

Rosalyn Diprose

Corporeal generosity: On giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas

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What can a philosopher do about social justice and economic equality? If we find ourselves in an historical era in which people, who at other times might be generous toward marginal groups, now claim that these minorities have benefited too much from government policies, are they likely to be swayed by a theory of generosity? If, as the philosopher argues, there is a connection between generosity and social justice, and if generosity is not merely an individual virtue but an openness fundamental to human existence, sociality and social formation, then it may turn out that although nothing currently anticipates the idea of generosity, there is, nonetheless, an urgent need to address the public about it. If so, then it is time for the philosopher to speak out, to other philosophers as well as to the general public. Such is the premise of Rosalyn Diprose's searching new book, *Corporeal Generosity, On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas*.

Lamentably, there are, numerous conceptual obstructions standing in the way. Generosity has been classically defined as the act of a sovereign, property-owning individual; as such, its "noble value" is independent of any fair outcome, an essential feature of justice. Diprose recognizes the unsolvability of the question as it currently stands and proposes to reformulate it. Generosity, she argues, *precedes* and also *establishes* communal relations as it constitutes the self as affecting and being affected by others. As such, Diprose wants to make generosity the primordial condition of personal, interpersonal and communal existence insofar as sovereignty implies that something has already been taken from others. Thus, she argues that philosophical claims regarding generosity are asymmetrical, attending to the so-called generosity of those whose resources are plentiful, while overlooking the primordial generosity of those whose resources are as marginal as their social status. Rather than address these issues on the level of already established and hardened social structures and forms of thought, Diprose proposes to begin her study on the corporeal level, the carnal and affective level that gives rise to material structures, and to move from there to a revaluation of values, beginning with the asymmetry endemic to definitions of generosity.

In her account of the corporeal, Diprose opens by addressing the *concept* of the corporeal as well as the temporality of the subject. Citing Nietzsche, Diprose asserts that the body is socially constituted, that the same concepts that govern the social world also sculpt the body, making our interpretations of pleasure and pain as well as our thoughts into effects of prevailing moral and cognitive norms. Reclaiming the self is neither an escape from the past nor a repetition of it but the creation of a new self in a process of self-temporalization, recognition of a past that is never complete in relation to the present, and a future that is never determined. In every new moment,

both past and future are altered. A self is never fully self-identical insofar as it is not part of a progression but belongs to moments in which the present self is risked in the process of willing backwards, recreating the past in order to project a different future. This remakes both past and future and forms them as contingencies.

Additionally, clues to the character or disposition of the self are to be found in whatever is outside but in relation to that self, in friendship and enmity, memory and forgetting, in the other. As such, life is *pathos*, a transient affectivity that evades the reduction of every different person to sameness. The point of justice is to encourage the rare, along with the process of self-overcoming that produces difference and independence from social determination. Diprose proposes a society that forgives debts without penalty or shame and encourages creative self-fabrication instead of demanding conformity in exchange for protection. In this way, one no longer measures the other in order to enhance one's own forms, capacities and effects because there is no longer an expectation of return or repayment, but an acknowledgment of abundance, both socially and with respect to one's ever-changing identity. Furthermore, given that men have created a social image of woman that affirms male identity and autonomy, women must be able to affirm themselves as more than the concept that men have of them. Both men and women must turn away from the concept created by men. This is difficult because even if identity is unstable, discourse, what women are called, cannot simply be ignored. Women become creditor's, guarantors of male identity; in return they are given otherness, but no place of their own.

In spite of this, Diprose insists that there is a generosity that conditions and disrupts normative discourses governing social exchange. Social contract theory's liberal individualism guarantees and protects private property, a category that includes the human body and body parts. Control over one's own body may be given up by contract through consent. This involves a contradiction. The law seeks to preserve the independent self-government of personal property in social exchanges, an autonomy and freedom negated in the act of consent. Justice, in these terms, is impossible. Law determines the identity of the corporeal entities that may be exchanged; it determines what is proper to each, that is, what is available for exchange, what can be given and what can be taken. If the owner consents to give what the law allows, then justice is done. Yet, how is the determination made regarding what can be given and received with consent? Here is the injustice at the heart of the system, the means by which men are given women's corporeality, and women appear to consent, yet insofar as the law defines what may be exchanged, women are coerced. Consent is a subtle form of coercion. Laws that recognize properties such as "female sexuality" by assuming that it is "proper to a woman's personhood" produce these results. The only way to avoid this is for the law not to determine in advance what sexed body property and productions a woman may contractually consent to exchange. Yet, even freely giving what is proper to women, Diprose argues, looks like duress, since what is defined as women's personhood is the sexed body property that the woman is responsible for, whereas no such qualification is attached to the body of any man.

The contractual body of personhood is not the same as one's own corporeality; corporeal identity is never singular, it is neither purely a subject nor an object. Existing as social beings, our possibilities are borrowed from the bodies of others, blurring the distinction between consent and coercion. Nonetheless, there are limitations to this manner of proceeding. Neither suspending

laws nor forgetting who gives and what is given are solutions because the giving that is forgotten tends to be the woman's whereas the giving that is remembered and rewarded is man's. Women are caught between absolute definition and none at all. In order to have any rights, they are constrained to giving their corporeality through sex or child-bearing yet this generosity goes unrecognized. It is the authority of the law to determine sexed identity and difference that comes into question, an authority that makes women invisible. When morality and politics establish identity prior to and outside of one's acts, that identity is necessarily unaffected by one's deeds or acts. This way of proceeding makes a self-responsible and accountable, but guarantees that generous acts go unnoticed since they are constrained by the social or legal definition of a sexed self.

To challenge this foundation of moral, social and political relations, Diprose argues for the recognition that the identity of any self is performed and reconstituted within its acts. Currently, the law of the social contract categorizes human beings and regulates their behavior based on their legal definition. Some legal definitions are privileged with respect to others and failure to live up to one's definition often results in punishment. Diprose contends that the body is the effect of the self that lies behind the action, but it is both body and self that are first nothing but effects of the law, and even the division into body and self is an effect of law. Not surprisingly, this makes life difficult for those persons who, body and soul, do not meet their definition. Ambiguity, Diprose claims, is the problem insofar as ambiguity, which she identifies with transgression, is not tolerated because it destabilizes the identity of every self that directs and confers meaning on its body. As perceptive as this analysis is, perhaps it misses the point. That is, the author's confessed discomfort at seeing Madonna gyrating over a "submissive Asian woman" may be related to her preference that the "exotic other" remain untouchable, but it may also begin with the sure assertion that the Asian-looking woman is in fact Asian and also exotic; that she is other, and that she is submissive. If Madonna's performance reeks of ambiguity, how would it be possible to make these or any determinations?

Indeed, insofar as the body-self is constituted in relation to the world and to others, ambiguity shrinks. The world pre-exists any particular body-self and it is a world replete with language, customs and laws. Repetition as difference may guarantee novelty or at least transgression, but the world of well-defined individuals is always ready to embrace such novelty, to reincorporate it back into its preexisting structures and meanings, even if only negatively, through exclusion and punishment. Either the affective dimension of interpersonal relationships is grounded in the generosity of interpersonal relationships or, corporeal generosity is grounded in affect (as opposed to conscious reflection). Diprose asserts both options. If the latter is her choice, then both the production and transformation of a self as well as prejudice, discrimination and domination are affectively based.

Erotics and sexuality are posited as the extreme case of corporeal generosity, since from Diprose's point of view, they present the greatest risk to a self. Feminist safe-sex discourses are easily shown to be anti-sex. Likewise, the Sartrean model of individual freedom makes love into a relation between two subjects but is also disembodied or anti-body, while his account of desire is too embodied for Diprose. Because it exists outside of the subject-object relation, she assumes that the caress strips the body of the meaning and projects it already is, and reduces it to a mass of flesh, which she takes to be nothing but inert matter. This would mean that affecting and being

affected are not at the basis of intersubjective life (something Sartre denies), but are derivative with respect to interpersonal life. If this is the case, there is no bodily interval in which the self is thoroughly embodied; rather the body always remains the province of the subject engaged in its projects, transcending itself and all others, who are and must remain others for the sake of its own freedom.

Beauvoir's suggestion that genuine love—the mutual recognition of two freedoms—is possible if the woman is economically independent and if men learn generosity is, for Diprose, no less empty than Sartre's. Women mistake desire for love, a move of bad faith, but love would demand transcending bodily immanence, seemingly constituting love without desire. She finds, following Bergoffen, that Beauvoir recommends a situational embodiment, which somehow is not the same as Sartre's caress insofar as the posture of independent subjectivity is a pretense and a perversion of freedom in which each person is always already a for-itself at the expense of others and the caress does nothing but strip this subjectivity away. Yet, may it not be the case that neither sex nor life can ever be truly safe, not because of the manner in which they restrict the freedom of a transcendental subject, but precisely because they open each life to the lives of all; not ambiguously, since we do make choices and refrain from choices, we do engage in sex and fall in love, but certainly, we do so contingently rather than ambiguously.

Diprose locates the ontology for this generosity in Merleau-Ponty, whose notion of embodiment is distinctly not that of an objectifying transcendent consciousness, but one which involves a pre-reflective engagement or intertwining, reflecting the ambiguity of existence. Nonetheless, if as Diprose argues, the emergence from the anonymous and impersonal level takes place by means of the visual mirror stage through mimesis and transitivism, this is primarily a visual model that overrides tactile sensibility. Merleau-Ponty does refer to an original non-perception, a sensible and passive being-affected by the world, but it is quickly surmounted by the sight of the father and image of the father in the mirror. The passive elements of affective life are absorbed without explanation into Merleau-Ponty's notion of perception that is always for the sake of the subject's interests and actions in the world. There are no guarantees here of openness to the embodied stew of corporealities. The inability to distinguish between what sees and feels and what is seen and felt is precisely the problem. What is posited may be nothing more than an anonymous subject who has no fear about "his" safety, but with no guarantees for anyone else. In the realm of language, where silence gives way to expression and meaning is indeterminate, Merleau-Ponty argues, analogously, that speech enters the child as silence, as simply perceived, a trace produced through divergence from the total movement of social speech. The same question arises here; is such a divergence adequate to constitute a subject? The gap between the indeterminate and the articulated stretches into an abyss.

Moreover, if the body in its sexual being is an expressive operation knowing nothing of a division between self and world, then what motivates that division, from where would it arise? How can there be other beings affecting me if there is only a shared flesh? How does this anonymous entity emerge from the indeterminacy of flesh into the life of an embodied being whose place is defined according to a system of possible actions, that is, in accordance with the representation of perceived objects of his or her interest? The body of perception is directed by and for its interest in the world, objects to be acted on, in this, affectivity as the heterogeneity of perceptible and imperceptible passive sensibility is lost. Thus Butler may in fact be closer to the

truth than Diprose admits when she argues that ungrieved possibilities for love and sexual desire govern our lives without us even noticing insofar as we are driven, not only by structures of power that dominate us, but also by our own interests in those structures and our failure to notice anything else. In Merleau-Ponty, passive, affective sensibility disappears into the swirl of undifferentiated flesh and only reemerges on the other side of the skin in the form actions and interests incited solely by visibility. Thus, the young woman's sexual "frigidity" is, in his eyes, nothing but a refusal of sex, femininity and orgasm, a rejection of the destiny of the male sexual partner. The only path left open to her is to break with life, to refuse communal existence, to retreat into her affective melancholy, but the creative element of this gesture goes unnoticed. She is objectified from the point of view of the interests of the perceiver for whom there is no affective life, no temporalization of heterogeneous perceptible and imperceptible sensibility conditioning emergence into the determinate spatiality of cultural coexistence.

Diprose's account of the clinical encounter reveals the extent to which affect, for her, far from being a direct relation between two things, an influence and a sensibility, is already mediated by social structures. The doctor who flinches and reacts with hostility over the word "anal" and the woman who endures a lecture on contraception each "react" but their original affective life is not affirmed, only their sociality. The suggestion that the patient's skin "touches" that of the examining physician overlooks the inescapable actuality that to perceive is to look at or it is to touch something with one's hand in a deliberate manner, for example, the manner in which a physician touches the body of a patient searching for symptoms. Likewise to apprehend the look is to be looked at and to become conscious of being looked at. Active and passive are not simultaneous for embodied consciousness. Physicians who have grown accustomed to the inertness of patient's bodies and their subjectivity are shocked when the patient apprehends them and may react with a vivacity that looks like domination but affectively amounts to pain or panic, not that dissimilar from the pain of a pin or shard of glass sharply embedded in one's flesh or the confused response to a stranger who appears to threaten one's body.

Given the decision to embrace Merleau-Ponty's account of perceptual faith, it is not surprising that Diprose turns to Levinas for an account of corporeal generosity in the production of social justice. Here, she proposes, one can locate the creation of a new concept of generosity arising from embodiment. The creation of new concepts is necessary to feminist philosophy to address problems overlooked by an axiology that deems unreasonable any concepts that are not related to the "lifestyles of men." There is something of a contradiction, however, in the suggestion that the creation of concepts is a solitary task when this very concept arises in a book with dual authorship, from author's whose insubstantiality is such that they cannot be just two but are a pack, swarming like rats. Nor is the creation of all concepts tied to the exclusion of rivals, for this is only the Platonic conception. Furthermore, although each problem is a plane of immanence constructed as a cut through multiple dimensions, we can and must presuppose a multiplicity of planes, each of which selects determinations that comprise its image of thought, each of which may construct many different concepts as it intersects with other planes of thought. Additionally, a philosopher's social constitution in relation to others is not, as Diprose claims, merely abstracted and left behind, but instead, the empirical, psychological and social rather than operating as simple causal determinations are transformed into intercessors, crystals, or seeds of thought in a system of referrals and relays. Relations, existential modes and legal status mutate into thought-events which then intercede in corporeal events or combine with other

concepts or both. This is why there is no need to make concepts one with corporeality, especially as the suggestion that concepts *are* corporeal affects rather than *effects* makes the Cartesian move of conflating thinking with sensibility. This would mean, for example, that it would be impossible to distinguish mere grunts and squeals from language. Human beings would be comparable to single-cell creatures which, when stimulated from outside must either flee or consume or be consumed by whatever touches them.

Levinas evokes corporeal generosity by maintaining a conceptual plane organized by the opposition of freedom or independence and possession, appropriation and power. Evasion of this framework requires an other who remains a stranger, beyond my comprehension and so unassimilable and unknowable. Insofar as I am fascinated by this stranger, I will attempt to think beyond myself and what I know, thus to think infinity insofar as this strangeness is of necessity beyond any concept, category or logic known to me. I can neither objectify nor represent the stranger, since as strange, they are beyond possession by me, and if I am to think at all, I must try to think this strangeness. Like the Kantian sublime, the stranger overwhelms my understanding and sensibility but here, I cannot call upon the Ideas of Reason to recall me to myself and to my knowledge. The command given by the face of this stranger, not to kill, is perhaps the reverse of the response that could be expected from many in this situation, but the feeling of strangeness prevents this, and in any case, there will always be another fascinating stranger, one after the other, not all of whom can be killed. In this light, it is difficult to imagine from where arises the social world of others who welcome me, since in order to maintain the other's freedom, one must also maintain the strangeness of every other. Any lapse would immediately open the door to possession, appropriation and power. Perhaps I would be fascinated enough by this strangeness to heap gifts upon its conveyor, but I would still be living in a lonely world, a stranger among strangers. This may be why, for Levinas, the feminine remains apart from the system. Women would be the exception to strangeness and so the only possible entrance into a world where men, at least, can be welcomed. The capacity to give freedom or to possess another may not be given to women; they may neither be a stranger nor encounter a stranger, thus their capacity to create new concepts would be limited as well. In short, if there are no welcoming others for women then once again, women become guarantors of male identity but are given no place of her own.

In her final chapters, Diprose turns again to Nietzsche to forge the point that truth is a convention that becomes life denying to the extent that its conventional nature is forgotten. Thus, the truth that constitutes the present moment of a culture as well as a self must be unsettled, so the past may be reinterpreted as well. Without this, reparation for historical social injustices can never proceed. Once again, Levinas's notion of the stranger is essential for the recognition of past injustices. I have already argued that Merleau-Ponty's conception of pre-reflective perception is unable to explain the genesis of distinct individuals let alone cultures; however, the maintenance of strangeness in Levinas certainly would, although, ontologically, it would mean that every individual, as strange, is culturally diverse with respect to every other individual, depleting the word "cultural" of any significant meaning. But when the temporal duration of affective life is reinterpreted as Diprose and Levinas do, as a sort of Platonic reminiscence, then there are no other options, for no reparations are possible and no Nietzschean eternal returns could be tolerated. Without an ontology of difference and temporal duration, every historical atrocity is a *fait accompli*, something neither remembered nor forgotten. My own cultural standpoint may be rattled but my apology is an infinite one, directed to no one and nothing in particular, merely the

apology of an individual who in its egotism is constantly confronted by what it can never know. Unlike Merleau-Ponty, Levinas reasserts passivity, but it is the passivity of an already formed consciousness who prostrates itself to become a stranger among strangers. Perhaps this is a formula for generosity that does no further harm, but only through isolation and alienation, without compensation for the past.

Dorothea Olkowski is a philosopher with broad, intersecting philosophical interests. Her current work on the mathematical and scientific frameworks of phenomenology and postmodern philosophy reconnects these philosophical methodologies to analytic philosophy of language. She is also exploring and writing about the relation between these frameworks and ethics, especially with respect to models for feminist ethics. She has examined and written about the correlations between models of the individual derived from classical physics and models of the individual in political philosophy and ethics. She is developing a model of persons that correlates with quantum models of causal networks. She is also interested in whether or not work in cognitive science can be correlated with the causal network model. Dorothea is a member of member of the Steering Committee of the UNESCO International Network of Women Philosophers, as well as Director of the Interdisciplinary Cognitive Studies Program at her home institution.