

Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with the Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero

Adriana Cavarero is considered Italy's foremost feminist philosopher. She emerged as a thinker during the 1980s, when the Italian feminist movement was dominated by women's collectives that sought to practice an alternative feminist politics, such as the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective and Diotima in Verona.¹ Rather than using their political and creative energy to contest male-dominated institutional politics, they sought out and established new spaces in which to found a new politics. These Italian feminists pioneered the creation of women's centers, libraries, bookshops, and magazines, establishing multiple sites where women separated themselves from masculine institutions and systems of thought, spaces where they could experience independence and freedom and exchange stories and memories.

The development of these autonomous alternative spaces was facilitated by political discussions and organizing and by the production of specific theoretical and political perspectives in feminist journals such as *DonnaWomanFemme* in Rome; in books by Diotima and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collectives such as *Il pensiero della differenza sessuale* (1987) and

Sexual Difference (1990); and in popular culture, in such women's detective novels as Fiora Cagnoni's *Questione di tempo* (1985) and Silvana La Spina's *Morte a Palermo* (1987), which expressed an interest in unmasking the inadequacy of male justice.

Many of these Italian feminist groups were deeply influenced by Luce Irigaray's political and philosophical work. Irigaray argued that the feminine as experienced by most women was either unrepresented or colonized by a masculine symbolic.² More specifically, Irigaray's "sexual difference" perspective suggested that women might speak the feminine in their own terms and affirm a female, sexed, thinking subject who stands in an asymmetrical relationship to the masculine. Italian feminism borrowed the Irigarayan sexual difference position and subsequently used it to develop a theoretical and political approach conceived as "strategic essentialism."³ In the Italian context, sexual difference was interpreted as a question of experience, not of identity. Emphasis was placed on social, political, and symbolic practices and on the collective dimensions of women's experience, expressing the Italian feminist desire to replace traditional political forms with more democratic and fully participatory approaches to political and social activism.

Feminists who embraced the perspective of "sexual difference" criticized traditional forms of politics, authoritarianism, social and family roles, the supposed neutrality of knowledge, and the "liberation discourse" that sought social reform that would establish women's equality with men. They emphasized the politics and practices of differences among women rather than an emancipatory politics of equality between women and men.

Within this perspective, Italian feminist thinkers and activists spoke of the possibility of *affidamento* (a practice of mutual recognition) among women and of *autocoscienza* (self-awareness or self-consciousness). This led to an emphasis on the importance of feminine subjectivity as expressed in relations among women, relations that were not mediated by men, which in turn generated a specifically ontological approach to feminist thought. Italian feminism practiced and theorized *self-awareness* in both philosophical and political terms. *Autocoscienza* or *self-awareness* meant both the consciousness-raising process of feminist activism and the self-conscious or self-aware process of the subject in an integrated mind-body unity, whereas *affidamento* activated a theory of sexual differentiation through mutual "entrustment" among women.⁴ Indeed, Italian feminism was distinctive in its critical focus on a nonstandardizing

and noninstitutionalized selfhood. Characterized by its radical dissociation from the masculine world, Italian feminism sought to establish and explore meaningful relations among women and to valorize the assertion of difference in political and social spheres.⁵ Today, Italian feminism has achieved a certain institutional standing and lost some of the radicality of this early moment in the women's movement.

Drawing on the legacy of Italian feminism, Cavarero proposes an approach to feminist theory that is crucial to feminist discourse beyond the Italian context. Her work focuses on rereading ancient philosophical texts otherwise. In *In Spite of Plato* (1995), Cavarero rereads classical texts to reveal their patriarchal gestures. But while she exposes the masculine theoretical dynamics at work in philosophy, she also steals figures from the classics.⁶ In unraveling philosophy's masculinist ontology, Cavarero confronts women's exclusion, undoes this founding gesture of philosophy, and rethinks the ontological script of Western civilization. Not only does she deconstruct the figures of metaphysical ontology, but she recuperates an entirely different meaning for these figures, foregrounding a different conception of political and ontological realities. To step beyond essence and ontology, Cavarero uses essence and ontology themselves.

In her most recent books, *Relating Narratives* (2000) and *For More Than One Voice* (2005), Cavarero develops her feminist thought more radically by clearly disclosing her debt to the work of Hannah Arendt. In both books, she develops and deepens a number of Arendt's key concepts. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt asserts that what counts in representation and speech is not signification or the communication of a *what*, but rather, the fact that, while acting and speaking, people expose *who* they are; they make their appearance in the human world and thus reveal actively and politically their unique personal identities. Refining Arendt's perspective, Cavarero emphasizes the singularity and materiality of human uniqueness together with its necessary relationality and vulnerability. For example, for Cavarero, the political is located in one's life story and in the corporeal singularity of one's voice, necessarily exposed in reciprocal relationals among human beings. Life stories are narrated and told with interest because they are always new, irreplaceable, and unexpected. All voices are unique insofar as they spring from different throats. What emerges—both in life stories and through the focus on voices—is the *who*, the corporeal singularity of the speaker in relation to others, no matter *what* one says. The speaker is singular, and this singularity is exposed both in the speaker's life story and in her voice in a sort of phenomenology of uniqueness.

The ontology of the *who* and of one's uniqueness is an "emptied ontology" of one who simply lives, breathes, and speaks in her or his unrepeatable existence (Cavarero, "Politicizing," 530). This invocation of an ontology of uniqueness helps Cavarero deconstruct the stereotypes that emerge in the ontological approach of traditional philosophy. By focusing on the category of one's uniqueness, she disrupts the sacrificial economy of traditional ontology, where one's uniqueness is only a "superfluous" element, repeatedly negated in favor of generality and abstraction. Whereas philosophy continues to talk of identities and subjectivity, which only express the *what* or the qualities of the subject, the focus in Cavarero is on the *who*. She puts into evidence in the discourse of ontology a series of categories, such as materiality, relationality, dependence, and vulnerability, which expose ontology's contingency and resonate with the temporary condition that is a human life.

The question of ontology is perhaps the issue that divides Cavarero's thought most decisively from other postmodern, poststructuralist, or deconstructive theories. These theories have in common their refusal of ontology by skeptically avoiding any metaphysical closure; they attempt to undo the foundations of philosophical, literary, and other textual and political realities and to deconstruct the truths that the Western philosophical tradition has defended since Plato. Poststructuralism also silently sustains the question of ontology in terms of sacrality. In the refusal to approach ontology, ontology is in fact thought of as something that cannot be touched and thus as something that is *necessarily* metaphysical.

While poststructuralist theories attempt, finally, to allow heterogeneity in feminist theory and to engender a multiplicity of gestures, in reality, the deconstructive approach tends to simply reject any ontological position as essentialist and metaphysical. By privileging the refusal of ontology, deconstruction privileges one kind of feminism, a feminism that seeks a permanent questioning of the ontological perspective. In this view, only feminism that deconstructs the structures of meaning and exposes their metaphysical grounds is properly feminist. Meaning must be made *undecidable*. But undecidability belongs to the economy of truth that is grounded in the general, the abstract, and it repeats the gestures of symbolic division into binaries and dichotomies. Through disintegration, disembodiment, bursting apart, splitting, multiplicity, movement, nihilism, the focus on whatness, texts, representation, identities, and subjectivity, deconstruction appears to offer a poststructuralist version of the paternal genealogy deployed in Plato.

In contrast, for Cavarero, it is necessary to deal with the traditional terms of philosophy—ontology, essence, and substance—*ironically*, that is, to treat them with *cattive intenzioni*, bad intentions; only this can liberate ontology from the “sacred” truth imposed on it by traditional philosophical perspectives. Ironically, poststructuralism has by now itself produced a permanent deconstructive truth. As Cavarero argues in the interview below, if one merely questions or deconstructs ontology, seeking in this way to avoid it, then ontology itself has not been transformed. Our theories and approaches will still be grounded in ontological perspectives.

Inevitably, ontology is an instrument of power. Human reasoning will continually seek, construct, and create concepts, theories, and meanings under the claims of neutrality and universality, thus reproducing the sacrificial matrix of singularity and of uniqueness in the symbolic order. Cavarero is concerned with the homelessness of singularity and uniqueness, and she is skeptical about the new sacred cows that poststructuralist discourse proposes.⁷

Against the current of the poststructuralist mainstream in feminist theory, Cavarero does not want to inhabit a permanent skepticism or to relegate the ontological to another space or time, on the *margins*, in the *to-come*.⁸ Rather, she attempts to rethink ontology and sexual difference by contextualizing them within the human condition. She wants to approach ontology strategically by addressing categories that are not taken into account in traditional philosophy and by demonstrating that ontology needs to be rethought, not refused. This rethinking leads her to consider singularity, uniqueness, and other terms that evoke the existing being as a unique face rather than an abstract subject. Her concept of one’s uniqueness springs from the tradition of sexual difference theory insofar as it stresses “feminine” traits such as corporeality, materiality, relationality, and also vulnerability, but for her, these traits belong to everyone, men and women.

Cavarero thus reconceptualizes ontology by providing its human face. To acknowledge singularity and difference instead of the *what* of identity as the fabric of life, she focuses on concepts and categories capable of expressing, rather than repressing, the chaos of materiality and the ambivalence of life.⁹ The task is to enact deconstruction by reorganizing the patriarchal economy of philosophy and taking account of concrete existence.

Cavarero offers a fresh feminist perspective. By speaking of one’s uniqueness and material singularity within feminism, she theorizes

a feminism beyond the essence of the feminine, a sexual difference beyond sexual difference, and an ontological approach beyond ontology itself. The female being in Cavarero is not an essential woman with “feminine” traits. Rather, she is a woman *who* is here, in flesh and blood, with a face, a name, a story, a voice, whose uniqueness is exposed and shared by others, men and women, in the vulnerable context of human, material, and transient life. Paradoxically, Cavarero’s use of ontology de-essentializes ontology.

Refuting ontology’s traditional privileging presence, Cavarero recovers the *who—who* one is, *one’s* uniqueness—within ontology. Language and representation install an economy that sacrifices difference and singularity, whereas narration, or the focus on the voice, exposes this sacrificed material singularity, one’s uniqueness. Cavarero’s position demonstrates that there are ways to recuperate difference and singularity and to critique political philosophy other than through deconstruction. Human exposure and interaction are grounded in the corporeal uniqueness of each of us, and the interaction between these singularities is both ontological and political. In Cavarero, the material uniqueness of the voice or the life story reveals the unique, relational, and material contingency of political action. Politics thus necessarily confronts conditions of singularity, reciprocity, vulnerability, and dependence as its horizon. Politics for Cavarero requires an ontology grounded in the materiality of the human condition rather than in thought, one that is always bound by the temporality and corporeality of existence.¹⁰

Cavarero is not interested in “identity politics,” in the possessive individual of current political theory, or in the rearticulation of the general “what” of identities; her aim is to deal with the problem of establishing priorities for human life. In this respect, her political theory remains rooted in the Italian feminism of *autocoscienza* and *affidamento*, which require women to communicate and interact with one another, beginning from their material and singular experiences.

EB: Adriana Cavarero, from the outset, you have sought to find a way to allow the self to speak starting from herself, avoiding corruption by the symbolic, which, while presenting itself as neutral, is in reality masculine. In your most recent book, *For More Than One Voice*, you propose a focus on the voice that reveals the uniqueness originating in the corporeal throat and participating at the same time in the formation of words and language. You argue that there has been a devocalization of language

and therefore of the logos—in other words, an erasure of singularity within the universal.

However, given that the phallogocentric symbolic order constitutes language and thought itself, any attempt to speak about our uniqueness would necessarily have to speak in phallogocentric terms. How can we speak of one's uniqueness without using the available masculine way of thinking?

AC: Feminist theory, in its various forms, is well aware of the “cage of language” issue and conscious that feminists are forced “to undo the master's house using his own tools.” In relation to the problem of language, feminism has developed specific strategies. My strategy, already formulated in my 1990 book *In Spite Of Plato*, consists of stealing figures from the phallogocentric imaginary and relocating them in anomalous ways so that they are made to react differently, thus changing their significance. More simply, I could say that I work on stereotypes, seeking to decontextualize and reposition them in a game of resignification through unscrupulous and irreverent decodifications.

This explains why I often make use of literary or poetic texts, using them *against* philosophy. It is well known, in fact, that poetic and narrative language is less rigid, more open and polysemous than the language of philosophy. In relation to language in its general sense, I am convinced that the position shared by many contemporary French thinkers and their followers, which reduces everything to language and negates the meaning of the extralinguistic, is curiously in tune with Plato's thought. In other words, in the past few decades, we have seen the emergence of a neototalitarian conception of language. This position seems to be nested in metaphysical foundations rather than being a subversive and demystifying novelty. In this sense, from Parmenides to Derrida, through different styles and contexts, things have not changed very much.

In contrast, like the maidservant from Thrace, I believe in facts, bodies, and material givens. One's uniqueness or, to quote Hannah Arendt, the fact that every human being is different from “everyone else that ever lived, lives or will live” (8) is precisely a material given. The language of philosophy, which proceeds through abstract categories, seeks to make this insignificant or even unsignifiable. The language of literature, which narrates stories of singular lives, instead confers meaning on this materiality.

EB: Could you explain in more detail the relationship between the strategy of stealing figures from the phallogocentric philosophical

tradition practiced in *In Spite Of Plato* and the emphasis on the voice, that is to say, on the unrepresentable that links life and the symbolic in *For More Than One Voice?*

ac: The strategy adopted in *In Spite Of Plato*, which I am still using, can be said to be my own way of using deconstruction, in the sense that I read the text as text (Derrida himself says this), and I undo it. There are points in the text that are irreducible and anomalous and that stand out from its texture and composition. Penelope is a clear example of this. In Homer's text, Penelope is the only one who does not recognize Ulysses. It cannot be said that this strange element does not stand out: Ulysses is recognized by everyone except his wife, whereas one would expect the opposite.

The figures that I steal already appear anomalous. Stealing figures in this way is therefore a way of working on stereotypes. I am convinced that, in particular, most feminine stereotypes contain a nucleus of meaning that can be retrieved with a different sense, which the standard explanation or function of the stereotype tends to hide. This is a type of deconstruction. I am aware that I myself write texts. My field of work is writing.

As regards the voice, even here I have been stealing. What is more, I stole from the Western metanarratives, where there were evident anomalies. In my view, the fact that Aristotle says that the logos that is discourse is *semantike* (semanticizing voice) indicates that he is already writing in a tradition in which it is only the semantic aspect of the logos that counts, while the element of the voice is marginal, secondary, servile, and ancillary.

There is already the hint of an anomaly if we consider that in the Greek expression *phonè semantike*, voice is a noun, while *semantike* is an adjective. It would therefore seem that the main theme consists of the voice, which becomes the signifier. If one then looks at the story of the Western metanarrative and that of metaphysics, it is the signified that is vocalized. So, even here, I have stolen in a manner that seems paradoxical in relation to the same Aristotelian text, and I have tried to elaborate on this.

Furthermore, I understand from your question that you want to stress that the voice does not belong to writing. The voice as a phenomenon is directly corporeal and nontextual. My intention was to underline precisely this, that the voice in the logos, the word, is the directly corporeal element. I have not examined this in the text because it is already well

known. The voice has an immediate emotional and affective impact and provokes emotional and affective reactions. Suffice it to say that the same word said with a different tone can be, for example, praising or insulting. I have not examined this, but it represents another sign of the corporeality of the voice. What interests me most in the corporeality of the voice is that the voice is unique, in other words, the voice indicates the singularity of the body, which is one of the things I insist on.¹¹

I have also examined (and this is known through Kristeva and Cixous) the fact that the written text, which is by definition mute, has in its rhythm an element of musicality and vocality. This is a well-known fact among writers and especially poets; it is not a novelty. Yet I wanted to examine all of these points of view in order to propose the thesis that the voice, on the one hand, is an index of uniqueness (but this would be too little), and on the other, that it is also immediately unique in relationality, whereas writing is not necessarily relational.

Writing can be relational. It is true that when we write, we write with the intention that someone read; otherwise we would not write. Nevertheless, there is also a type of writing, such as the diary, that is more a relation with oneself. However, the voice in the word, if it does not happen as a mere expression of joy when one sings in the shower, is the relational element par excellence, because it has a corporeal and material relationality beyond signification.

EB: In your philosophy, you seem to think of subjectivity from a point of view that is different from the metaphysical concept of a unitary, rational, and solipsistic individual. You are talking about a human being in flesh and blood, whose unique existence is exposed when speaking with another human being. There is therefore an attempt to propose a nonmetaphysical subjectivity.

One's uniqueness shows ultimately that we need to accept ourselves as fallible, finite human beings. One's uniqueness seeks to avoid the subject of reflection in the philosophical tradition; it emerges precisely during those moments when the subject is not yet constructed within philosophical subjectivity and moves toward a more concrete and differentiated self-in-plurality.

However, this is not an easy task, and there will always remain a risk of complicity with the philosophical tradition, which Derrida describes as the problem of the closure of metaphysics. Closure means, in fact, remaining trapped within the presupposition of logocentrism's metaphysics of presence. One's uniqueness is a moment of exposure during

relationality, but you also use the terms *absolute* and *ontology*, which very much reflect metaphysics. If the question of the subject has been a metaphysical question since the beginning, how can one's uniqueness represent a nonmetaphysical self? How can we avoid the illusion of being able to go beyond, overcoming, or suspending this persistent metaphysical construction?

AC: I think that when Derrida raises the problem of metaphysical closure, he is first of all talking about himself. Of course, the logocentric trap exists, and I am in it up to my neck. As I attempted to argue when I mentioned linguistic totalitarianism, one should avoid strengthening metaphysical imperialism. When a sort of *sacrality* of philosophical terms such as *ontology* and *absolute* is assumed, one can easily end up paying homage to the empire.

Words are not sacred or untouchable, especially in philosophy. Rather, it is necessary to use words with bad intentions (*cattive intenzioni*), situating them in a different context that can overwhelm and recodify them, pushing those terms toward unpredictable meanings. One needs ultimately to use words that are metaphysically compromised—and *ontology* is one of them—to attack the system that produces them and to finally destabilize them.

When I speak of the ontology of uniqueness, I intend precisely and above all a contrast with traditional ontology, which is constructed through the negation of uniqueness with abstract and universal categories such as the subject (or the *anthropos*, the individual, and so on). Franz Rosenzweig states that “I, name and surname,” do not exist for philosophy because they have already been pre-digested by its universal categories (262). Hannah Arendt also notes that the main aim of philosophy is that of reducing flesh and blood humans, necessarily unique and singular, to absolutely superfluous beings. She adds that, on the level of historical fact, Auschwitz is, in a sense, a tragic actualization of philosophy's theoretical implications.

My use of ontology has Arendt as its specific referent. Like Arendt, I think that ontology is not related to human nature, but rather, to the human condition. Our condition is that of corporeal, unique, vulnerable human beings, dependent on one another and reciprocally exposed. This is precisely the contrary of the position advocated by various ontologies in the philosophical tradition.¹²

Besides, as you know, I enjoy playing with philology. The term *ontology* contains in its roots the Greek *on* that is a form of the verb “to

be/being” (*einai*). In a nutshell, one could say that ontology signifies literally “discourse on being.” My challenge consists of clearing out the philosophical ontology that takes “being” to be an abstract and universal category and replacing it with an ontology that instead signifies being with every human being in her/his corporeal and unrepeatable uniqueness. I deliberately use words in an incorrect and disrespectful way to strike at philosophy’s heart, avoiding any reverence.

EB: You have just used the term *sacrality* to describe the way in which ontology is considered; you propose instead to use words “with bad intentions.” This reminds me of Giorgio Agamben’s theory of desacralization/profanation, which consists of returning something to its simple use to avoid its genetic inscription or sanctification and, at the same time, of his emphasis on the simple (*haplos*) human being.¹⁵ Although Agamben has ignored feminist issues, it seems that there is a link between Agamben’s perspective and yours.

AC: Your questions are always complex and make multiple points. I shall answer them one by one. There is some affinity with Agamben because we have had a common education: the Italian *formae mentis* and a familiarity with classical texts. In relation to desacralization, I do not use it in a way that is as serious and technical as the way Agamben uses it: he has also written books on the theme of the sacred, taking a rather technical approach.

I do not use the term *sacrality* with this intention, but rather, with the intention of saying that there are some words (I am speaking with reference to philosophical language) in the metaphysical tradition, such as *essence*, *substance*, or *ontology* (and you noted it immediately), that become key words that loosen the rest of the discourse, words that are usually invented by philosophers. It is enough to think of the *Dasein* of Heidegger or the *différance* of Derrida. A certain approach, let’s call it traditionalist, states that it is necessary to respect those words, use them with their genetic meaning in the sense in which they are inscribed in the history of philosophy and have generated the history of philosophy itself.

This is not my position nor is it Agamben’s, happily. There is another position that appears to be slightly more critical but that, in my opinion, is not. I referred to it in my previous answer. That is, for example, this big scandal that the word *ontology* provokes within post-structuralist and postmodern perspectives. Some important poststructuralist and postmodern authors have criticized the classical conception of essence or ontology. Such positions seem to be critical and characterized

by radical critique. But to my mind, they leave those words untouched and untouchable, sacred.¹⁴

For example, if Aristotle talks about substance (which I do not believe to be true) and something in the tradition of Aristotle becomes substance, then substance becomes a symbol of Aristotelian metaphysical doctrine and the history of metaphysics. It is then said that one should not speak of substance, that it is not correct because it is metaphysical. And yet, merely affirming that touching or repeating the substance means falling into the metaphysical trap does not do anything to substance itself. I prefer instead to deconstruct, to strip those words of their philosophical aura and resignify them, therefore treating them in an ironic way. I enjoy doing this.

A substantial difference between my work and that of Agamben is that he treats being as being in general. In this sense, his being is a variation within metaphysics, while I insist on the human being as seen in his/her corporeal singularity. Moreover, when I speak of relation or relationality, I always mean a material, physical relationality that is in the here and now.

Consequently, I would not liken Agamben's position to my own. It seems to me that his position has most in common with that of Jean-Luc Nancy. Even when Nancy speaks of the singular, which is most interesting, it is a singular in general. We could say that one's corporeal singularity and all the lessons that I have learned from Hannah Arendt and sexual difference theory have not influenced these two thinkers at all. Using an Arendtian notion, I prefer to say that they continue to think the superfluity of human beings in their corporeal existence.

EB: According to Diana Fuss, "[E]ssentialism is most commonly understood as a belief in the real, true essence of things, the invariable and fixed properties which defines the whatness of a given entity." Essentialism "seeks to locate and to contain the subject within a fixed set of differences" (xi–xii).

How can we prevent the focus on one's uniqueness from becoming a new essence, a new element of commonality, or a new identity construction in place of the abstract individual? From a poststructuralist perspective, one's uniqueness may appear essentialist because the only position available for deconstruction is the one within logocentrism; any position outside this risks becoming an essence. Aware of this critique, I have tried to use your thought as a strategic essentialism. Can your thought be used appropriately, in some situations, as a strategic essentialism?

ac: I accept the proposal of strategic essentialism, provided that this essentialism is practiced with the worst intentions toward the phallogocentric tradition. I am thankful for your question, as it raises an issue that is most important to me. In response, I would like therefore to make myself clear and to tell you what I think sincerely and without holding back.

First, I think that the question of essentialism is a problem that torments only a certain stream of contemporary English-speaking thinkers. In Italy, Germany, and Spain, for instance, where I often hold seminars and conferences, this type of objection is rarely if ever put to me. I have not worked in France very often, so I cannot speak for the response there. I believe that one reason is that, in Italy, for example, poststructuralist theory, although studied and well known, has never become the truth, as I am afraid seems to have happened in English-speaking countries (or in those North European countries that are influenced by this thinking).

I am aware that I am expressing myself in a crude and slightly provocative way, but there is a reason for this. In the intellectual community in which I grew up, poststructuralism and psychoanalysis (Lacan!) are considered to be interesting positions but, like all other positions, criticizable. Ultimately, in my part of the world, to be a poststructuralist does not mean to be on the right side or to adopt a perspective that is better, more demystified, political, radical, subversive, and so on than other ones.

Poststructuralism is simply considered to be one of many styles of thinking, often connected to contingent elements of intellectual biography that circulate among us. As far as I am concerned, I think that poststructuralism inscribes itself within logocentric doctrine and that psychoanalysis is a form of naturalism that is not even particularly hidden (the so-called mirror phase or stage is a dogma with a naturalistic basis to me).

Moreover, like many French scholars, my education has allowed me to read the texts of classical metaphysics in the original language. In other words, I benefit from a direct, first-hand knowledge of logocentrism. When I encounter the interpretations of Plato provided by Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida, I do not consider them to be the truth, but I leaf through Plato's texts and enjoy identifying the philological games that these authors play in their theories. Sometimes, I am of the same mind and concur; at other times, I do not. I have the impression that, in some English-speaking environments, there is instead a tendency to embrace a critique of metaphysics that is filtered through the poststructuralist and

postmodernist critique of classical metaphysics. In saying this, it is not my intention to exhibit my erudition, which is most modest and no doubt conditioned by my education, but rather to suggest that the question of essentialism is sometimes raised by scholars who know very little of the complex history of the category of essence itself, although they appear to know its poststructuralist interpretation.

Essentialism, as we want to call it, is a problem related to the medieval debate on universals, influenced by some Aristotelian scholars and by a certain reception of Stoic logic. In summary, it is a slightly tedious issue that poststructuralists are good at livening up but that in itself does not authorize the pronouncement of ritual judgments in their names. Besides, philologically speaking, the term *essence*, like the term *ontology*, is related to the verb “to be/being.” If one uses it with bad intentions, the game remains open.

EB: You spoke before about the human condition and vulnerability. Could you say something more about the concept of vulnerability? Explain, for example, what you mean by vulnerability and how attention to vulnerability can influence the human condition.

AC: To me, vulnerability is the human condition itself, or one could say that it is one of the most important aspects of the human condition. Hannah Arendt pushes in this direction. Although she has not been particularly sensitive to the theme of the body, it has to be said that the body is not absent in her work. Rather, Arendt speaks of the fragility of the human being in the sense that from birth the human being is exposed and fragile.¹⁵ However, the word *vulnerability* is used by Arendt only in passing; she does not reflect on it in detail.

In this light, my perspective is more in sympathy with that of Judith Butler, who when speaking of vulnerability clarifies immediately that vulnerability is part of our material and corporeal relation. Butler demonstrates attention to the theme of the body, as I also do, even though in the end we have different perspectives. Looking at *Bodies That Matter* or *Gender Trouble*, one can see that this sensitivity to the body goes through what I call linguistic filters, the body as it is said, performed by the language that says it.

If one looks at *Precarious Life*, this performative aspect hardly ever plays a role anymore. When Butler meets vulnerability in the material form of a country such as the United States in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, in which bodies are really made vulnerable and really bleed, then her position or attention to the performative

decreases enormously. There is, in fact, very little to say about the performativity of a body that lies crushed and vulnerable in front of you. I see in Judith Butler, especially in her most recent works, an attention to the body that is similar to mine, a real attention to the materiality of corporeal relations.

In this sense, vulnerability is a potentiality (in this, I agree with Butler, although I emphasize it more). The vulnerable body, since it is a body that can be wounded, exposes itself to the wound and, for the same reason, is a body that exposes itself to care. Therefore, I see vulnerability more as the place in which the human condition gives space to the ethical question. By ethical question, I mean a question that roots itself in a decision.

In other words, if I can do only good or I can do only bad, if I can only wound or care, there is no problem, we are in the field, let's say, of "obligation." Even, for example, if one's behavior and education (the Greek custom) lead toward care—especially for us as women—this still does not mean that one is in an ethical dimension. I am particularly critical of Gilligan's ethics of care.

Ethics happen when one finds oneself singularly facing a decision to wound or not to wound, to care or not to care. In this respect, I think that the mother is an ethical figure. The infant is vulnerable *per antonomasia* as it is absolutely defenseless and vulnerable, and the mother finds herself faced with the alternative of caring for or wounding this vulnerable human being (to abandon it, for example). It is well known that mothers have been killing babies since Medea. Medea is an ethical figure or, one could say, the dark face of an ethical figure.

EB: From your answer to my question regarding essentialism, it seems that speaking of essence in relation, for example, to the representation of woman is directly related to a poststructural point of view. However, the essentialization of the feminine is also produced by cultural specificity. For example, in different parts of the world, there may be different essentializations of women and femininity.

AC: I do not see the problem. The poststructuralist perspective is naturally a local and ethnocentric perspective that criticizes the feminine essence and the way in which, in the European tradition or certain European traditions of the feminine, an essence has been constructed, which I call a stereotype.

If in other cultures there are other elements or characteristics that are seen as feminine and are essentialized in a different way, I do

not consider this to be a contradiction because I am of the opinion that universality does not exist. (Maybe I misunderstood your question?) The fact that the Western metaphysical tradition uses the word *essence*, and the fact that it says, for example, that the feminine essence is domesticity—to stay at home—is part of the Western culture of stereotypes. I work on the stereotypes, and I am not limiting my action to just reporting and naming these as stereotypes, avoiding any feminine position.

This is an absolutely fruitless way of thinking because in the attempt to avoid naming the essential feminine, at the same time, culture continues to use this feminine as a stereotype. So, what is one to do? An intellectual operation? It is necessary instead to consider the philosophical language and the ordinary language wherein the feminine is essentialized and constructed as a naturalization, working to unravel, decodify, recodify, and to make it ironic. This is not contradicted by the fact that, in other cultures, the feminine is seen as having different characteristics and stereotypes from Western ones. Of course! The idea of essence comes from all of the Western traditions: it is a common term in philosophical language.

The fact that metaphysics translates or tends to translate data, material data or behaviors, into an essence (for example, by saying that the feminine by nature means domesticity and the masculine by nature politics) is a way of saying that the essence of man is thinking. This is the language of philosophy, and philosophy belongs only to the language of the Western tradition; in other traditions and cultures, wise texts, theology, and religions are more important. Philosophy is a Western product.

Consequently, with good reason, poststructuralism notes that the metaphysical tradition constructs essences and bases itself on the construction of essences, and I agree with that. It seems banal to say this. Yet, the poststructuralist or postmodern position seems obsessed by this problem. When I try to articulate a discourse, my articulation is hardly ever postmodern in style, that is, I am not obsessed with underlining the fact that uniqueness does not exist, that there is nothing but a whirl of fragments, that nothing can be stopped because to stop is bad, whereas to let movement proliferate and multiplicity generate anomalous situations is good. This story, according to which all that is movement is good and all that is still is bad, is not in my language. I do not use this language because I consider it to be the language of a school, a school that is no longer able to produce very much, as it merely continues to repeat all of this.

Precisely because I am not using this language, I affirm, for example, that feminine sexual difference is a corporeal difference. In

saying that, I am asserting a banality, because this is not just confirmed by biology, medicine, and anthropology, but it is also evident when a baby is born; one can see immediately if it is a boy or a girl, with the exception of rare cases. Consequently, I maintain that sexual difference is a corporeal given (banality). The corporeal given asks for a meaning, the returning of a meaning.

To say that the corporeal given of the vagina is lack or the absence of the phallus is the winning way the Western tradition addresses the problem. Yet, I do not feel like an essentialist in stating this banality, that there is a corporeal morphology in the feminine and in the masculine. If one needs to negate this in order to be postmodern, then, in my view, postmodernism is this century's illness. So, if some traditions dictate that vaginal morphology needs to be sewn up to prevent sexual pleasure, this is just a different way of addressing the meaning of sexual difference in comparison to the European tradition. However, this does not have anything to do with postmodernism.

EB: If you accept the challenge of using your perspective as a strategic essentialism through an ontology of "bad intentions" that deprives ontology itself of its metaphysical meanings, would you also accept the challenge of considering your thinking as phenomenological and empirical? This would be in line with Merleau-Ponty's work. Merleau-Ponty, in fact, postulates that we perceive and receive information from the world through the body.

AC: Links with Merleau-Ponty are also problematic because from my reading (I am not an expert), it seems that the flesh is always flesh in general in his work. It seems to me that there is always an identification of singularity and then an avoiding of it through generalization. However, beyond Merleau-Ponty, I would be most happy to be considered a phenomenologist, in the sense that Arendt speaks as a phenomenologist. In other words, not a phenomenologist in the great classical tradition starting with Husserl and continuing with Merleau-Ponty, not the phenomenology in which phenomena are always thought of from the general perspective of the subject, but rather a phenomenology of one's uniqueness and the materiality of singular bodies.

EB: Some scholars might read your idea of one's uniqueness as being close to the concept of soul, as a theological and untouchable element. This interpretation would reflect a Christian perspective. How do you relate to this analysis?

ac: I would say that I am influenced very little by Christian philosophy, other than by the fact that I live in Italy, a Mediterranean country where Christianity and Catholicism are widespread. I am not a scholar of Christian philosophy or theology. On the contrary, I received a rather secular education.

In relation to the concept of the soul, there is no doubt that more attention is given to the singularity and the uniqueness of a person in the Christian tradition than in the Greek tradition. The Greek tradition is rather indifferent and focused on the object: it is the object and not the subject that counts. Insofar as the soul is singular in the Christian tradition, and the question is not the soul, but singularity, one can say that there is some approximation between one's uniqueness and one's soul.

However, I accept what you asked me before, that is, the phenomenology of one's uniqueness. I like the phenomenological horizon most and prefer it to the theological one. By the phenomenological horizon, I mean that you who are in front of me show yourself to be unique because I see you, feel you, and hear you.

You could object by saying that this appears as a metaphysical, obligatory element, an element of necessity. But, I think that there are some elements of necessity that are inscribed in the flesh and in the world itself. I always say very banal things, but philosophy does not seem to accept these banal things. That the human being has a voice modulated by vocal cords is an element of necessity. If this disturbs us because it appears theological, I cannot say anything. I benefited from a lay education, and I am not very attuned to theological answers.

EB: When you state that "psychoanalysis is a form of naturalism," what do you mean exactly? In particular, what do you think of the fact that some contemporary feminists, such as Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti, try, in some ways, to redirect feminism toward the biological?

ac: There is a polemic between myself and Butler in relation to this.¹⁶ Arendt notes that a theory that presupposes a mandatory development through phases where the human being would have characteristics that set up its personality, its language, the ego, and the id is a scheme that allows us to read evolution from birth to childhood with some variations. Precise mechanisms, such as the Oedipus complex, the mirror phase are applicable to the entire world. In my opinion, this is naturalism, even naive naturalism.

In this polemic between me and Butler, she cites all those psychoanalysts who are critical of Freud and Lacan. (I am not a great expert

on psychoanalysis, but I have read most of the feminist reworking of it.) Criticizing and reversing the Oedipus complex is an interesting operation within the history of psychoanalysis, but it does not erase psychoanalytical naturalism—it simply substitutes some of the categories.

With regard to biologism, this can be intended in so many ways that I do not know how to answer. If it means an attention to corporeality, the morphology of the body, and the essential and corporeal aspects in their singularity, then I concur. That is, if it means that by the observation of the *bios* and the expression of corporeality (*del darsi*)—which is never an expression in general, but rather expresses itself in definite forms and singularly—one sees that the anybody is my body, then I agree with biologism. One can say thousands of things about biologism.

EB: You seem to be suggesting, with good reason, that poststructuralism is not a truth and that it is necessary to go directly to the classical sources in order to avoid errors and misunderstandings. However, I think that there seems to be a sort of contradiction in your answer. On the one hand, poststructuralism is considered to be one of the various perspectives on knowledge within a coherent historical-genealogical point of view, but on the other, you appear to be privileging classical philosophical thinking.

AC: No, I am not saying that. What I intended to say was that whether one is a feminist or not, if one produces a deconstruction, making use of a Platonic category, then it is better to go to the Platonic text, even with all the filters of one's later education. When I obtain information from the Platonic text, I know very well that I have read Derrida, Gadamer, and so on: I am not going back to square one. What annoys and irritates me is that often, in the poststructuralist school, Plato's words are misunderstood—not in the way that Plato has been read, but because what Derrida has said about Plato is misunderstood.

As a result of my training, I privilege the classical texts. The poststructuralists, from Derrida to Deleuze, also privilege classical texts because their education started from Plato and Aristotle, read first hand, known, studied, and restudied. If one wants to follow poststructuralist thinking or a critique of poststructural thinking, one must know the classical texts; otherwise, one understands only an interpretation of the classical texts, made by someone who has a classical background. This is what I want to say: something academic, rather commonplace.

EB: Both you and Luce Irigaray can be considered philosophers of sexual difference. You both seem to seek to disrupt the syntax of Western

logic by working against what has been considered thematizable and representable. While Irigaray ends up constructing feminine subjectivity through metaphorical elements of bodily femininity, your philosophy of sexual difference seems to move beyond sexual difference itself, going toward a philosophy of singular difference.

By talking about the possibility of recognizing everybody's uniqueness and therefore their singularity and differences, your work appears to seek a resolution to the contradiction between universalism and singularity and proposes itself as a struggle to situate humanity within the universal symbolic. However, in focusing on differences and uniqueness, how can we ensure that sexual difference receives the necessary attention? Is your feminist theory, via one's uniqueness, able then to dispense ultimately with the notion of woman?

AC: I feel an enormous debt toward Luce Irigaray, second only to the one I owe Hannah Arendt. In saying so, I think I have already outlined the main points of my answer. On the one hand, the Irigarayan sexual difference is decisive in my theoretical horizon. On the other, if there is some originality in my position, this depends on my effort to conflate the issue of sexual difference with the ontology of uniqueness that I have inherited from Arendt.

Indeed, I am convinced that my attention to one's uniqueness, with its traits of fragility, exposure, vulnerability, finitude, and above all corporeality, is inscribed within the very stereotype of the feminine. As I have already said, I work on stereotypes, that is, from stereotypes. Underneath their rough, misogynist surface, there is often a hidden sense in the stereotypes that pushes against the metaphysical skin to emerge and break it into pieces.

My strategy is therefore uncomplicated. For me, sexual difference is a given of the human condition translated by logocentrism into a hierarchical scheme that prevents one of the two sexes from representing herself outside the stereotypes of the feminine. However, precisely those stereotypes disclose a nucleus of resistance against the very logic and content of the system that has informed them.

To put it another way, I think that phallogocentrism does not totally and serenely control its domain: there are leaks, tears, places of the symbolic and above all of the imaginary that produce sometimes unexpected and undisciplinable meanings. Bodies and their morphology, experiences and their practice exceed the system that claims to be able to codify and control them. Traces of this excess—according to my

thesis—can be detected not only in specific texts and female lives but also within the same Western patriarchal macrotext.

When I seek to elaborate an ontology of uniqueness, my unraveling of Western texts, including metaphysics, begins with an “excavation” of the feminine stereotypes and a search for a thread that could instead help me demolish the plot and weave another one. If we consider, for instance, the stereotype of maternity, I argue that besides all the edifying and spiritual images, the maternal figure evokes contact with the immediate event of the human being as exposed and vulnerable, unique and fragile, and absolutely immersed in the relation in which unconsciously but concretely she reveals her own existence.

However, this does not lead me to celebrate an ethics of care. On the contrary, it leads me to investigate a negative or even disgusting sense of every ethical discourse that engages with the maternal figure and trusts uncritically in its traditional goodness.

For instance, I am writing at the moment on the theme of terror and horror, with a particular attention to women who transform themselves into “body bombers.” One of my points of reflection is infanticide (Medea). I am examining in essence the maternal figure as an answer to the vulnerability of the infant; she has to decide between the wound, *vulnus*, and care, between destroying the uniqueness absolutely exposed or receiving and containing it.

In other words, even though the mother appears to be the central character of a primary relationality, this does not guarantee that this relation is oriented automatically toward goodness and care. If we work only with the stereotype of spiritual maternity (*la madonna*, Our Lady) or with that of destructive maternity (Medea), we risk tracing two different versions of patriarchal discourse rather than disclosing the radical dilemma that is at the basis of an ethics of relation. Besides, there is no such thing as an ethics that does not simultaneously recall ontology and politics. Some stereotypes are more important than others: the “irreducible” is internal to their polysemy.¹⁷

EB: I am now trying to bring your thought face to face with that of Judith Butler. For Butler, the focus is on the discursive construction of identities and subjectivities and on how, within the regulatory mechanisms of discourse, it is possible to resignify and subvert those fixed positions. Within this theoretical frame, Butler proposes in particular the possibility of interpreting gender not as a fixed identity category, but rather as a process of becoming that can be rearticulated and resignified continuously.

Butler sees in the discursive mechanisms of exclusion a political way of rearranging discourses and representations themselves.

On the contrary, you seem to consider the available means of representation and discourses inadequate to express one's uniqueness, and you seek in moments of disjunction between language and life, discourse and materiality—where one's uniqueness can be revealed—the possibility of subverting and opposing discourses. In other words, your thinking seems more like an attempt to take into consideration an irreducible material excess. Therefore, despite what you said earlier, I would like again to draw attention to the fact that, while Butler admits the existence of materiality outside language, she denies its intelligibility. She does not deal with it and therefore leaves open a gap between mind and body.¹⁸

Can you explain the way in which your focus on the voice can avoid the mind/body separation? Are you seeking a postdeconstructive approach?¹⁹ What is the relation between one's uniqueness and gender and one's uniqueness and sex? What is your position on gender? Can gender, if used as an unstable identity category rather than a fixed one, as suggested by Butler, be useful to achieve change in women's condition and for feminism in general? How can one's uniqueness be used in relation to a concept of gender that is applied to all discourses?

ac: Judith Butler is a genius. I am most fascinated by the originality of her thinking, which is coupled with an extreme methodological rigor. In other words, hers is an analysis that seeks, in an Aristotelian way, conceptual clarity by proceeding through questions that articulate themselves into other questions, until the discourse is gutted and exposed in all its premises and consequences. Since I am Platonic, I place more emphasis on a narrative architecture and collateral digressions.

However, we have one point in common: in our youth, we both worked on Hegel, and this has left its trace.²⁰ In any case, the major difference between us does not consist in the use of an Aristotelian style or a Platonic one (if you forgive me this little joke), but in the diverse intellectual and geopolitical horizons to which we refer.

To put it succinctly, the problem of the distinction between sex and gender is internal to the English-speaking debate. I contest, therefore, the statement in your question that gender is today applied in all discourses. This is perhaps true if by "all" we mean the Anglophone community and its areas of influence. The Italian equivalent term for gender, *genere*, is notoriously so *generic* (precisely!) that its use is inadvisable in the theoretical field. Also, in Italian feminist theory, speaking of sex (*sesso*)

or sexual difference (*differenza sessuale*) does not imply a mere biological level, but rather a mode in which biological, cultural, material, symbolic, morphological, and imaginary elements traverse one another.

I think that my reflection on stereotypes is in some ways related to Butler's interest in gender. In this sense, I have always appreciated Butler's attempt to mobilize "gender," pushing it toward previously unheard of and destabilizing interpretations. One of Butler's main merits is the theoretical and political shift that she has inscribed in feminist studies. Feminist studies were lingering over the critique of patriarchy, limiting themselves to reporting, and demonstrating the masculine mark of Western metanarratives. This was something that had already been acknowledged, and it constitutes, in any case, only a superficial aspect of the problem.

Butler instead teaches us that behind its evidently misogynist signs, the system is complex and, above all, attackable through the unprejudiced use of its own symptoms of destabilization. Specifically, Butler not only theorizes how to accelerate this destabilization but also applies her strategy to feminist theory in general and to herself in particular (as Aristotle would do), thus avoiding the problem of a subversive movement again finding stability within a system.

In short, Butler gives a lesson in rigor, coherence, and extraordinary critical acumen. Yet, I have to confess that I am more in tune with the recent Butler, who reflects on vulnerability and relations, for example, in *Precarious Life*. In this text, she takes an interest in my position. I am not saying this out of vanity, but to underline how some feminist journeys of radical American thinking or Italian/Mediterranean thinking might meet and generate a dialogue beyond the diverse intellectual, linguistic, and geopolitical horizons in which they are differently grounded.²¹

The same applies for the English philosopher, Christine Battersby, to whom I am close not only as a friend but also through a common interest in the thematics addressed by her in *Phenomenal Woman*. Obviously, I am not suggesting that Butler, Battersby, and I are saying the same things. On the contrary, it is symptomatic that our intellectual biographies and their conceptual constellations do not function as barriers to positive dialogue and comparison.

Therefore, in relation to the question of the body, I contest you. As I said, in *Precarious Life*, Butler's attention to the body is an attention to the materiality of the body. I think her performative filter carries out a much more minor function than before. In my view, Butler has somewhat consumed the performative category and now places herself in an ironical

position vis-à-vis the performative (ironically is a beautiful word). That is how I read her most recent work. I don't think she puts the body aside, but faces it with courage in *Precarious Life*. She does so with a language style that is very different from mine, and it is interesting precisely because it is so different. I see a turning point here in Butler's work.

In addition, I would like to take the opportunity to reflect on the question of the performative. Even though this might lead one to think that I am too attentive to the geopolitical dimension, I would like to underline the fact that the enormous interest of American poststructuralism in the concept of the performative is connected to Derrida's critique of John Searle, who reclaimed Austin's theory. The background of this debate is the collision between analytical philosophy and so-called Continental thinking, an Anglophone collision that in Italy and other European countries has received scarce attention.

This is also evident from the fact that the term *performative* in Italian is still a linguistic opprobrium, an Anglicism that is, in turn, a Gallicism. Beyond the term, the theoretical question is another thing. To state it drastically, I remain convinced that Plato is the inventor of the performative. Plato rigorously applied the performative to construct metaphysics, even though, for the Athenian philosopher, the performative is employed more for ideas rather than spoken language. However, the polysemy of the term *logos* allows Plato this and other games. I suggest that those who are interested in these questions read attentively the *Cratylus* and, with less pleasure, the *Timaeus*.

In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler in effect has read the *Timaeus*, albeit not in the sense that I am attempting to suggest. In saying this, I do not seek to discredit Butler. If Butler is postmodern, she is postmodern in a critical and productive way. She does not limit herself to applying, as many do, the French truth to problems. Instead, she tends to test the permissibility of this applicability until problems disarticulate along with the truth. I have to say that, in some contexts, Butler has become, however much against her will, a truth in herself. Some dogmatic residuals of the postmodern, or better, of poststructuralist doctrine, remain, in fact, still stuck to her fingers. But which of us, considering that we are daughters of our time and geopolitically located, does not carry dogmatic residuals? What is really important is that those dogmatic residuals do not function as barriers.

I am not eluding the question regarding my method of valuing the extralinguistic. In *For More Than One Voice*, I underline that in

the word (in speech), the vocal element, intended as a physicality and an acoustic materiality, has a reality and a communicative power that precedes and exceeds the linguistic element. The scream and the whimper produce, in fact, sense and communication apart from language. In my opinion, the question is particularly important not only because it provides an example of extralinguistic materiality but because, on the one hand, what is at stake here is the corporeal root of the logos and, on the other, this corporeality, as voice, communicates immediately the uniqueness of the human being who emits it.

In other words, I think that the material, in this case, the body, not only involves the sphere of meaning but, above all, that this materiality produces meaning beyond and even before it is produced by meaning, that is to say, that materiality is performed. The category of uniqueness can, in fact, function as a good example. There is no doubt that uniqueness is a concept in which values relating to the use of the term are stratified (uniqueness tends to signify, for instance, “exceptional,” “extraordinary,” “special”).

However, even infants and animals are capable of recognizing the uniqueness of a voice. There is, then, a given that communicates itself and produces meaning independently of the linguistic sphere. Not everything that produces meaning is language. On the contrary, there is a meaning of bodies that is passed on to language, forcing it to acknowledge and take account of this meaning, although the language, chained as it is to its arrogant foundational dream, often resists the body’s meanings.

With regard to your other question concerning the mind/body relationship, I have to say that it is too complex an issue, and too entwined with the mind/brain issue, to be given serious consideration here. I will only say that embodied and corporeal uniqueness or, in other words, you, she, he, and, in the end, really in the end, I, is not only the unity of mind and body on a linguistic level. It is also the unity of mind and body before this distinction, so beloved by metaphysics, has taken place and found a language to express itself.

In my opinion, deconstructing metaphysics is also useful in highlighting the strategic role of the mind/body distinction, with its hierarchical and disciplinary effects, as well as the traces of its destabilizing potential. I am not sure, therefore, if the aim is to push thinking toward a postdeconstructive horizon. However, I know that both Butler and I intend deconstruction not as an academic practice on the hermeneutic text, but rather, as one of a number of intellectual instruments

that allow us to rethink ontology and politics, especially today, in times of violence. Even though we diverge in our approaches, we very much converge on this.

EB: The Italian thinking on sexual difference is well known for its position of separateness, in other words, for refusing to be coopted into the masculine stream of ideas. The key idea is that women should not aim at equality with men, but should, rather, focus on their differences. There is also a tradition of noninstitutionalized feminist women's groups. Your work seems to continue this legacy of separateness by suggesting moments of "suspension" from the emancipatory politics of current feminism and from institutional forms of power. What kind of political position is therefore left for feminism within your philosophical theory?

Are you proposing a politics of disengagement from institutions and other centers of power, while paradoxically engaging with them? How do you sustain this separation from the institutional centers of power that one has necessarily to confront in order to achieve change in society? On a more theoretical level, how do you connect the moment of suspension of one's uniqueness with the symbolic as it is used in political action? Is this suspension something we experience momentarily as we live immersed in the symbolic?

AC: Many years ago, I wrote an article titled "L'Emancipazione diffidente" (Diffident Emancipation). Since then, I have not substantially changed my opinion. My argument is that, although contradictory and assimilative, emancipation is a point of no return, and one has to use it strategically. Allow me to explain. I share the idea, expressed not only by Italian feminists, that emancipation is a trap, which—in the name of overcoming the exclusion of women from knowledge and power—incorporates women into the paradigm constructed by and for the masculine subject. Following the formal equality principle, women ought to be valued as men, even though they are women and not men.

Notoriously, however, putting this formal principle into practice does not work. If we think in a coherent way, the symbolic order that has sought to treat women as if they were men is, in fact, the same principle that allows the perpetuation of the notion of women as different from and inferior to men. I shall not prolong this argument now. I will only highlight instead that in Italian society, the so-called glass ceiling is very thick. Today, fewer than ten percent of the members of parliament are women, which is a lower proportion than in 1946. In Italy, patriarchal culture, on both the right and the left, continues.

In other words, the patriarchal symbolic order is so strong that it invalidates even the effects of the egalitarian position (which is also criticizable). Reaction to this status quo has the effect of producing different positions among sexual difference feminists. Some of these feminists emphasize a separatist strategy; they do not accept compromise with institutions, and they practice a politics that I would call niche politics. They are against “equal opportunity,” quotas, and the institutionalization of women’s studies within universities.

My position is different. Even though I criticize the arguments behind the politics of equal opportunity and quotas, I think that one needs to take advantage of these arguments when an egalitarian approach means more jobs for women or a raise in their salaries. Ultimately, if the application of equality benefits some women, then it is fine.

At stake is a strategy that is callously utilitarian and not at all passionate. I am ready to form alliances strategically with some powerful masculine groups but also to shamelessly betray them on the first occasion. After all, men have been doing it to us for millennia. In relation to the institution of women’s studies (I am using a generic term; in Italian I would call them sexual difference studies), my strategy is similar: if it is useful to have more women in Italian universities and to facilitate their careers, then that is fine. If it provides, within the university, formative opportunities for students and includes feminist thematics, it is even better.²²

However, I repeat, I dedicate myself to such commitments with little passion. Instead, I dedicate my passion to my lecturing, to making sure that the ethic of relation and therefore the ontology of uniqueness brings about practical effects in the context in which I operate. I am now too old to believe in the utopia of a theory that has an impact on society and changes it, and I am not so vain as to believe that my task is that of changing the world. I think instead that my work consists in an exercise in political imagination that makes ideas circulate and seeks to put them in practice. I understand this may appear of little importance.

EB: Could you explain specifically whether the sexual difference of one’s uniqueness can go beyond heterosexual normativity? In other words, can it also be applied to lesbians and gays?

AC: I understand this problem from Butler’s point of view, which is exactly the point of view of the heterosexual norm. Absolutely, yes [it can be applied]. The human being is sexed, in one way or another; that is, the human sex is either masculine or feminine and the intermediate stages are most rare. It is not possible to consider the hermaphrodite a third sex.

The hermaphrodite exists, but one cannot say that human sexualization has three prototypes. In other words, the hermaphrodite is a rarity. On the one hand, one can say that, because there are two sexes, the system is heterosexual; and, on the other, one can say that there are two sexes and that corporeal materiality has to do with the presentation/appearance (*presentarsi/darsi*) of sexualization in difference. Yet, just because there are two sexes, it does not mean or it is not normative that they must pair off with the opposite sex or that the feminine sex cannot couple with or love the feminine sex. I do not see the immediate impact.²⁵

To this, Butler would respond that sexual difference in some ways facilitates the heterosexual norm, but I cannot make this jump. Of course, if there were five sexes, it would perhaps facilitate things, but I cannot do anything about that.

EB: I would like to ask you about the ontology of *being with* in your philosophy. Could you talk about your insistence on this ontology in relation to Heidegger's *mit sein* and also in relation to the perspective of Jean-Luc Nancy? For instance, while your ontology appears to be an ethical ontology with political implications, in Nancy's work, the focus seems to be on a political ontology with ethical implications. The intention here is not to confine your thinking to the problematics of other scholars, but rather to explore its potentialities further.

AC: My point of reference is neither Heidegger nor Nancy, but Arendt. Arendt is most critical in relation to Heidegger, from whom, nevertheless, she starts. Arendt says, with good reason, that Heidegger's philosophy is still inscribed in the privilege of metaphysics, pure theory, and contemplation and that it pays no attention to the practical or political sphere. Therefore, I do not refer to the *being with*, which I take from Arendt, as *mit sein* or *being with*, but as in-between, as relationality, as something more material and relational.

Arendt-like, I give an ontological and political meaning to this in-between. The ontology is intended by Arendt for politics. Consequently, one can say that my approach is political: it is a corporeal relationality, precisely where corporeality exists in singularity. I consider singularity to be a necessary prerequisite to rethinking the community. Relationality constitutes something with which to review a determinate politics, a determinate way of articulating politics or to intend the political. This does not interest Heidegger at all.

Nancy pays attention to this, but there is a sort of shortcoming: he applies the category of *being with*, which he also calls *knot* and *sharing*,

to the whole globe. In short, there is no such place as meaning, the body, or even breath, logos; there is nothing for Nancy that does not participate in this *sharing*. Like Arendt, I focus instead on the human condition, which originates at birth. I define this human condition in terms of exposure and, more recently, in terms of vulnerability.

Nancy and also Agamben differ in that their discourse on these categories is always a general discourse, where the body, as such, is in general, where the individual is any individual. Again, they dissolve the Arendtian attempt to consider the human being in its corporeal singularity, in relation to the here and now.²⁴ As I have pointed out, Arendt says that when one dissolves human beings in discourses in general, human beings, as such, become superfluous. In my view, Nancy and Agamben are still within this philosophy of the superfluity of the determinate here and now, of being in front of the other: I with my face, you with your voice, which can be dissolved into the category of corporeality in general.

EB: Liberal democracies seem to function by transcending the localized and partial concerns of people by addressing only the needs of the majority of the community. Gender equality and rights are not guaranteed by the abstraction and neutrality of the individual subject of liberalism. This unitary conception of the abstract individual has the effect of marginalizing those who differ from the norm. In *For More Than One Voice*, you suggest that this is a politics based on logocentrism and rationality, and you propose to focus on the “community of speakers” and on a “relational politics” through “uniqueness in plurality.” I very much like your focus on one’s uniqueness in plurality.

Thinking about the application of your theory, however, it seems impossible to produce a system of norms starting from the uniqueness of each of us. I can only imagine including within the standard of the abstract individual more specificity, therefore reducing its abstract nature. In other words, can we use one’s uniqueness, which is said to be contingent and ever changeable, to adjust the normative system based on universalism? And more generally, what roles do the normative system, law, and rights play in your work?

ac: You raise difficult questions, considering my limited juridical competence. I shall attempt to answer by taking the long way around, through the philosophical territories with which I am more familiar. The normative system, as you know, is not isolated and self-sufficient; rather, it is a cultural result of a conception produced in a specific time by human beings and their relations. In the time of Aristotle, the normative model

and the political one were equivalent to the definition of man (masculine and universal) as *zoon logon echon*.

Modern liberal democracies and the normative system based on individual rights have as a reference the individualistic ontology that was invented by Thomas Hobbes and then revitalized by John Locke. Without this individualistic ontology, the modern state and juridical universalism would not exist. It is not possible, then, to attack the ontology of the individual without taking into account the fact that this attack falls back into the conception of the normative system of the state. Although for decades now holders of diverse theoretical positions have criticized the ontology of the individual, few of those are ready to subject the elementary principle of juridical universalism to their radical critique.

To put it simply, the individual is critiqued, but individual rights are still seen as something to be upheld, albeit with some modifications and adaptations to multicultural society and differences. Substantially, the generative model of individual rights remains intact.

In the context of today's outbreak of religious fundamentalism and attacks on the Western secular model, this debate appears to be a burning issue. I am concerned about the uncertain future of secularism, and yet I am aware that my critique of the ontology of the individual also brings the modern system of rights into doubt. In addition, today one needs to take account of the crisis of the model of the state and of the conceptual constellation related to it, juridical universalism included. What we call globalization is in fact only a period of transition from a known model to a model that is as yet unknown, complicated by an intensification of forms of violence. I do not intend to go into catastrophe theory here, but I would like to emphasize that to attack the ontology of the individual today can be a very uncomfortable position, considering that historical events seem to participate in this attack in a violent way.

The problem is not simple. It is necessary to proceed with caution, without ignoring the risk of an involuntary complicity with the position that attacks modernity in violent ways. However, the present crisis opens a space particularly suited to practicing a political imagination that commences, as always, from a radical rethinking of ontology. The ontology of uniqueness, on which I attempt to reflect, has these events and concerns as its backdrop.

Normative engineering is, of course, outside my competence. However, in terms of the singularity of every life, it seems to have been possible to find grounds for orienting the legal system toward the theme of

the vulnerability of human beings and their reciprocal interdependence. I could say with a simple formula that I am focusing on the passage from possessive individualism to exposed uniqueness, from abstract universalism, attentive to themes of goods and resources, to a concrete materialism, where what counts is the fragility of the body of the other.²⁵ I understand that I am again speaking of ethics and ontology rather than normative systems, and therefore I shall stop there.

EB: You say that at the moment, you are writing something on “body bombers.” Could you talk about this article or book?

AC: It is a book that begins with the category of the vulnerable and reflects on the category of horror.²⁶ I propose a neologism, that is, I propose the category of *horrorism*. Readings of the violence of these times often use the word *terrorism*, with its long history. In addition, within the category of terrorism, many books present different classifications. However, the numerous classifications provided in such books are not important: they are books about distinguishing and classifying. Classification underlines that the terrorism of our time—the terrorism manifested in events such as the attacks on September 11 or the everyday episodes in today’s Baghdad, where children buying ice cream are blown up—is indeed terrorism. However, there is something that escapes the classification that is known as terrorism.

Starting from this problem, I am writing a book on the category of horrorism instead. I suggest that many of today’s forms of violence are in fact forms of horrorism because they repeat, let’s say, the repulsive gesture of Medea. The gesture of Medea is that of destroying the vulnerable and defenseless and, in fact, we are always vulnerable, from birth to death. The vulnerable is not reducible; that is, the reducible is that (and here I am reiterating where I differ from Giorgio Agamben) which one can kill, where the alternative is either life or death. As for the vulnerable, the alternatives consist of being able to wound or to care.

When body bombers are women, the effect strikes even harder, because we are used to men enacting war and violence, whereas a woman should be a mother. Women are very close to the vulnerable because they are mothers. We can say, then, that horror is expressed with more clarity in the feminine.

EB: You define globalization as a transition from “a known model to an unknown one, complicated by forms of violence.” This is an interesting proposition. How far can we consider this model to be a known model? How do you intend “violence”? What’s the relationship

between one's uniqueness, the rethinking of relationality, and this phase of globalization in which we are living?

AC: Globalization is the name given to a phase of historical transition from the modern state model. The modern state, which we call a nation, is not a mysterious object. A detailed literature describes this fact. If you ask scholars of political philosophy such as myself to clarify the modern state, perhaps I might not answer in the same way as an English scholar, but there is surely a common language: the object is there.

Globalization is not an object but a series of phenomena that can be described—without great precision (nonterritoriality or permeability of boundaries and so on)—that plunges all the characteristics of the modern state into crisis. The most precise thing that one can say is that this phase is part of the dissolution of the modern state and that it is happening while the modern state still exists. I do not know toward what form of power or domination we are moving; that is not my task.

Uniqueness becomes fundamental to understanding the current violence, as I said before, in relation to terrorism. What is destroyed and hit today by terrorist attacks (take, for example, the terrorist attacks in New York on September 11, as well as those in London in July 2005) is precisely the human being, because she is defenseless, just anyone, the exemplary harmless human being.

Violence is always inflicted on a particular person, name, surname, with a unique story; it breaks singular lives, as one can also see from the fact that, after a terrorist event, photographs of those missing are hung up because a precise and singular life is missing. The blow always strikes materially singular, defenseless, and vulnerable lives.²⁷ We are not dealing with an armed militant, but rather, with someone who happens to be traveling on the Underground and who is absolutely defenseless against a bomb detonated below ground.

It is important to understand that the defenseless person has been the exemplary victim of all forms of violence since the Second World War, when civilians accounted for over half of the casualties. Since then, civilian casualties have reached around ninety percent of the total. Yet, violence always and necessarily strikes singularly. There is one type of violence that voluntarily strikes a singularity—the case of vendetta: I kill you as you, not as exemplary. Hate in this case is singular and directed against you, whereas the current form of violence strikes the defenseless and exemplary human being generically and indiscriminately.

Thus, the reasoning goes: I blow up users of the London Underground precisely because they are just anyone and so that any person in the West will know that anyone can be hit anywhere indiscriminately. This can therefore be considered as a form of violence against the singular defenseless one. This violence shows itself as a negation of singularity and one's uniqueness precisely because it proposes this singularity as if it were exemplary, just anyone. Therefore, one can see that singularity is an effective category in the reading of events.

Even in the case of two armies confronting one another during the wars in the 1700s—now things are more blurred—people were hit because they were just anyone. However, those anyones were positioned within a category. For instance, Carl Schmitt considers friend/enemy as the main categories of the political. In those wars, two enemy armies wearing different uniforms wanted to kill each other, not because the other someone was called John or Connor but because those someones were, for example, English, Irish, or Communist.

However, these categories stop anyone from becoming global. They are categories of belonging that erase singularity and uniqueness but still manage to group people together. Instead, today we have large world categories of the believers in Allah versus the infidels. These categories, which are so global and large and which deny singularity and uniqueness, allow the killing of the defenseless because the defenseless are just anyone. He/she is singular, but when they are hit, they become “exemplary,” just anyone, indiscriminately potentially targetable, killable, and woundable everywhere.

EB: In your philosophical work, you make use of literature such as Italo Calvino's stories. Why do you use literature? Is this perhaps a way to vocalize devocalized philosophical language?

AC: Yes, as I have already said, literature is a polysemous language that undoes the arrogance of every system claiming stability. Of course, the symbolic patriarchal order, together with its well-known binary economy, passes through literature too, which divulges and transmits the patriarchal order to readers even more easily than philosophy or other technical knowledge.

The vocal, musical aspect of the poetic text, as Kristeva would say, is what, for me, is most important. Poets and writers are, in fact, particularly sensitive to the sound rhythm that emanates from the pulsations of the body. The body's visceral respiratory and cardiac symphony transmits language as cadence.

It is not by chance that the language of philosophers, often associated with obscurity and complexity, is generally unpleasant. Philosophy is constructed by removing from language the liveliness of the body, the communicative sense of its resonance and, consequently, the voice that invokes another voice before and beyond what is said. As I often say to my students, I am convinced that the best antidote to metaphysics is singing.

EB: The universality of language can be focused on the particular through the use of a narrative language. What does the concept of the narratable self—which you use in *Relating Narratives*—add to the narratability of language?

AC: We can say that there is a style of narrative language that is usually different from the style of philosophical language because narratable language takes multiple forms. In narrative language, attention is paid to singularity, one's uniqueness, particularity, and the unforeseeability and fragility of life.

The narratable self is called such because I focus attention on the pulsation of narration, the desire to narrate, which is often noticed phenomenologically—although it is not mandatory—in one's own experience of self and of others. I am aware—and this is more feminine than masculine—of the pleasure of narrating one's own story or of listening to narration. When you arrived, for instance, I immediately asked you to tell me about yourself. But this is a question of literary theory that is not my strong point.²⁸

EB: Do you agree with me in reading the contemporary philosophical spectrum as divided between two tendencies, one that goes toward interpretation and the other that goes toward relationality and communication, including Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, and yourself?

AC: I would not use the term *communication*. I would say that part of contemporary philosophy—and I would include Judith Butler in that—is definitely moving toward the category of relationality. And this seems to me an interesting category, which I see in an Arendtian way. It is a radical rethinking of ontology, and I enjoy ontology. Ontology means: what is the sense of Elisabetta being here?

EB: Finally, focusing on ethics, one can say that the ethics implied in your work is similar to that proposed by Levinas. Like you, Levinas is able to initiate a dialogue with a human being who is dissimilar by resisting the opposition or symmetry in which difference is usually represented. Difference can instead be interpreted as asymmetry and excess,

and thus ethical selfhood becomes proximity to the other. All this seems to open a productive engagement of your ethics with Levinasian ethics.

Yet, your attachment to a materiality that is inseparable from language, such as the voice, appears to differentiate your ethics of one's uniqueness in plurality from Levinasian ethics. Your materiality pushes toward a different way of thinking about philosophy and discourses such as law or politics and proposes an ethical way of producing symbolic systems and languages. What is the role of philosophy or symbolic production in your work? What is the political significance of this for feminism and beyond?

AC: I am enormously interested in Levinas, as I am in other representatives of a Jewish tradition that is attentive to human fragility: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, and Arendt, for instance, but also Derrida and Cixous (I have already spoken of Butler). Rereading those authors, I seek, though, to shift the emphasis to a uniqueness that is absolute difference, each time embodied in each unrepeatable existence, and to a relationality that is not just added to one's uniqueness, but rather, that constitutes each human being's uniqueness.

I intend, in fact, this relationality in material, contextual, local, and current terms. Each of us is practically in relation to those with whom—here and now, in a specific physical space and in a specific definite time—one is exposed. This relation can also be word or dialogue but is not necessarily so. Also, the sensory faculties place us in relationship, and it is not by chance that each of those faculties catches the uniqueness of the other: your face, your voice, your scent, the curve of your arm. Given that the symbolic order is a cultural product and, consequently, a projection of values and power at play, it can either catch the meaning of this corporeal and material relationality or, as has often happened, obscure it.

In this process of hiding, twisting, and offending, the philosophical tradition is, of course, always on the front line. This explains my attempt to work with a symbolic that is, instead, responsive to the meaning of bodies. It also explains why the material experience of relationality needs, now or in the future, to venture into philosophy. I do not know if all this counts for feminism in general, but I know for sure that sexual difference feminism, with which I grew up politically and intellectually, insists on the practice of relationality between women and on the centrality of bodies.

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—EB

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—AC

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Notes

- 1 On Italian feminism, see Bock and James; Boscagli; Braidotti with Butler; Hellman; Jeffries; Kemp and Bono; Parati and West; Whitford.
- 2 See Irigaray, *Sexes* and "Equal."
- 3 See de Lauretis; Schor.
- 4 Scholars of Italian feminism writing in English typically translate *affidamento* with the term *entrustment*.
- 5 Italian feminism was also influenced by the Italian Communist Party of the time and by post-Marxist theories such as Gramsci's "third way," which is based on the principle of education and on the possibility of theoretical perspectives overcoming the tensions among essentialism, liberalism, and multiculturalism.
- 6 Cavarero uses the verb "to steal" (*rubare*) in the interview.
- 7 See Derrida, "Violence."

- 8 See Derrida, *Margins and Politics*.
- 9 Ambivalence is connected to the existence of the human condition of whoness and opposed to the polyvalent approach that thinks in terms of identity and whatness. See Galimberti.
- 10 In Arendt, politics goes beyond the human condition; politics is the capacity of initiating something new through action. Action is stimulated by relations with others, but it is not dependent on material necessities. By contrast, in Cavarero, action—as voice or life story—is always confined within the limits of the human condition understood as material and unique, and politics is dependent on the materiality and singularity of existence.
- 11 The voice allows the exposure of one's uniqueness. On the theme of the voice, see Cavarero, "L'Orecchio," "Italo," "Politica," and "Ben Piu'." See also Nancy.
- 12 See Cavarero, "Hannah Arendt," "Il Locale," "Note Arendtiane," and "Ombre."
- 13 See Agamben.
- 14 If one considers ontology and essence as sacred and untouchable and thus to be avoided, one does not change ontology but only refuses it. Cavarero criticizes the critique of a poststructuralist and deconstructive position by insisting on an ontological approach linked to the human condition of material singularity and vulnerability.
- 15 The concept of vulnerability is directly related to the materiality and corporeality of one's uniqueness and to the human condition in which singularity is situated. There is in Cavarero an attention to a body that is singular, material, relational, dependent, and vulnerable.
- 16 See Cavarero with Butler.
- 17 There is a direct link between Cavarero's position and the thought of sexual difference, one that goes beyond sexual difference itself, deessentializing and ethicalizing it.
- 18 See Butler, "How Can I" and "Politics"; Costera and Prins.
- 19 The concept of postdeconstruction is taken from Critchley and Dews.
- 20 See Cavarero, *L'Interpretazione* and "L'Hegelismo"; Butler, *Psychic*.
- 21 In more recent work, Judith Butler also writes of life as vulnerable. See *Precarious Life*.
- 22 See Cavarero, "Amnesia," "Birth," "L'Emancipazione," "Il Modello," "Politicizing," "Thinking."
- 23 The system is heterosexual, but this does not imply that human beings should pair up only heterosexually. The biology of the two sexes, female and male, does not limit human sexual behavior.
- 24 There is a difference between the concept of singularity in Cavarero and Nancy. Cavarero talks of one's uniqueness and refers to the material singularity of each corporeal human being in relationality, whereas singularity in Nancy does not express a radical materiality; singularity in Nancy refers to a general body in a community of relations.
- 25 Cavarero's focus is on priorities, which means attention to human life in its singular, material, and vulnerable condition.
- 26 Cavarero's most recent book, on horrorism, has been published in Italian by Feltrinelli and is forthcoming in English from Columbia University Press.

- 27 This is an important concept in Cavarero's book on horrorism. The impact of violence must be seen in relation to the singular and corporeal human being rather than the abstract and general victim.
- 28 One's uniqueness is exposed through narration. When narrating a life story, there is always attention paid to singularity and material life. See Cavarero, "Il Corpo" and "Edipo."

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