

## Introduction to Part One: Metaphysics and Language

According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue of our time which could be our 'salvation' if we thought it through.<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Irigaray announces in the first paragraph of *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* that sexual difference is a metaphysical question on par with Heidegger's questioning of Being. Metaphysics as first philosophy and the reflection upon ultimate principles is by definition the attempt to think through to that which is most real. The claim that sexual difference is an issue of metaphysics can be read in several ways. First, it can refer to the manner in which metaphysics as a discipline or tradition has dealt with the issue of sexual difference. Second, it can mean that sexual difference itself is a matter for reflection, symbolisation, and transformation. Third, and most controversially, it can suggest that sexual difference is in some sense ultimate. Irigaray "thinks through" sexual difference and its relation to metaphysics in each of these three ways. Each approach, more or less, corresponds to what Irigaray describes as the three phases of her project: "The first a critique, you might say, of the auto-mono-centrism of the western subject; the second, how to define a second subject; and the third phase, how to define a relationship, a philosophy, an ethic, a relationship between two different subjects".<sup>2</sup>

First, Irigaray questions the metaphysical foundations of our conception of sexual difference. This involves a questioning of metaphysics' own relation to the physical. To the extent that metaphysics attempts to look beyond appearances to the essence of things, beyond becoming to being, beyond the many to the one, it has often relegated sexual difference to the realm of appearances. Metaphysics transcends sexual difference. But this "transcendence" of sexual difference is not sexually neutral. The female sex, to the extent that it is associated more closely with appearances and the processes of becoming, invariably pays the price for the transcendence of the (male) subject and is made to bear man's debt to the flesh. Thinking through sexual

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<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Luce Irigaray, in Elizabeth Hirsh and Gary A. Olsen, "'Je - Luce Irigaray': A Meeting with Luce Irigaray", *Hypatia* 10, 2. (Spring: 1995) 97.

difference in this instance means uncovering the presuppositions of the metaphysicians with regards to what is considered to be of ultimate value. This is what Irigaray achieves through her critique “of the auto-mono-centrism of the western subject”. By means of this critique, Irigaray demonstrates that sexual difference does not yet exist, since there is as yet only one sex to which innate value may be ascribed.

The second way in which Irigaray attempts to think through the issue of sexual difference is by bringing sexual difference into thought and discourse. This is, Irigaray argues, something that has not yet taken place. Sexual difference for Irigaray is not simply biological difference, but the ideal of that difference raised to the level of culture, ethics, and spirit. Sexual difference requires *more than* a singular subject as a source of value and knowledge. In order to establish woman as a second subject that is not simply derivative of the masculine, the elements of what has traditionally been conceived of as woman’s relation to immediacy need to be mediated. At this point, thinking through sexual difference becomes fraught with ambiguity. Since the broad tradition of Anglophone feminism has been founded upon the distinction between sex and gender, the attempt to bring sexual difference into culture threatens to blur the very distinction that has been foundational to a substantial portion of feminist theory.

Finally, Irigaray considers sexual difference itself to be ultimate and an issue of first philosophy to the extent that sexual difference is the most universal of differences between human beings. As an issue of alterity, thinking through sexual difference is the first step towards the transformation to a properly ethical culture. The problematic of the third phase of her work concerns the attempt to define an ethical relationship between two different subjects in which the integrity of each subject is preserved. Irigaray’s whole project can be encapsulated by the concern to establish within the Western world view, an ideal of subjectivity that is plural, or “at least two”. Such a task is at odds with the world view or metaphysics that has shaped Western subjectivity and culture according to the ideal of the “auto-mono-centric” subject.

## 1. Sex and gender

In Irigaray's work, the most contentious task remains the definition of a second subject. For Irigaray, the establishment of two different yet equal subjects means nothing less than the creation of a new socio-cultural order. To criticise the hegemony of the singular subject is a much easier task than providing an alternative. Some of Irigaray's critics would question whether Irigaray provides an alternative at all. Perhaps the principal point of contention is the apparent disregard for the sex / gender distinction in Irigaray's work. Toril Moi suggests that the lack of a clear operative distinction between sex and gender in Irigaray's work is due to the lack of distinction between "female" and "feminine" in the French language, both of which are designated by the adjective "féminin".<sup>3</sup> Moira Gatens argues that this does not mean that the distinction between the biological and social aspects of sexual difference is not made, but rather that the distinction is made by a middle term "that is *reducible* to neither anatomy nor socialization: that term is *morphology*".<sup>4</sup> Morphology is the shape or form of the body as it is represented in culture. The body constituted as meaning is the only body to which we have access.

It is not my intention to revisit the debates about essentialism and the attribution of this "heresy" to Irigaray.<sup>5</sup> It is, however, worth noting Naomi Schor's suggestion that the essentialist, "in the context of feminism, is one who instead of holding apart the poles of sex and gender maps the feminine onto femaleness".<sup>6</sup> The concern to keep sex and gender separate has made it difficult to investigate the manner in which sex and gender are mutually constituting. Tina Chanter argues that the power and usefulness of the sex/gender distinction for feminism has been such as to militate

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<sup>3</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1988) 97.

<sup>4</sup> Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy: Perspectives on Difference and Equality*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991) 115.

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Linda Alcoff, "Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory", *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 13, 3. (1988) 405-36. Naomi Schor, "Previous Engagements: The Receptions of Irigaray", and "This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray", in *Engaging With Irigaray*, eds. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor and Margaret Whitford. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). Elizabeth Grosz, "Sexual Difference and the Problem of Essentialism", in *The Essential Difference*, eds. Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994).

“against serious investigation of anything that does not immediately sit well with the most superficial renderings of it — sexual difference, for example”.<sup>7</sup> Despite acknowledgment by the more careful theorists that the terms “sex” and “gender” are “contiguous and at times inextricably intermingled”,<sup>8</sup> the distinction has in practice often been used as a warrant to separate the two terms and transpose them onto other available binary distinctions such as nature/culture and biology/history.<sup>9</sup> The complicity of the sex/gender distinction in mind/body dualism has been noted by Moira Gatens.<sup>10</sup> But this complicity remains implicit when sexual difference itself is not thought through, and the inherited metaphysical assumptions underlying our conception of sexual difference remain intact and unexamined.

The power and the attraction of the sex/gender distinction is that it lends itself to historical and political agency. But it also tends to position gender as a cultural construct in the higher realm of the spirit leaving, as Irigaray suggests, sex to an “uncultured and instinctual fate.”<sup>11</sup> The danger of this position is that it leaves the body unthought, and that only those — we — elites who have the leisure to cultivate the mind are able to escape towards the purer realm of the spirit as “auto-mono-centric” subjects. An emphasis upon sexual difference need not conflict with the concerns of race and “other” marginalised peoples.<sup>12</sup> Unless the body itself is brought into the dialectic and is able to achieve transcendence, then only the elite who are able to ignore the body — precisely because others are employed to tend to its needs — will be able to transcend it. Otherwise, the operative model of

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<sup>6</sup> Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One”, in *Engaging With Irigaray*, 60.

<sup>7</sup> Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray’s Rewriting of the Philosophers*. (New York and London: Routledge, 1995) 41.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Stoller, *Sex and Gender*, Vol. 1. (New York: Jason Aronson, 1968). Cited by Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, 40.

<sup>9</sup> Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, 25, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Moira Gatens, *Feminism and Philosophy. Perspectives on Difference and Equality*, 115.

<sup>11</sup> Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You. Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, 39.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth V. Spelman argues that:

In their eagerness to end the stereotypical association of woman and body, feminists such as de Beauvoir, Friedan, Firestone, and Daly have overlooked the significance of the connections — in theory and practice — between the derogation and oppression of women on the basis of our sexual identity and the derogation and oppression of other groups on the basis of, for example, skin color and class membership. It is as if in their eagerness to assign women a new place in the scheme of things, these feminist theorists have by implication wanted to dissociate women from other subordinate groups. One problem with this, of course, is that those other subordinate groups include women.

“Woman as Body: Ancient and Contemporary Views”, *Feminist Studies* 8. (1982) 127.

transcendence will continue to be a transcendence at the expense of the other, rather than with the other. Irigaray insists that both women and men take responsibility for their own natural identity and its cultivation. Essentialism may, as Schor suggests, consist in collapsing the poles of sex and gender, but the fear of such an essentialism may lead to another essentialism — one that is derived from the belief in Platonic and Aristotelian essences — unless our notions of gender are allowed to be contaminated by the “natural” reality of sex. Irigaray does not collapse sex and gender so much as attempt to establish a dialectic between sex and gender in which nature is able to be spiritualised and in which the flesh is made word. Irigaray seeks to bring flesh to word while reminding word of its debt to flesh.

The “natural” reality of sex is not merely natural, but is attributed meaning and value through language. Woman’s so called natural immediacy is already word, although it is not woman’s word. It is man’s word, an instrument of his mediation and ordering of the world. To leave such a word unanswered and untransformed is to accept such an ordering and the symbolic muteness that it attributes to woman. Woman’s experience may still seek out other ways of becoming language, and in the process it may provide the possibility of a different model of subjectivity. But, even if this different subjectivity is achieved, it is not yet in dialogue and its capacity for the transformation of culture and the world is severely restricted.

Irigaray’s critique of the “auto-mono-centrism” of traditional metaphysics is carried out from a perspective that considers language as a dialogical reality to be that which constitutes the truly human. One might say that Irigaray takes the Greek view of the human person as the *zōon logon echon* — which is usually translated as “rational animal” — and re-translates and reinterprets it as “the living thing that has speech”.<sup>13</sup> Although both translations are legitimate, they differ substantially as an expression of value. It is these values and the world views that they engender that will be the focus of this first part of this thesis. The Logos as rational measures the ratio of the world and ultimately assumes a commensurability that for the Logos as speech is unable to be assumed. As speech, the Logos is open ended and looks for a response.

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<sup>13</sup> This alternative translation I have taken from John Macquarie, *In Search of Humanity: A Theological and Philosophical Approach*. (New York: Crossroad, 1985) 96.

For Irigaray, it is the aspirations of the word, rather than reason, that are divine. Irigaray's ideal of language is dialogical and unlimited in its creative potential. For Irigaray, the word not only looks to dialogue, but is itself dialogical in its constitution. A living language is one that exists in a dialogical relation with the material elements that nourish it.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. *Word and flesh*

The dialectic of flesh and word finds its clearest and definitive expression in the doctrine of the incarnation. The rich Christian theological resonances of the concept of the Word / Logos have their origins in John's Gospel, but it is also a pervasive category within Greek thought. Logos was first used as a Metaphysical concept by Heraclitus to describe the divine intelligence in a manner resembling what some contemporary scientists are calling the "mind of God". The term was elaborated within Stoicism to refer to the divine rational principle immanent within creation. For Philo, the Logos was the ordering principle of creation, the divine image and the exemplar of the human soul. Neoplatonists consider the Logos to be the demiurge, the intermediary between God and the world. Biblical scholarship, however, considers any direct Greek influence on John to be unlikely.<sup>15</sup> The Logos of John's Gospel has its origins in the biblical Wisdom tradition<sup>16</sup> and the Hebrew idea of God's creative word - *dabar* - through which the elements are ordered. But Christian reflection upon the Logos / Word was not constrained by biblical precedent. Anthony Kelly observes that the concept of the Word has in Christian thought been a dialogical reality that has never been slow to explore its analogues in other systems of thought.<sup>17</sup> The Christian "Word" is not simply an intermediary between God and the world, but God active in the world. What remains unique about the Christian concept of the Word is its incarnation: the Word became flesh.

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<sup>14</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 127.

<sup>15</sup> PHEME PERKINS, "The Gospel according to John", in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond E. Brown, et al. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1989) 944.

<sup>16</sup> The biblical hymns to Wisdom personified reveal a much closer affinity with John's prologue. See Sirach 24, Proverbs 8-9, Wisdom 7.22 ff.

<sup>17</sup> ANTHONY J. KELLY, "Logos", in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph A. Komonchak, et al. (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987) 602.

The incarnation cuts against the grain of the Hellenistic duality of spirit and matter. According to Plato, the material world is transient and mutable. Only the spirit, which does not pass away, is truly real. This distinction between the true world that persists in being, and the transient world of becoming, is the foundational gesture of Hellenistic metaphysics. Under the Oriental influence that followed Alexander's conquest of Persia, this division and dualism was intensified in what became Hellenistic thought. In the popular imagination it was only a simple step to move from the idea that the material world had no real existence to one that regarded that it should have no existence. God and the world became not merely distinct but contradictory opposites.<sup>18</sup> When the traditional Greek gods descended into the human realm, they invariably violated and destroyed humanity.<sup>19</sup> The incarnation of the Christian God, however, does violence to neither humanity nor God.

The first systematic attempt to reconcile the apparent contradiction of the non-violent unity of divine Word and human flesh was Docetism, so called because it claimed that Jesus only "appeared" human. At the other end of the spectrum various subordinationist theologies arose in which Christ as less than God, but more than human, stands as an intermediary between God and the world. Both of these approaches share a common concern to safeguard the divine from the contamination of matter. Both approaches the Church rejected decisively. But the Church has not so decisively rejected the metaphysics that gave rise to these docetic and subordinationist responses. This suggests that the incarnation has yet to be fully thought through.

It is in her attempt to think through the incarnation in the light of contemporary insight that Irigaray offers her most significant challenge and contribution to Christianity. Irigaray challenges theology to think through the incarnation in the light

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<sup>18</sup> Karl Adam, *The Christ of Faith: The Christology of the Church*. (London: Burns and Oates, 1957) 28.

<sup>19</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *The Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991). Irigaray describes the endless incarnations of Dionysos in terms of the destruction of the flesh. *Ibid.*, 123, ff. As for the coming of Apollo, it "inspires terror". *Ibid.*, 143. However: "The man who did not wish to enter violently into the body of the other dies pierced with thorns, nails, lance". *Ibid.*, 184.

of sexual difference, in the light of the critique of metaphysics, and in the light of language. Irigaray argues that the incarnation needs to be thought through according to the dialectic of word and flesh. We need to inquire, therefore, as to the means by which flesh is able to become word. In chapter one I examine some of the ways in which the Christian tradition has failed to think through the incarnation. Despite the centrality of the doctrine of the incarnation, the assumption that the *imago Dei* could never be material has remained implicit. But when the Christian tradition is looked at through the lens of sexual difference this assumption becomes more explicit.