay critical attention to the way such facts are themselves ideologically informed and often detrimental to feminist projects, as decades of feminist science studies have shown. As a consequence of her methodological naturalism and her implicit reliance on scientific objectivity, then, it seems that Grosz fails to deliver a sufficiently complex, subtle and critical account of biological matter for feminist purposes.

However, there are reasons to suspect that Grosz is anything but a methodological naturalist. First, as has become evident, Grosz’s account exhibits a distinct lack of attention to the empirical data concerning sexual difference and biological matter. It would be strange for a philosopher of her stature to ig-

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24. David Papineau, “Naturalism,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2016, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016).

25. Pulkkinen, “The Role of Darwin in Elizabeth Grosz’s Deleuzian Feminist Theory: Sexual Difference, Ontology, and Intervention,” 288.

26. McNeil, “Post-Millennial Feminist Theory: Encounters with Humanism, Materialism, Critique, Nature, Biology and Darwin,” 436.

nore such data if her account depended on them. Second, Grosz combines her analysis of Darwinian theory with the thought of distinctly non-scientific theorists, including Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Luce Irigaray. Grosz apparently reads Darwin along with these theorists as a philosopher, referring on numerous occasions to Darwin as a philosopher or as partly responsible for developing a philosophy of becoming.<sup>27</sup>

Grosz's statement that she reads Darwin as a philosopher is significant for the question of her methodological naturalism, since her understanding of philosophy implies a distinction between science and philosophy. First and most explicitly, Grosz adopts Deleuze and Félix Guattari's idea of philosophy as the creation of new concepts that transform our field of understanding.<sup>28</sup> Second, Grosz consistently follows Irigaray's lead in taking the facilitation of the elaboration of sexual difference as the key philosophical goal of our time. Importantly, for Deleuze and Guattari as for Irigaray it is ultimately ethical and political standards that determine the value of a philosophy, rather than scientific adequacy. Acknowledging this methodological background to Grosz's interpretation of Darwin as a philosopher, I argue, requires rethinking the appropriate evaluative framework for her ontology of biological matter.

Deleuze and Guattari develop their understanding of philosophy as the creation of concepts in *What is Philosophy?*,<sup>29</sup> in part through a contrast between philosophy and science.<sup>30</sup> Science, they claim, concerns the generation of propositions that correspond to the world, and can therefore be assessed based on its

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27. E.g., Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 3, 120.

28. Elizabeth Grosz, "The practice of feminist theory," *differences* 21, no. 1 (2010): 94–108; Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, chapter 5.

29. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

30. Daniel Smith and John Protevi, "Gilles Deleuze," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Spring 2018, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018); Paul Patton, "Introduction," in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Malden: Blackwell, 1996), 1–17; for a contrasting interpretation, see Rex Butler, *Deleuze and Guattari's 'What is Philosophy?': A Reader's Guide* (London / New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016).

level of empirical support.<sup>31</sup> In contrast, philosophy involves the creation of concepts that are not assessable in terms of how well they correspond to reality, since, according to Deleuze and Guattari, they aren't about correspondence to reality at all. Instead of empirical adequacy, Deleuze and Guattari hold that a philosopher's concept can only be evaluated in terms of the way it generates a new field of understanding, complete with specific problems to which it responds and specific conceptual relations.<sup>32</sup>

At first blush the idea that novelty should be the standard for assessing philosophical contributions seems to be arbitrary and potentially quite dangerous. However, as Paul Patton explains, Deleuze and Guattari actually assign philosophy “a ‘utopian’ task”<sup>33</sup> of generating a transformation in the way we understand our lives and thereby how we live in the world. Thus, Patton states, “ultimately, the purpose served by the creation of concepts is ethical rather than epistemological.”<sup>34</sup> As a number of theorists have now elaborated, it was this ethical and political task of creating transformative new concepts that Deleuze and Guattari took up throughout their respective and joint careers, developing alternatives to current models of capitalism, communism, humanism, oedipal desire, and so on.<sup>35</sup>

Reading Darwin as a philosopher in the Deleuzian sense, Grosz understands Darwinian evolutionary theory as a concept: something that completely transforms the way we can think about reality and the human subject. The most significant elements of Darwin's concept, according to Grosz, include the understanding of biological matter in terms of dynamism and unpredictability, the understanding of the human as a more complex elaboration of life in general, and

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31. Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 22.

32. *Ibid.*, 31.

33. Patton, “Introduction,” 13.

34. *Ibid.*, 15.

35. E.g., Claire Colebrook, *Understanding Deleuze* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2002); Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On nomadic ethics* (Cambridge / Malden: Polity, 2006).

the idea that sexual selection partly drives the differentiation of species. First, viewing biological matter as dynamic and unpredictable radically transforms the fixity and predictability previously attributed to biological phenomena.<sup>36</sup> Second, humans were and still are forced by Darwin's concept to think of themselves as continuous with rather than of a separate kind to animals and other life forms.<sup>37</sup> Finally, sexual selection invites an understanding of sexual difference as an important and powerful force.<sup>38</sup>

Given Grosz's Deleuzian heritage, then, it is already evident that her method is anything but naturalist; in constructing an ontology of biology she aims for novelty and a transformative role rather than empirical adequacy. However, in ways that I describe in more detail below, Grosz often states her intention to generate theory that is not just new, but that specifically overcomes the oppression of women. Grosz's feminist goals cannot be understood solely within the framework of a Deleuzian understanding of philosophy. As Patton argues, for Deleuze and Guattari the ultimate value of a concept (as opposed to its internal value in terms of how well-formed the concept is) can only be determined after the fact, according to the success or otherwise it has in reaching people and pointing to a different future.<sup>39</sup> In contrast, Grosz's feminist goals are not posited after observing the success of feminist philosophy at generating transformations but rather are posited beforehand as desiderata for a feminist ontology. Grosz must therefore have something more than a Deleuzian understanding of philosophy in mind.

In fact, in a recent essay Grosz makes it clear that she is also influenced by Irigaray's approach to philosophy.<sup>40</sup> Since it contains more substantial and

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36. Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 78; Grosz, *Time travels: Feminism, nature, power*, 25.

37. Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 13.

38. Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 141; Grosz, *Time travels: Feminism, nature, power*, 31.

39. Patton, "Introduction," 14.

40. Elizabeth Grosz, "Irigaray, The Untimely, and The Constitution of An Onto-Ethics," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 43, no. 1 (2017): 15-24.

explicitly feminist ethical principles, the Irigarayan understanding of philosophy can be seen to complement the Deleuzian one in Grosz's understanding of philosophy. In the next section I show that understanding Irigaray's influence in this respect will provide a framework within which to assess Grosz's ontology of biology as a specifically feminist project. This will allow me to return to Grosz's ontology in the following section in order to develop a novel critique.

## 4 Irigarayan Onto-Ethics

Grosz's feminist approach to ontology can be illuminated by examining Irigaray's philosophy and the influence it has had on Grosz. As well as bringing out some striking similarities between their respective ontologies, clarifying Grosz's Irigarayan heritage will also provide important clues as to how we should assess Grosz's project of developing a specifically feminist ontology of biology.

Irigaray is notorious for her argument that, roughly put, ontology must be changed in order to end the oppression of women. Influenced by Heidegger, Irigaray argues that Western metaphysics<sup>41</sup> has been dominated by a substance or object ontology, in which the world is seen to be occupied by individual, independent objects to which a subject relates. While Irigaray agrees with Heidegger concerning the way Western metaphysics has distanced humans from Being and nature,<sup>42</sup> she also argues that a substance ontology excludes sexual difference. By positing a universal subjectivity and a homogeneous set of objects, Irigaray claims, substance ontology denies the possibility that subjects and their relations to objects are fundamentally sexually differentiated. Women as different subjects are therefore excluded by Western metaphysics from their own proper

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41. In this context, and in the rest of the present article, metaphysics can be understood as the philosophical field or tradition in which ontology is developed, as in "Western metaphysics" or alternatively as simply equivalent to ontology, as in "metaphysics of fluids".

42. Martin Heidegger, *The question concerning technology, and other essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York / London: Garland Publishing, 1977); cf. Helen Fielding, "Questioning nature: Irigaray, Heidegger and the potentiality of matter," *Continental Philosophy Review* 36, no. 1 (2003): 1–26.

subjectivity and forced to take up subjectivity in relation to the masculine order. Thus, Irigaray makes the revolutionary move to argue against substance ontology on the grounds that it contributes to the exclusion and oppression of women.

In response to the faulty Western metaphysics, Irigaray develops an alternative ontology: a metaphysics of fluids or a process ontology as opposed to a metaphysics of objects or substance ontology.<sup>43</sup> Drawing on the cosmologies of the pre-Socratics, philosophies from India and China, and the phenomenology of the female body, Irigaray conceives of matter as active, dynamic, and sexually differentiated. What results is an ontology that can readily appear mystical or essentialist, replete with descriptions of mysterious fluid forces to which women are somehow intrinsically related. Relatedly, it can seem that Irigaray is ignoring or blatantly contradicting scientific facts about nature.

However, Alison Stone insists that Irigaray's ontology of nature must be interpreted in light of its phenomenological and ethical goals rather than its scientific adequacy.<sup>44</sup> First, for Irigaray an ontology of independent subjects relating to causally interacting but only superficially changing objects conflicts with our first-hand experience of the world. In contrast, Irigaray claims that a fluid metaphysics accords more with our lived experience as bodily, changing beings. In this sense, Stone elaborates, Irigaray is following the phenomenological tradition in which scientific accounts of the world are abstractions from and secondary to the understanding of the world as we live it.<sup>45</sup>

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43. E.g., Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), chapter 6; cf. Iris Marion Young, *On female body experience: "Throwing like a girl" and other essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 81; Alison Stone, "Irigaray's ecological phenomenology: towards an elemental materialism," *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 46, no. 2 (2015): 117–131; Alison Stone, "The sex of nature: A reinterpretation of Irigaray's metaphysics and political thought," *Hypatia* 18, no. 3 (2003): 60–84; Ann Murphy, "The enigma of the natural in Luce Irigaray," *Philosophy Today* 45, no. Supplement (2001): 75–82.

44. Stone, "Irigaray's ecological phenomenology: towards an elemental materialism," 118.

45. Stone, "The sex of nature: A reinterpretation of Irigaray's metaphysics and political thought," 69.

Second, as well as aiming for phenomenological adequacy Irigaray argues that her metaphysics of fluids will bring about a more ethical way of being in the world. According to Irigaray, seeing the world as dynamic and unpredictable involves acknowledging the agency and sensitivity of nature and that it escapes our total domination. And seeing the world in this way will, Stone explains, encourage us to “live more humbly, less hubristically.”<sup>46</sup> In addition, Irigaray develops her ontology to allow for the development of sexual difference with the specific aim to foster positive relations amongst sexed human subjects. Thus Irigaray argues that her ontology will lead to a more ethically responsible way of being in the world.

For Irigaray, then, ontology should be developed with a view to the way it will affect humans and their relations with each other and the world around them. Iris Young sums up Irigaray’s thoughts on the matter:

The point is that a metaphysics [or ontology] of self-identical objects has clear ties to the domination of nature in which the domination of women has been implicated because culture has projected onto us identification with the abject body. It makes a difference how we think about beings in the world, and we can make choices about it that seem to have political [and ethical] implications.<sup>47</sup>

In Irigaray’s understanding of philosophy, in other words, the way we understand ourselves and live our lives is bound up with a broader understanding of and interaction with reality. As a consequence, for Irigaray ontology is ultimately answerable to ethical and political standards, and not to scientific ones. Thus, as Grosz puts it, Irigaray understands philosophy as “ontology/ethics/politics”,<sup>48</sup> or more simply “onto-ethics”.<sup>49</sup>

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46. Stone, “Irigaray’s ecological phenomenology: towards an elemental materialism,” 121.

47. Young, *On female body experience: “Throwing like a girl” and other essays*, 81.

48. Grosz, “Irigaray, The Untimely, and The Constitution of An Onto-Ethics,” 18.

49. *Ibid.*, 16.

In this sense Irigaray's notion of philosophy is similar that of Deleuze and Guattari, both being assessable by ethical and political rather than scientific standards. In addition, Grosz suggests that Irigaray, too, takes novelty as an important criterion, stating that Irigaray urges us to redirect thought into "creating, inventing, conceptualizing what has never existed before."<sup>50</sup> Through this interpretation of Irigaray's project, Grosz integrates the Irigarayan and Deleuzian understandings of philosophy and her own expressed preference for generating novel theory.<sup>51</sup> Nevertheless, it is evident that more is at stake in Irigaray's philosophy than mere novelty, and that her positing of specific predetermined goals for philosophy differentiates her approach from that of Deleuze and Guattari.

Now, it is interesting to note that, as Grosz herself recognizes,<sup>52</sup> Grosz's ontology of biological matter as dynamic and unpredictable is remarkably similar to Irigaray's ontology of nature. Though drawing from markedly different sources, both call for an understanding of nature, or biological matter, as dynamic and unpredictable or not fully knowable.<sup>53</sup> Irigaray justifies her ontology as more ethically and phenomenologically appropriate. Though Grosz tends to emphasize novelty over Irigaray's substantive aims of philosophy<sup>54</sup>, Grosz does sometimes articulate explicitly feminist philosophical goals and offer an explicitly ethical and political justification for her ontology of biology.

For instance, Grosz argues that feminist theory must develop a positive con-

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50. Grosz, "Irigaray, The Untimely, and The Constitution of An Onto-Ethics," 23; see also Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 168.

51. Elizabeth Grosz and Rebecca Hill, "Onto-Ethics and Difference: An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 43, no. 1 (2017): 7.

52. Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, chapter 7.

53. Also interesting is that Irigaray's and Grosz's moves to dynamize biological matter are not unique. Many new materialists, for instance, have made similar claims as part of the general trend to disrupt the understanding of biological matter, and matter more generally, as fixed and passive cf. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms," in *New materialisms: Ontology, agency, and politics*, ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham / London: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–43.

54. "At its best, feminist theory is about the invention of the new: new practices, new positions, new projects, new techniques, new values." Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 83, emphasis in original; see also Grosz, "The practice of feminist theory"; Grosz, *Time travels: Feminism, nature, power*, 2

cept of difference to replace that of identity, since the latter contributes to the oppression of women through its denial of different subjectivities.<sup>55</sup> She also discusses in many places the need to prioritize ontology and nature rather than epistemology and culture, since without ontology and an understanding of nature we do not have an appropriately complex and complete understanding of how feminist change can take place.<sup>56</sup> Grosz aims to articulate, she states, “something like a new metaphysics [or ontology], a new way of understanding *what is* in terms *more relevant to women and their interests* than previous models offered.”<sup>57</sup> All in all, then, Grosz tends to see the aim of feminist philosophy as the elaboration not just of a new ontology, but of a specifically *feminist* ontology.

More specifically, since her early work Grosz has situated her ontology of biology within the feminist project to challenge biological determinism and essentialism while also according significance to biological matter as an important aspect of our reality.<sup>58</sup> Grosz argues that viewing biological matter as inert leaves intact the foundations of biological determinism and essentialism, since in both of these discourses it is the unchanging features of biology that determine or define human traits and behavior. For Grosz it is therefore important for feminists to understand biological matter in terms of unpredictability and change.

Grosz’s reinterpretation of biological matter as the site of continual, unpredictable change certainly does cut the grounds out from underneath biological determinism and essentialism. Without a fixed, steady biology to appeal to, it is difficult to make a claim that certain biological features are normative or

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55. E.g., Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 89.

56. E.g., Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 84; Grosz, *Time travels: Feminism, nature, power*, 6; Grosz, *The nick of time: Politics, evolution, and the untimely*, 2.

57. Grosz, “The practice of feminist theory,” 101; second emphasis mine.

58. Grosz, *Volatile bodies: Toward a corporeal feminism*, 14–18.

definitive. Take the oft-voiced opinion that men are aggressive by nature due to some evolutionary history in which aggressive men were more reproductively successful and passed this trait on to their offspring, who eventually came to dominate the human population. Depending on how it is construed, this could be an argument from biological determinism (men's biology determines their behavior) or biological essentialism (men are essentially aggressive, because of their biology). In either case, it relies on biological traits being exactly reproduced over generations. But if biological materiality is a matter of the continual, unpredictable production of difference, then anything that happened in evolutionary history need not continue into the future. Aggression might (possibly) have conferred an advantage in the past, and might even be used to describe some men today, but that doesn't mean it won't cease to be exactly reproduced such that future men will not be especially aggressive. With a dynamic, unpredictable biology, therefore, Grosz has a way to combat biological determinism and essentialism at their roots.

Like Irigaray, then, Grosz develops an ontology with a view not just to novelty but to achieving specific, feminist ethical and political goals.<sup>59</sup> Given Grosz's Deleuzian and Irigarayan heritage, then, it should be clear that Grosz is anything but a methodological naturalist. What's at stake in Grosz's feminist ontology of biology, that is, is not scientific adequacy but rather a combination of novelty and specific feminist ethical and political goals.

Understanding Grosz's non-naturalistic approach therefore calls into question the evaluative frameworks of those critics who focus on criticizing Grosz for

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59. On the other hand, it is not clear whether Grosz would agree with Irigaray on the importance of phenomenological adequacy. Though in her early work she used phenomenology productively, her more recent work has exhibited more ambivalence regarding the relevance of phenomenology. In this period, Grosz refers to her preferred "philosophy of becoming" as "an alternative to the traditions of liberal political thought, phenomenology from its Hegelian to its contemporary forms, and structuralism and poststructuralism." Grosz, *Becoming undone: Darwinian reflections on life, politics, and art*, 5 At other times, though, Grosz seems to approve of the phenomenological approach in Irigaray's work, with its basis on lived experience rather than objective knowledge of the body *ibid.*, 145-6. I will leave the question of phenomenological adequacy unresolved, since the mere positing of feminist ethical and political goals already shifts Grosz away from methodological naturalism.

her inattention to empirical evidence or for her uncritical and dependent attitude towards the biological sciences. Instead, it suggests that Grosz's ontology should be evaluated in a Deleuzian-Irigarayan fashion, according to its generation of a new concept and its ability to achieve feminist ethical and political goals. Employing this alternative evaluative framework brings new considerations to bear on Grosz's ontology of biology and, as I develop in the next section, points to a novel avenue for critique.

## 5 Reevaluating Grosz's Feminist Ontology

Three considerations come of evaluating Grosz in light of her Deleuzian and Irigarayan approach. First, acknowledging the influence of Deleuze and Guattari, it would make sense to check the internal consistency of Grosz's Darwinian concept. Second, we should assess how likely it is that Grosz's ontology of biological matter, with its dual assertion of the continual, unpredictable production of difference on the one hand and sexual differentiation on the other, is ethically and politically sound. Third, it would be necessary to consider whether, even if sound, it is the best option available. I will sketch an answer to these questions here.<sup>60</sup>

First, is Grosz's ontology of biology internally consistent? As we have already seen, Grosz appears to construct an account of biological matter as totally dynamic and unpredictable. At the same time, she posits sexual difference as a necessary (and therefore unchanging and predictable) condition of biological matter. Thus, commentators like Parisi<sup>61</sup> and Weinstein<sup>62</sup> conclude that Grosz

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60. I leave aside the much-discussed question of sexual difference in order to focus on Grosz's ontology of biology as the continual, unpredictable generation of differences. A full evaluation of Grosz's biological turn would therefore require considering the criticism of Irigarayan theories of sexual difference as heterosexist and racist or ethnocentrist for a good overview of these criticisms, see Rachel Jones, *Irigaray: Towards a sexual philosophy* (Cambridge / Malden: Polity, 2011), chapter 6.

61. Parisi, "Event and evolution."

62. Jami Weinstein, "A Requiem to Sexual Difference: A Response to Luciana Parisi's "Event and Evolution",<sup>3</sup> *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, no. s1 (2010): 165–187.

contradicts herself when she introduces sexual difference. However, leaving sexual difference out of the picture does not necessarily resolve the inconsistency. An ontology of biology as totally dynamic and unpredictable could also be seen to be inconsistent with the general idea that biological matter produces difference. More specifically, without some kind of stability and regularity, and especially without the reasonably faithful inheritance of parental characteristics, the great differences with which Grosz is concerned could never have developed through evolution. This suggests that Grosz's Darwinian concept is perhaps not internally consistent.

Perhaps a more charitable reading of Grosz could refer to Grosz's numerous references to regularity and constraints in nature. There are moments throughout her texts in which Grosz speaks of nature in terms of resistance,<sup>63</sup> cohesion,<sup>64</sup> and constraints.<sup>65</sup> Grosz also speaks of biological features that "rather than *simply* exhibit stasis, a fixed essence or unchanging characteristics, are *more readily understood* in terms of active vectors of change."<sup>66</sup> Thus, although Grosz at times refers to "the impossibility of stasis and mere reproduction",<sup>67</sup> at other times she rejects only the total characterization of biology by regularity, presenting instead an account of biology as somewhat dynamic or to a certain extent unpredictable. Grosz's very inclusion of sexual difference as a condition for the continual production of difference, rather than a weakness of her theory, could also be interpreted as an outline for a broader understanding of the way that some level of regularity and stability more generally is a condition for life as the production of difference. In other words, it is possible to read Grosz as more sensitive to the interplay between change and stasis, difference and repetition, than many have given her credit for or than she herself makes clear.

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63. Grosz, *The nick of time: Politics, evolution, and the untimely*, 72.

64. *Ibid.*, 18.

65. *Ibid.*, 33.

66. *Ibid.*, 19; emphasis added.

67. *Ibid.*, 32.

Reading Grosz as a thinker of somewhat dynamic and somewhat unpredictable matter might resolve an internal contradiction. It also leaves intact Grosz's achievement of obstructing biological reductionist and essentialist arguments, since matter is still always open to possible change. However, it also entails a particular understanding of biology that is problematic in its own rights. This brings us to the second consideration in evaluating Grosz's ontology of biology: is her theory ethically and politically sound?

Working within a Darwinian framework, Grosz tends to locate the production of difference within organisms, while the environment becomes the locus for regularity and stasis, as both resource and constraint. For instance, and in a quite standard format that is still taught to biology students<sup>68</sup>, Grosz characterizes evolution in terms of three requirements: for evolution to take place, there must be (1) individual variation, (2) the reproductive proliferation of individuals, and (3) natural selection.<sup>69</sup> While the first two are internal generative forces, dynamic and unpredictable, the third is typically seen in terms of fixed external resources and constraints. It is the environment that selects organisms for their fitness, that is, that constrains the kinds of differences that are reproduced in the next generation.<sup>70</sup> Natural selection, for Grosz, is the "background" against which organisms' differences acquire a value, or, alternatively, variation is the material for natural selection.<sup>71</sup>

By taking on the Darwinian picture in which the environment is the site of stable and regular resources and constraints, while the lively generation of difference is located within the organism and its reproduction, Grosz creates an understanding of biology that is ethically and politically problematic. If the organism is seen only in terms of the dynamic, unpredictable production

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68. One which could be attributed to geneticist Richard Lewontin Godfrey-Smith, *Philosophy of biology*, 30

69. Grosz, *The nick of time: Politics, evolution, and the untimely*, 32.

70. Ibid., 33.

71. Ibid., 42-48.

of difference, instances of stability and regularity in the organism itself are marginalized or disregarded. Thus, viewing the organism as the site of the production of differences readily leads to the idea that bodies are ultimately flexible and manipulable. Catherine Malabou<sup>72</sup> points out the danger of such a view of bodies, which denies the possibility of bodily resistance to exploitation within biopolitical regimes.

In developing this point, Malabou cites theorists such as Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben and Roberto Esposito who theorize biopolitics as the gradual inclusion of the body's biological features and processes into the political realm that has occurred since the eighteenth century. Malabou argues that such theorists tend to view biological matter only in terms of how it is taken over and shaped by political and symbolic forces. Biological matter is thus seen as ultimately the malleable material readily available for training and regulating towards political ends, rather than as a possible source for resistance to such biopolitical control and regulation.

Malabou objects to such a view, arguing that it ignores the power of biological matter and thus dismisses an important possible site for political resistance and change. In addition, viewing bodily matter as ultimately flexible and malleable supports the very regulation and exploitation exerted in biopolitical regimes upon and through the body. Thus, Malabou argues that in a certain sense such theorists enable biopolitics, which is seen as able to “take place without tension because the biological is deprived of the right to respond and appears to flow simply into the mold of power.”<sup>73</sup> In contrast to the malleable body, Malabou calls for an understanding of the organism as itself “an

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72. Catherine Malabou, “One life only: Biological resistance, political resistance,” trans. Carolyn Shread, *Critical Inquiry* 42, no. 3 (2016): 429–438.

73. *Ibid.*, 430. Malabou is perhaps too quick to dismiss some of the biopolitical theorists. Roberto Esposito, for instance, has drawn on certain understandings of biological matter precisely as a possible source for disrupting negative biopolitics see Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas: the protection and negation of life* (Cambridge / Malden: Polity, 2011).

interactive space,”<sup>74</sup> a site where faithful transmission and possible transformation coincide. This combination of internal constraint and transformability, akin to Malabou’s concept of plasticity, enables the organism to act as a site for resistance and disruption to biopolitical regimes.

Though Grosz’s understanding of biological matter certainly differs from that of thinkers like Foucault and Agamben, the way she locates constraint, regularity and so on solely in the environment tends to repeat a similar gesture, constructing the organism as a flexible, malleable matter for political regulation and control. Grosz’s ontology of biology therefore tends to unwittingly support the biopolitical regulation and exploitation of bodies. Such a failing is especially important for a feminist, since biopolitical regimes are often implicated in the perpetuation of the oppression of women.<sup>75</sup> Assessing Grosz within the evaluative framework proposed earlier, therefore, reveals that her ontology falls short of being politically sound. In contrast, an ontology like Malabou’s, which lends greater weight to the interaction between internal constraint and transformability, might be preferable.

In addition to its tendency to reinforce biopolitics, Grosz’s Darwinian concept also appears to replicate a particular version of the nature/culture dichotomy. For Grosz as for many feminist philosophers, the nature/culture dichotomy is tied up with the oppression and exclusion of women. To tackle this dichotomy is therefore a crucial task for feminist philosophy. In her own work Grosz attempts to destabilize the nature/culture binary by arguing that cultural processes too involve a process of evolution by natural selection.<sup>76</sup> However, the distinction between the organism and its environment, inherited from Darwin,

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74. Malabou, “One life only: Biological resistance, political resistance,” 433.

75. Penelope Deutscher, “Reproductive politics, biopolitics and auto-immunity: From Foucault to Esposito,” *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 7, no. 2 (2010): 217–226; Penelope Deutscher, “The Membrane and the Diaphragm: Derrida and Esposito on Immunity, Community, and Birth,” *Angelaki* 18, no. 3 (2013): 49–68.

76. Grosz, *The nick of time: Politics, evolution, and the untimely*, chapter 2.

seems to reinstall the problematic dichotomy. In Grosz's work the environment appears as distinct from the organism and as the limiting, restricting force on the organism's production of difference. Thus, nature—in the form of the difference-producing organism—is viewed as distinct from and in conflict with culture—in the form of the limiting environment.

Such a reinstatement of the nature/culture dichotomy, and the implications this has for the feminist project, is another mark against the ethical and political suitability of Grosz's ontology of biology. In addition to Malabou's concept of plasticity, another understanding of biological matter that could perhaps be more ethically and politically sound can be derived from evo-devo (evolutionary-developmental) theories. Evo-devo approaches such as developmental systems biology developed in response to the dominance of neo-Darwinian and gene-centric understandings of evolutionary theory and biology more generally.<sup>77</sup> They place strong emphasis on the interdependency between organism and environment in such a way that both are sites of both change and fixity, regularity and unpredictability, in the constant, interactive and interrelated processes of development and evolution. As such, evo-devo approaches could provide a more suitable framework for a feminist understanding of biological matter, one that does not reinstate a problematic nature/culture binary but rather conceives of organisms and their environment as interdependent and co-constitutive, involved in complex interplays of constraint and transformation.

Evidently, Grosz's ontology of biology does not stand up particularly well to an assessment within a Deleuzian-Irigarayan evaluative framework. Though her ontology can be interpreted in such a way as to be reasonably conceptually coherent, doing so means reproducing a Darwinian understanding of the envi-

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77. E.g., Jablonka and Lamb, *Evolution in four dimensions, revised edition: Genetic, epigenetic, behavioral, and symbolic variation in the history of life*; Susan Oyama, Paul E Griffiths, and Russell D Gray, *Cycles of contingency: Developmental systems and evolution* (Cambridge / London: MIT Press, 2003).

ronment as the sole limiting, constraining force on the generative power of the organism. This in turn presents an understanding of the organism as malleable material for biopolitical regimes to control and exploit. In addition, it reinstates a version of the ever-problematic nature/culture dichotomy. Thus, Grosz's interpretation of Darwin is ultimately unsuitable to serve as a feminist ontology of biology, not because it does not accord with empirical evidence but because it is lacking in the ethical and political department. Furthermore, there are other understandings of biological matter, such as those developed by Malabou or by evo-devo theorists, that appear to be more suitable to inform a feminist ontology of biology. Again, this is not necessarily because they are more in touch with empirical data, but because they seem more likely to be ethically and politically sound.

## 6 Lessons to Learn from Grosz

In the end, though Grosz's understanding of biological matter as the continuous unpredictable production of difference might not be entirely up to scratch, her work represents a valuable attempt at an ethically and politically sound feminist ontology of biology. So what can we learn from her work?

In many ways Grosz can be aligned with the new materialists, a body of theorists who have recently developed a number of different materialist ontologies.<sup>78</sup> Like Grosz, new materialists often justify their ontologies based on political effectiveness. However, their focus is typically on addressing post-millennial problems such as those generated by climate change and new genetic technologies, rather than traditional feminist problems of biological essentialism and

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<sup>78</sup> See Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, "Introduction: Emerging models of materiality in feminist theory," in *Material feminisms*, ed. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (Bloomington / Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2008), 1–19; Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms"; Iris Van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn, *New materialism: Interviews & cartographies* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2012).

determinism.<sup>79</sup> Grosz can serve as a reminder that old feminist battles should not be abandoned in favor of only addressing what is new. In addition, Grosz's approach to philosophy is a corrective to the tendency amongst new materialists, exhibited in the very critique of her work, to fall back on empirical standards for ontology and to thereby overlook ethical and political considerations.<sup>80</sup>

Thus, perhaps the most valuable contribution Grosz makes is her insistence on the insight that ontology is not a neutral matter of study but rather a fundamentally ethical and political issue. On the one hand, her work can be seen to take on and carry along the understanding generated by poststructuralist thinkers like Michel Foucault and Judith Butler that power shapes how reality is understood, and that a particular understanding of reality is itself a site of the exercise of power.<sup>81</sup> On the other hand, her project can be understood as an elaboration of the post-Heideggerian enterprise of developing a more ethically appropriate ontology, witnessed not only in Irigaray's ontology of sexual difference, but also, for example, with Emmanuel Levinas' work to develop an ontology that allows for absolute otherness or more recently Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology of community.<sup>82</sup> Grosz's sustained effort to combine and carry forward the impulses of these two traditions stands out in a time in which ethical and political considerations tend to be sidelined in favor of empirical or epistemological concerns.

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79. E.g., Coole and Frost, "Introducing the New Materialisms."

80. For a striking example of this tendency to slide into solely empirical standards for ontology, see Myra J Hird, "Review: Feminist Engagements with Matter," *Feminist Studies* 35, no. 2 (2009): where "engagement with matter" becomes "engagement with science" without comment.

81. Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon, 1980); Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Judith Butler, *Prearious life: The powers of mourning and violence* (London / New York: Verso, 2004).

82. Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1969); Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than being or beyond essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1981); Jean-Luc Nancy, *The inoperative community*, ed. Peter Connor, trans. Peter Connor et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being singular plural*, trans. Robert D Richardson and Anne E O'Byrne (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

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# Research Proposal

## Figures of maternity in the ethics of generosity

### 1 Project Title

Figures of maternity in the ethics of generosity

### 2 Summary

Recent French ethical theorizing about generosity draws on the figure of maternity as a model for absolutely non-reciprocal ethical relations between two people. However, feminist motherhood studies have demonstrated that the non-reciprocal two-person figure of maternity is an ideology that is both inaccurate and harmful. Feminist motherhood scholars have instead presented cases for alternative models of maternity as a communal activity that can involve different levels and kinds of reciprocity between multiple carers and a fetus or child.

The proposed PhD project will bring feminist motherhood scholarship to bear on the French-origin ethics of generosity. Through detailed studies of fundamental ethical texts as well as overviews of important research within feminist motherhood studies, the project will both critique the ideologically informed model of maternity in the ethics of generosity and offer an alternative model of

generosity drawn from within feminist motherhood studies. The ultimate goal is to provide a model of ethical relationships that involve communal networks of care and mutual support with varying levels and kinds of reciprocity while preserving the structure of alterity that motivates Levinasian and poststructuralist ethical theories.

### **3 Description of the proposed research**

#### **3.1 Background/status quaestionis**

##### **The ethics of generosity**

Generosity is a key value in many ethical systems and theories throughout history. How generosity should be characterized and understood, however, is a question with highly varied and contested answers. Anthropological investigations of gift-giving ceremonies in non-Western contexts theorized generosity in terms of disguised forms of economic exchanges (Schrift 1997). In direct opposition to anthropological models of generosity as communal, reciprocal, and sometimes self-interested exchange, twentieth century French philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida theorized generosity as an absolutely non-reciprocal relation between two people (Levinas 1979 & 1998; Derrida 1993; see also Schrift 1997). For these French thinkers and their followers, generosity is an ethical mode of giving to another person just for the sake of that other person, rather than for any benefit to oneself.

The figure of maternity plays a special role in this recent French ethical theorizing about generosity. Both Levinas and Derrida make use of the mother giving life and birth to a child as a potential example of an absolutely non-reciprocal relation between two people (Levinas 1998, 67; Derrida 1993, 54). Several later theorists have elaborated on the connection between maternity and generosity, arguing that the non-reciprocal two-person model of maternity plays

a central role in ethical theorizing about generosity in Levinas and Derrida, a significance which persists in the work of later postmodern and poststructuralist ethics of generosity (Guenther 2006; Diprose 2002; Aristarkhova 2012a; Hird 2007; Shaw 2003; see also Joy 2013).

### **Feminist motherhood studies**

Simultaneously to the French-origin ethics of generosity, there has arisen an unconnected body of research demonstrating that the non-reciprocal two-person model of maternity is a harmful ideology (Lintott and Sander-Staudt 2012; Hrdy 2011; Mullin 2005; Rich 1995; Nakano Glenn, Chang and Rennie Forcey 1994). The ideology of motherhood, as it is known in the literature, both fails to accurately characterize the details and varieties of maternal relationships and also produces harmful effects in its imposition as a norm with which women attempt to and are expected to comply. These harms are diverse and apply to both carers and their children, including for example maternal feelings of failure and guilt for not “living up to” the unrealistic norms of motherhood, limitations on the care that children in the end receive from overworked and under-supported mothers, and preventable self-harm and suicide amongst mothers. Feminist motherhood scholars have instead presented cases for alternative models of maternity as a communal activity that can involve a certain level and kind of reciprocal benefit between carers and a fetus and/or child (see especially Mullin 2005). Drawing on empirical research of existing mothering practices as well as theorizing a possible motherhood less constrained by harmful ideology, feminist models of motherhood are at once more accurate and less harmful than the existing ideology of motherhood.

## **A feminist ethics of generosity**

The insights of feminist motherhood studies offer both a critical and a positive contribution to thinking about an ethics of generosity. On the critical side, feminist motherhood studies offer a powerful critique of the Levinasian and Derridean ethics of generosity as premised on a harmful model of relationships. Specifically, it can be argued that the harms that feminist motherhood scholars have demonstrated follow from the ideology of motherhood are good indications for what would likely occur in non-maternal ethical relationships that are modeled on an ideological figure of motherhood. Though similar critiques have been made of Levinas' work (Mullin 2005; Aristarkhova 2012a&b), they are yet to be expressed with a focus on generosity and therefore have not been made in relation to either Derrida's work or the later ethical theorizing that draws on Levinas and Derrida.

As a positive contribution, the feminist model of motherhood as communal and reciprocal may be useful for reconstructing a less harmful understanding of ethical generosity (Mullin 2005). The application of feminist models of motherhood to the ethics of generosity can also be bolstered by drawing on French feminist theorizing about (non-maternal) generosity (e.g., Irigaray 1993a&b; Cixous 1976; Kristeva 1985; Young 1997; see also Joy 2013). Much like the primarily anglophone feminist motherhood scholars, French feminists propose a model of generosity as involving various kinds of community and reciprocity. In addition, since they are in direct conversation with Levinas and Derrida, French feminists provide a way of linking feminist motherhood studies with the ethics of generosity. Together, feminist models of motherhood and feminist theorizing about generosity provide the material for constructing a feminist ethics of generosity. Laying the foundations for such a construction is one key goal of the proposed research project.

At the same time as feminist motherhood studies provides critical and positive contributions to an ethics of generosity, ethical theorizing about generosity can add to feminist motherhood studies. Feminist motherhood studies are characterized largely by empirical, political, and juridical approaches. In addition, philosophical work concerning the ethics of relationships between mothers and children has largely been restricted to studies of breastfeeding. A feminist ethics of generosity will provide a more comprehensive vision of the ethics of motherhood in all its diverse aspects and a vision for the way in which maternal generosity is to be understood.

### **3.2 Aims/Research questions**

The project will encompass two elements. On the one hand, it will further develop an already existing critique of the figure of maternity in theorizing about generosity by Levinas and Derrida and their followers. Specifically, it will be argued that the ideology of motherhood informs ethical theorizing about generosity, and that consequently such ethics of generosity provides harmful ethical models. On the other hand, the project will use alternative understandings of maternity and of generosity furnished by feminist theorists and philosophers in order to develop a better approach to an ethics of generosity. In summary, the research questions to be investigated are:

1. How does the ideology of motherhood inform the ethics of generosity as it appears in the work of Levinas, Derrida and their followers? And what does this mean for such ethics of generosity?
2. How could a feminist understanding of motherhood act as a model for a better ethics of generosity? What could such an ethics look like?

The research questions will be addressed according to the following basic structure. The first part will provide the entry point to the research questions,

introducing the ethics of generosity and provide a detailed analysis of generosity in Levinas and Derrida with a focus on the figure of maternity as exemplary for ethical generosity. This part will also review the extant literature that draws on and responds to Levinasian and Derridean models of generosity and maternity. Part two will address the first research question, introducing the problematic of the ideology of motherhood and discussing its role in the Levinasian and Derridean models of maternal generosity. Part three will analyze key works within French feminist theory and feminist motherhood studies to build a case for a feminist ethics of generosity based on feminist models of motherhood and generosity, thereby addressing the second research question.

Shorter publishable papers may form part of the research project, however they will not map directly onto the thesis structure as a whole. For instance, a paper on the ideology of motherhood in Levinasian and Derridean models of generosity may form one paper, combining work from parts one and two. Another paper may be composed discussing feminist models of motherhood and generosity as potential sources for an ethics of generosity, consisting largely of content from part three.

### **3.3 Methods**

The overarching methodological approach that will be taken in the project is a feminist one. A feminist philosophical approach involves both attention to the role of gender differences in philosophical theorizing and the commitment to produce philosophy that contests rather than reproduces women's oppression. By focusing in on the feminine figure of maternity in ethical theorizing about generosity the project will clearly satisfy the first element of the feminist approach. The second element of the feminist approach will be satisfied in two ways. First, the project will argue against the use of the ideological figure of maternity in an

ethics of generosity, instead providing a model of maternity that contests rather than reproduces women's oppression. Second, the project will draw on feminist work by women and seek to ensure that this includes women of color, women from the Global South, differently abled women and LGBTQI women, thereby attempting to avoid the tendency to disregard the work of women thinkers. It must be admitted that the initial focus on the work of two white male philosophers perhaps undermines this attempt at gender justice. The thought of these philosophers remains important and productive but it is hoped that a gender-sensitive critique will put such importance into perspective with the work of women philosophers and theorists around the globe. Taking the feminist philosophical approach, a number of methods will be employed. A core part of the project involves examining the theoretical implications of a figure taken to be exemplary in a theory, a method that often features in feminist philosophy (e.g., Michelle Le Doeuff's "philosophical imaginary"). In addition, the project will use standard argumentative techniques and employment of textual evidence and analysis.

### **3.4 Scientific and Societal Relevance**

The project will make a number of contributions to current research in philosophy and feminist theory. First, it will elaborate a critique of ethics of generosity based on the ideology of maternity, something yet to be performed in a comprehensive manner in a way that refers not only to Levinas' work but also to that of Derrida and later theorists. Second, it will lay the foundations for a feminist ethics of generosity that is based on a feminist model of maternity, also yet to be fully laid out in the literature in a way that refers back to the insights of French-origin ethics of generosity. Third, it will add to feminist motherhood

studies with an analysis of the ethics of generosity in maternal relations from a feminist perspective.

In addition to its scientific relevance, the project has the potential to contribute to society by providing a feminist model for generosity in mother-child relationships that could furnish new social and potentially legal understandings of what is involved in our relationships with those we give care to and with those who give us care. This kind of understanding is especially important for the way we distribute and organize caring practices like pregnancy care, parenting support, or childcare but also aged care, disability support, and so on. While this project won't provide direct recommendations or programs, it will offer a new perspective on these issues that may be able to inform such concrete efforts.

## 4 Keywords

Ethics of generosity, representations of maternity, ideology of motherhood, Levinas, Derrida, French feminism, feminist ethics, motherhood studies.

## 5 Work Programme

### Year 1

Research:

- French-origin ethics of generosity, study key texts by Levinas and Derrida
- Start research on feminist motherhood studies with foundational texts

Activities:

- Netherlands school of Gender Studies/OZSW workshops
- Research visit to Southampton University (Research Group on Philosophy of Pregnancy and Early Motherhood with Elselijn Kingma and Fiona Woollard)

Output:

- Draft version of the first two parts of dissertation

## **Year 2**

Research:

- Continuing research in feminist motherhood studies, focus on later texts
- Research on feminist models of maternity and generosity

Activities:

- Netherlands school of Gender Studies/OZSW workshops
- Summer school in feminist philosophy

Output:

- Revised versions of first two parts of dissertation
- Article on the ideology of motherhood in French-origin ethics of generosity
- Presentation at an international conference

## **Year 3**

Research:

- Continuing feminist models of maternity and generosity

Activities:

- Teaching philosophy courses
- Organize workshop on feminist ethics/motherhood studies

Output:

- Draft third part of dissertation
- Article on feminist ethics of generosity

## **Year 4**

Output:

- Completion and publication of dissertation
- Presentation at another conference

The standard amount of vacation time has been taken into account.

## 6 Summary for non-specialists

What does it mean to be generous? When and how much should we give? And do we owe something to someone who gives to us? Generosity has an important place in ethics, the philosophy that deals with what we should do and how we should live a good life in relationships with other people. French philosophers like Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas thought that generosity is a core value and maybe even the best way to relate to other people. For these thinkers, to be generous is to give from oneself to another person without ever getting anything back. One example that crops up in both Derrida's and Levinas' description of generosity is that of motherhood. The way these philosophers see it, a mother gives birth to her child, a gift that the mother performs all on her own and that the child can never and will never return. Seen this way, motherhood is a perfect example of the generosity that Derrida and Levinas talk about.

But the French philosophers' way of seeing motherhood has been sharply criticized by many feminist theorists as ideologically informed. Feminists argue that mothers don't really give birth and care for children all on their own: just think of all the midwives, nannies, childcare workers, family members, and friends that play a part in successful pregnancy, birth and childcare. And feminists also point out that it's not true that mothers never get something back from their children: not only can kids help out around the house or take care of their parents when they get sick or old, but even pregnancy sometimes makes women healthier and happier than before. These feminists argue that thinking about motherhood as a single person giving something and not getting anything back is not just wrong but harmful. For example, women can feel guilty for not being able to give all the care a child needs, children can miss out on full support

from a community of different carers, and children aren't encouraged to develop caring skills in their family lives.

So Derrida and Levinas use an inaccurate and harmful picture of motherhood to talk about generosity. This project will show that this means that their idea of how to be generous would have bad results just like the ideology of motherhood does. But that doesn't mean we can't learn anything about generosity from motherhood. Instead of generosity based on the ideology of motherhood, this project calls for a new kind of generosity based on a more accurate and less harmful view of motherhood as communal and reciprocal. In this way, generosity will still be a core value that we take as a model for our lives, but it will be one where we give by cooperating with other people, giving and receiving at the same time in relationships of mutual care and support.

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# Rose Trappes

## Curriculum Vitae

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## Education

- 2016–present **Research Master's in Philosophy**, *Radboud University*, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.  
Specialisation in Philosophical Anthropology
- 2011–2015 **Bachelor of Arts (Hons)**, *The University of Queensland*, Brisbane, Australia, *First Class*.  
Extended major in Philosophy
- 2011–2014 **Bachelor of Science**, *The University of Queensland*, Brisbane, Australia.  
Major in Biochemistry and Molecular Biology

## Theses

### Master's thesis

- Title Evaluating Elizabeth Grosz's Biological Turn
- Supervisor A/Professor Veronica Vasterling
- Description The thesis examines Elizabeth Grosz's use of Darwinian evolutionary theory to ground a feminist ontology of biology. In contrast to most critics of Grosz, I show that Grosz aims for a politically and ethically sound ontology rather than one that is empirically accurate.

### Bachelor's theses

- Title Thinking generosity through maternity, beyond the ideology
- Supervisor A/Professor Marguerite La Caze
- Description This thesis explored current philosophical work on generosity, focusing on its role in the ethical thought of Derrida and Levinas, and counterposed this against a feminist understanding of generosity drawn out of contemporary feminist and philosophical discourse on pregnancy, childbirth, and child care.
- Title Butler on vulnerability and an ethics of contestatory non-violence
- Supervisor Dr Aurelia Armstrong
- Description This thesis examined Judith Butler's recent work on constitutive vulnerability and her attempt to reconcile her earlier work on performativity with an effort to construct an ethics and politics.

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## Publications

### Peer-reviewed

- 2017 Trappes, Rose. 2017. "Review of A New Dawn for the Second Sex: Women's Freedom Practices in World Perspective." *Hypatia Reviews Online*. <http://hypatiareviews.org/reviews/content/331>
- 2017 Teymoori, Ali and Rose Trappes. 2017. "A revolution in thinking: Immanuel Kant's influence on psychology." *The Psychologist* 30: 92–95.

### Student journals

- 2017 Trappes, Rose. 2017. "Is it possible to make amends?" *Splijstof Student Journal* 45 (3):11-17.
- 2016 Trappes, Rose. 2016. "Are tattoos just another fashion choice?" *Exordium Student Philosophy Magazine*, <https://exordiumuq.org/2016/07/28/are-tattoos-just-another-fashion-choice-by-rose-trappes/>.

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## Conferences & Workshops

### Paper presentations

- 2017 "The Heideggerian Artist". 2017 OZSW Conference, Utrecht University
- 2016 "Does philosophy need diversity?". Moving Humanities: New Movements in a Broad Field, Radboud University

### Participation

- 2018 Process Biology: Final Conference of the ERC Project "Process Ontology for Contemporary Biology", London
- 2017 Masterclass with Rosi Braidotti, Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies.
- 2017 NOISE Summer School (Critique in Times of Crisis: Feminist, Queer and Postcolonial Interventions), Netherlands Research School of Gender Studies
- 2017 Feminist Philosophy and Methodological Commitments, Humboldt-University of Berlin
- 2017 Genesis of a New Human Being: Luce Irigaray's *To be born*, University of Bristol
- 2017 Critical Theory in the Humanities: Resonances of the Work of Judith Butler, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

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## Experience

### Teaching

- 2018 **Teaching Assistant**, *Radboud University*, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.  
Research Master's course: Methods and Skills of Philosophical Research
- 2017 **Tutor**, *NOISE Summer School*, Utrecht, The Netherlands.
- 2015–2017 **Private Tutor**, Brisbane, Australia.  
Secondary school and university-level English, mathematics, science and philosophy.
- 2015–2016 **Tutor**, *Kelvin Grove State College*, Brisbane, Australia.  
High school English, mathematics, science and philosophy.
- 2015 **Tutor**, *The University of Queensland*, Brisbane, Australia.  
BIOC3005 – Molecular Systems Biology

- 2013–2014 **Guest lecturer**, *Kelvin Grove State College*, Brisbane, Australia.  
Guest lectures to high school philosophy classes, under supervision by philosophy teacher Chris Poulsen.
- 2014 **PASS Tutor**, *The University of Queensland*, Brisbane, Australia.  
BIOL1020 – Genes, Cells and Evolution.
- 2014 **Practical Manual Preparation**, *The University of Queensland*, Brisbane, Australia.  
Developed practical material for BIOC3005 – Molecular Systems Biology under supervision by Dr Ulrike Kappler.

### Leadership and Organisation

- 2016–present **Organiser**, *Philosophy Work in Progress group*, Radboud University.  
radboudwip.wordpress.com
- 2016–present **Student Representative**, *Research Master's in Philosophy Curriculum Committee*, Radboud University.
- 2017 **Co-organiser**, *Lifting the Blinds: Workshop on Diversity in Philosophy*, Radboud University.  
liftingtheblinds.wordpress.com
- 2015–2016 **Chief Editor**, *Exordium Student Philosophy Magazine*, The University of Queensland.  
Available at exordiumuq.org
- 2014–2015 **Treasurer/Secretary**, *UQ Student Philosophy Association*, The University of Queensland.
- 2012–2014 **Student Representative**, *Chemistry and Molecular Biosciences Coursework Student Advisory Group*, The University of Queensland.

### Other Work Experience

- 2016–present **Student Assistant**, *International Student Office Marketing Department*, Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands.
- 2013–2015 **Postal Worker/Shop Attendant**, *Kelvin Grove News and Post*, QUT Student Guild, Brisbane, Australia.
- 2012–2013 **Laboratory Research Scholar**, *School of Chemistry and Molecular Biosciences*, The University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia.
- 2011–2012 **Postal Worker**, *Wynnum Plaza Post Office*, Brisbane, Australia.

### Awards and Scholarships

- 2016–present Radboud Scholarship
- 2015 Don Mannison Prize (Philosophy)
- 2015 University Medal
- 2014 Douglas Price Memorial Prize (Philosophy)
- 2013, 2014 William Marquis Kyle Undergraduate Philosophy Prize
- 2014 Included as member of UQ Future Leaders program
- 2011–2015 Dean's Commendations for Academic Excellence
- 2011–2014 UQ Excellence Scholarship

### Languages

- English Mother tongue
- French Intermediate

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## Referees

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