

Introduction to Part Two: The Question of the Other

In order for language and the symbolic to be thought on the basis of the principle of dialogue, the other must be able to be and to speak on its own terms. We need to be able to clarify both the manner in which the category of the other is constituted as a function of identity and subjectivity, and how the other might be able to remain other and yet be a partner in dialogue. The question of the other, Irigaray argues, has been poorly formulated in the Western tradition inasmuch as talk of the other has failed to question who or what this other represents. “This lack of definition of the alterity of the other has left all thought, the dialectical method included, in a state of paralysis, in an idealistic dream appropriate to a single subject (the male), in the illusion of a unique absolute.”¹ The other “may represent (my) absolute perfection or greatness, the Other: God, Master, *logos*; it might denote the most insignificant or the most destitute: children, the ill, the poor, the outsider; it might name the one I consider to be my equal. It is not the other we are really dealing with but the same: inferior, superior, or equal to me.”² But in each of these instances, “the other is always seen as other of the same, the other of the subject itself, rather than an/other subject, irreducible to the masculine subject and sharing equivalent dignity”.³

Irigaray argues that “even in the reversal constituted by the privilege of the many over the one . . . we just end up with a stand-in for the model of the one and the many, of the one and the same, in which a singular subject inflects one meaning rather than another”.⁴ This can be related to the observation made by Raimon Panikkar, a theorist of religious pluralism, that the hegemony of the one can also take the guise of a multiplicity of private or relative truths.⁵ For Panikkar, truth is not so much relative but relational, to the extent that for Panikkar, “error entails precisely isolation, breaking of relations, excommunication. As long as there is dialogue, struggle, discussion, even disagreement, we will have conflicting opinions, differing

¹ Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You*, 61.

² *Ibid.*

³ Luce Irigaray, “The Question of the Other”, *Yale French Studies* 87. (1995) 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

and even contradictory views, but all this appertains to the very polarity of Reality.”⁶ Irigaray’s response is similar. To get away from the all-powerful model of the one and the many Irigaray proposes that we must move to the model of the two. “My first theoretical gesture was thus to extricate the two from the one, the two from the many, the other from the same, and to do so horizontally, suspending the authority of the One.”⁷

Ardis B. Collins lists three ways in which people deal with what is other.⁸ The first is confrontation which sees the other as something to be overcome or excluded. The other challenges the legitimacy of the same such that no compromise is possible. The other remains other. It is a foreign body to be either expelled or attacked. The second way of dealing with the other is appropriation. The other is incorporated into the world of the same and made an element within the system. The other is allowed to be, but not on its own terms. The third way of dealing with the other is dialogue. Dialogue requires that each party remains true to their own principles. As soon as one party dominates, dialogue becomes appropriation. Much of what passes for dialogue simply seeks to learn from the other. But this is not yet dialogue.

Participants in a dialogue acknowledge the other as different without trying to set aside or render inoperative the other’s principles. Nor do they try to re-define the difference between them in terms of one participant’s scheme. Rather each participant recognizes that the relation is defined not by one participant or the other but by the conversation between them. In the communion of real dialogue, difference exists and operates within the unity of conversation itself.⁹

Most contemporary discussions concerning the other will eventually find their way back to Hegel. It is to the encounter with Hegel that I turn in Chapter Four. Hegel’s thought dominates the philosophical inquiry into the question of the other because it is with Hegel that the question receives its first clear articulation in the modern period. Hegel attempts to find a middle way between Kantian dualism and Spinozan

⁵ Raimon Panikkar, “Religious Pluralism: The Metaphysical Challenge”, *Interculture*, vol. 23. 3. (Montreal: 1990) 25 - 44. especially 29-34.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁷ Irigaray, “The Question of the Other”, 12.

⁸ Ardis B. Collins, “Introduction: Hegel and the Other”, in *Hegel on the Modern World*, ed. Ardis B. Collins, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) xi ff.

⁹ *Ibid.*, xii-iii.

monism through the process of recognition, in which self-consciousness is achieved through the dialectical return out of otherness. Hegel's thought is ambiguous because on the one hand he insists on the importance of maintaining the alterity of the other in recognition, while on the other hand he attempts to incorporate every alterity and contradiction into an ultimate unity. The importance of mutual recognition in his thought constitutes his dialectic as a dialogue. Meanwhile, the drive towards unity constitutes his dialectic as appropriation. The most common criticism of Hegel's dialectic is that the other is overcome in the unity of the absolute. Irigaray's analysis, however, focuses on the base of the dialectical structure which she argues remains unthought by Hegel in that he conceives of the family as an undifferentiated unit. This means that in the place where the personal and the political, the particular and the universal, converge, no genuine dialectic is able to emerge. For Irigaray, this means that the whole dialectical structure is crippled. Irigaray responds by attempting to rethink the nature of both the dialectical structure and the universal. Women need a universal by which to mediate their particularity. Only then, Irigaray argues, can the dialectical method be rehabilitated through an ethics of the couple.

In Chapter Five I explore the possibility of a relation with the other of sexual difference through an exploration of the work of Jacques Lacan. Lacan's work is useful in attempting to address Irigaray's concern regarding the lack of clarity in the definition of the other and what it represents. Lacan can help us make sense of the various functions of the "other" and what they represent through his three registers of the psychoanalytic field: the real, the *imaginary* and the symbolic. But through all Lacan's various modalities of alterity, it is only through what Lacan has called "full speech" that the other escapes the Platonic paradigm of the same. This is because "full speech" operates according to a *dialogic* that is, in effect, a logic of the "at least" two mediated by a universal third term. However, it is a two that Lacan eventually abandons due to both the fear of re-establishing a Platonic universal and the influence of George Bataille. Bataille is influential for Lacan in that his thought feeds into Lacan's own fascination with, and nostalgia for, the *real*. The result of these influences is the priority of a radical heteronomy that excludes any possibility of relation with the other as other.

In Lacan's thought, the other is ultimately reduced to a function of subjectivity. As a consequence, Lacan can see no way in which to break out of the play of immanence, and despairs of the possibility of any genuine relation with the other. Emmanuel Levinas, on the other hand, attempts to establish the priority of the other and to retrieve a sense of the other that is beyond the other of the same. Subjectivity, Levinas argues, "is not for itself; it is... initially for another".¹⁰ This is where Levinas distinguishes himself most clearly from Hegel who, although acknowledging the role of the other in the constitution of subjectivity, conceives of the other as an alter ego and, ultimately, appropriable to the same. Levinas is concerned to retrieve a notion of transcendence which beyond the "logic of the same" is truly other, revelatory and unforeseeable. He accomplishes this task by giving absolute priority to the other as manifest in the encounter with the other in the "face-to-face".¹¹ The asymmetry of this relation is guaranteed by the divine in whose trace the other stands.¹² Reciprocity is also established by the divine, but this time in the role of the third party who, in constituting the subject as other to the other, establishes justice as equality in the social relation.

In Hegel, Lacan and Levinas, the divine has a critical role in establishing a just and ethical relation with the other. It remains to be seen whether in Hegel's system the

¹⁰Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity: Conversation with Philippe Nemo*. (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985). 96.

¹¹ Levinas was fond of quoting from Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Kamarazov*, as a sort of epigraph to his thought, that "each of us is guilty (responsible) before everyone, for everyone and for everything, and I more than the others". "God and Philosophy", in *Basic Philosophical Writings*, eds. Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley, and Robert Bernasconi. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996) 144.

¹²Stéphane Mosès summarises Levinas' position in relation to the "death of God":

If it is possible to speak of God, it is not a God "who guarantees us a happy end." For Levinas, such an idea of God is no longer tenable for us: "Nietzsche's God, the God who is dead, is the one who committed suicide at Auschwitz." Yet there is another conception of religion, which Judaism has always placed to the fore: one should not await God's bestowing his good deeds on us, but on the contrary one should love him without the expectation of reciprocity: in this sense the true love of God is the love of the next. Recognizing "the God who appears in the face of the other," this is the true protest against Auschwitz. The fact that another has a meaning for me, this is "the miracle of miracles." The secret of a goodness which does not expect a reward, of a "devotion without promise."

Stéphane Mosès, "Emmanuel Levinas: Ethics as Primary Meaning", *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 20. 2 / 21.1 (1998) 23. Citing Levinas, "Antlitz und erste Gewalt: Ein Gespräch über Phänomenologie und Ethik", in *Spuren in Kunst und Gesellschaft* 20. (September 1987) 31, 34, 31-2, 34.

divine emerging from the immanence of the dialectic is able to safeguard a genuine alterity. Lacan, wary of reintroducing a new transcendentalism into his system, abandons the possibility of any such relation. Levinas, critical of the proclivity of Western thought to reduce the other to the same, looks to a relation with divine transcendence to establish a just relation with the other. Irigaray, however, argues that each of these thinkers neglects women's own relation to transcendence, and that it is only when women have their own access to the divine that our relations with other will become truly ethical.