Chapter 1 – Refiguring Bodies.

Grosz asserts that the body has remained a “blind spot” in philosophy and feminist thought. A common view has developed of the human subject as made up of two dichotomously opposed characteristics: mind and body. This thinking naturally hierarchises the concepts so that there is a privileged term and a suppressed, subordinated counterpart. Thus far, the body has been the suppressed aspect; it is implicitly defined as unruly, disruptive, incidental to the defining characteristics mind, reason or personal identity.

The opposition of mind and body has given rise to other binaries such as reason and passion, outside and inside, self and other, depth and surface, reality and appearance etc. These associations provide “positive” accounts of the body only inasmuch as it is secondary to the mind.

Philosophy, despite its status as a higher order of thought, has inadvertently contributed to the subordination of the body as the focus of philosophical thought has been conceptual knowledge. In turn, this has led to an exclusion of femininity, and thereby women, through its implicit coding of femininity with the unreason associated with the body. Philosophers are unable to avoid the body as corporality is the mode for framing key questions and providing the criteria with which to evaluate concepts. On one hand, the body is acknowledged in the advancement or the hindrance of knowledge. On the other hand, when the body is discussed, it is problematized through narrow and binary terms.

The traditional partnering of the mind with maleness and the body with femaleness has resulted in ‘Woman’ being seen as philosophy’s eternal enigma, its mysterious and inscrutable object.

Philosophy and the Body.

The body has long been seen as an interference with, and even a danger to, the operation of reason. Plato maintained that reason ruled over the body and over the irrational inclinations of the soul. A kind of natural hierarchy prevailed to create the harmony within the state, the family and the individual. Aristotle distinguished matter or body from form; in reproduction, the mother provided formless, passive matter which was then given form and attributes by the father. “The binarisation of the sexes, the dichotomisation of the world and knowledge has been effected already at the threshold of Western reason”.

Within the Christian tradition, there has always been a moralised binary in which the soul is God‐given and the body is its lustful, sinful carnality. This binary is embedded in doctrine which promotes the distinction between the mortal and the immortal; together, they form an indissoluble unity. Living in the body is about experiencing suffering and overcoming mortal challenges to attain the ultimate spirit being. Early in Christianity, moral characteristics were
given to various disorders such as leprosy, which was regarded as the diseased consequence of lechery and envy.

Descartes did not so much separate the mind and body, rather the soul from nature. He saw two kinds of substance: a thinking substance (mind) and an extended substance (body). The thinking substance has no place in the natural world, whereas the body is a self-moving machine, functioning according to the laws of nature. Thus the soul or consciousness is evacuated from the world and what results is a concept of knowledge as rooted in the laws of nature and which is indifferent to considerations of the subject. Subjectivity may mitigate the status of knowledge; crucially, the subject or consciousness can reflect on the world of the body, objects or qualities.

Dualism.

Instituted by Descartes (as above), the idea of dualism has long been the challenge of philosophical thought to overcome or reconcile. Major problem has been to explain the interaction of mind and body when, on a daily basis, there is a manifest connection. Poses a range of questions such as: how can the body inform the mind of its needs and wishes? How is bilateral communication possible? Dualism has also managed to achieve an ongoing separation of knowledge domains such as the arts and the sciences.

Cartesian dualism establishes an unbridgeable gap between the two; to overcome this gap, the theory of reductionism denies the interaction between mind and body and prioritises the operation of one at the expense of the other. Grosz rejects reductionism by stating that as soon as one defines the mind and body in mutually exclusive ways, there is no logical means of bringing them back together.

Cartesianism.

There are at least three lines in contemporary thought which may be regarded as the heirs of Cartesianism. They indicate the kinds of theory that feminist thought needs to move past in order to challenge and evaluate its own investments in the history of philosophy.

In the first line, the body is regarded as an object for the natural sciences, particularly biology and medicine. The body is understood in terms of organic functionality. However, the role of psychology also plays a part in dealing with emotions, as do philosophy and ethnography. The body is understood either as organic functioning or posited as merely extended, merely physical, an object like any other in the humanities. All these ignore the specificity of the body.

The second line commonly regards the body as a series of metaphors that construe it as an instrument, a tool, a vessel. John Locke and the liberal tradition, see the body as a possession of the subject, who is then dissociated from carnality (corporeality?) and is able to make judgements about how to dispose of or operate the body. Some models see the body as a self-moving automaton; this underlies some feminist theories which see patriarchy as a system of male ‘possession’ of women’s bodies. Several feminist political campaigns have been vested in
the idea of resisting a male ownership of the body through issues such as rape, harassment etc. The body is regarded as something which can prompt struggles between its ‘inhabitant’ and others. As an instrument, it requires careful training and as a passive object, it requires subduing and conditioning.

The third line of thought promotes the body as a signifying medium, a vehicle of expression, a mode of making public essentially private thoughts, beliefs and ideas. As such it is a two way conduit: i. it is a circuit for the transmission of information from outside the organism, ii. it expresses the self-contained and incommunicable psyche.

**Spinoza’s Monism.**

Spinoza’s most fundamental assumption is the idea of an absolute and infinite substance, singular both in kind and number. Finite things are not substances but are modifications or affections of the one substance which has infinite possibilities to express its nature. Extension and thought are two attributes but whereas Descartes suggests they are incompatible, Spinoza suggests they are simply different attributes of the same substance. Crucially, Spinoza thereby relieves the body of the dominant mechanistic models. The body is productive and creative which cannot be definitively known, it is not a truth or true nature since its meaning and capacities will vary according to context.

**Feminism and the body.**

Misogynist thought has often justified itself by aligning women’s social secondary position with bodies which are represented, or even constructed, as frail, imperfect, unruly. Sexuality and reproduction are defining cultural characteristics which render a woman vulnerable or in need of protection. Instead of giving women a corporeal autonomy, women’s bodies are rendered naturally unequal and more prone to unpredictabilities.

Patriarchal oppression connects women more closely than men to the body and, in particular, the biological requirements of reproduction. This leaves men free to sustain the sense of hierarchy while satisfying their need for bodily contact. Feminists resist the patriarchal fixed concept of the body to contain women.

Grosz suggests there are three models of feminism:

1. Egalitarian feminism – the specificities of the female body are regarded as a limitation on women’s access and also as giving women a special insight, a unique means of access to knowledge.
2. Social constructionism – see the body not so much as an obstacle to be overcome but more as a biological object whose representation is political. Political struggles over the body are directed towards neutralisation of the sexually specific body.
3. Sexual difference – the body is crucial in understanding a woman’s psychical and social existence. The body is not a biologically given, acultural object but a lived body, interwoven with systems of meaning, signification and representation which position
the body as a political, social and cultural object par excellence, not the product of a passive nature which is overlaid by culture.

Body Traces.

In order to develop the autonomy in self-understanding necessary to challenge male knowledges and paradigms, the specific nature and integration of the female body and subjectivity - and its similarities and differences from male bodies - needs to be expressed. There is no ‘body’, there are only ‘bodies’. These may be understood not as a linear continuum with oppositional male and female polarities, but as a two-dimensional continuum in which race (and possibly class, caste or religion) form body specifications.

Grosz suggests that a number of body types must be posited to ensure that each individual has an ideal or body type to which they may aspire. When the relation between mind and body is adequately retheorised, then we can understand the contributions the body makes to the production of knowledge systems. Assuming that the mind is linked to the body, or even a part of the body, and if those bodies are sexually and racially varied but distinct, then it is not possible to generalise the forms that subjectivity will take. If subjectivity cannot be made to conform to a universal ideal of ‘the human’, which includes all subjects, then the evaluation of knowledges must be questioned regarding the sexual and cultural specificity of their positions.

The body must be understood through a range of disparate discourses and not restricted to naturalistic and scientific modes of explanation; this may cause upheavals in the structure of existing knowledges and the power relations which govern the interactions of the two sexes.

Grosz poses four powerful questions:

1. How, then, is a different analysis of the body to proceed?
2. By what techniques and presumptions is a non-dichotomous understanding of the body possible?
3. What, ideally, would a feminist philosophy of the body avoid, and what must be taken into consideration?
4. What criteria and goals should govern a feminist theoretical approach to concepts of the body?

Grosz’ gives six operational conditions which must be observed if the analysis of the body is to begin anew:

1. Analysis of the body must avoid the impasse posed by dichotomous accounts of the person which divide a subject into the mutually exclusive zones of ‘body’ and ‘mind’.
2. Corporeality must no longer be associated with one sex or race which then takes on the burden of the other’s corporeality.
3. Singular models, which are based on one type of body as the norm, must be refused.
4. Although dualism must be avoided, so too must essentialist accounts of the body. The body must be regarded as a site of social, political, cultural and geographical inscriptions, productions or constitution. The body is not opposed to culture, a resistant throwback to a natural past; it is itself a cultural, the cultural, product.

5. Whatever models are developed must demonstrate a sort of internal or constitutive articulation – or disarticulation – between the biological and the psychological.

6. Instead of participating in binary pairs, these pairs can be more readily problematized by positioning the body as the threshold or borderline concept that hovers undecidedly at the pivotal point of the binary. The indeterminable nature of this position allows it to be used strategically to upset the frameworks by which these binary pairs are considered; new terms or conceptual frameworks can thereby be devised which facilitate discussion of the body outside or in excess of binary pairs.