

# The New Sexual Ethics of Luce Irigaray

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## Abstract

My paper first points out the urgency of a politically engaged ethics of sexual difference. Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (English translation of *Ethique de la Difference Sexuelle*, published 1993) provides such an ethics different from the current, patriarchal one. Through reconceptualizing the concepts of space and time, Irigaray rereads the classical philosophical texts of Plato, Aristotle, Decartes, and Spinoza, etc., from a different perspective. In the Irigarayan rethinking of limit, place, and link by images such as "place," "envelope," and the maternal-feminine, human bodies are envelopes, material limits, boundaries, which give each person his or her place.

In other words, for Irigaray, truth, ethics, and spirituality begin from difference. They begin from the recognition that every living human body is sexed, male or female, and that Divinity, enveloping mortals and at least partially enveloped in them, inhabits the copula of masculine and feminine in their interaction and difference. She rejects the collapse of gender difference into the Derridean sort of doubly sexed, predominantly male Everyperson, together with the "pseudo-neutrality which believes that it is possible to definitively annul one gender, the question of gender, of the genders."

I then assess the practicability and the applicability of the new sexual ethics she proposes. Despite Irigaray's interesting and imaginative reading, her rereading of western philosophical writings is still limited to and premised on the white and middle-class paradigm of heterosexuality. She

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does not take into consideration the possible homosexual scenario. Eager to construct a utopian world, she overlooks probable interventions from other cultures. If her "theory" of sexual difference is to be an intervention in the political-ethical space, as well as in time, she has to recognize that sexuality is bound up in sexual difference in more than one paradigmatic way. That is, she should take into consideration the existence of homosexuality, or whatever other forms of sexuality. If Irigaray continues to presuppose her readers to be familiar with the western classical philosophical texts, such assumption would hamper its reception.

Key words : Luce Irigaray, new sexual ethics.

Today, as we stand at the crossroad of the fin de siècle, we need to reinterpret and reconstruct sexual relationship. In other words, sexual difference should really be a difference between two or more terms, no longer reduced to a "relation" between one and its double, inverse or counterpart. Thus as Stephen Heath says, "[w]e need a theory of the subject politically envisioned in relation to the **actual** complexity of lives and existing situations and to the various levels and possibilities for grasping and using (or refusing) sexual difference as a concept" (emphasis mine).

Luce Irigaray's *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993, English translation of *Ethique de la Différence Sexuelle*, 1984) presents a pioneering effort to portray an ethics different from the current, patriarchal one. This paper would then assess the practicability and the applicability of the new sexual ethics she proposes.

Originally a collection of lectures delivered at Erasmus University in Rotterdam in 1982, *An Ethics* takes as its point of departure the issue of sexual difference in philosophy. Compared with *Speculum or This Sex*, it projects a more positive future ethics. Hence it provides the re-perception and reconceptualization of "space-time (*l'espace-temps*), the inhabiting of places (*l'habitation des lieux*), and of containers, or envelopes of identity (*des enveloppes de l'identité*)" (Irigaray 1993: 7). To many feminists, it seems a radical betrayal of Irigaray's earlier stance since she was long regarded an advocate of lesbianism. Yet as Elizabeth Grosz argues, "Irigaray clearly refuses to moralize about the question of whether women should engage in hetero- or homosexual relation. She believes that women, individually and/or collectively, must choose for themselves" (Grosz 1988: 41). Thus following the fashion of her earlier book *Speculum*, Irigaray reexamines the relevant western philosophical texts, and inserts her dialogues with each "master" while blurring the boundaries between their discourses and hers, in other

words reappropriates them for her own use. And the useful strategies she propagates in *This Sex* ("mimicry," for instance) are still employed in a different way.

Thus in the second chapter of *An Ethics* entitled "Sorcerer Love," Irigaray provides a reading of Plato's understanding of love in *Symposium*, actually his presentation of Socrates' report of Diotima's praise of love. She brings to our attention that Socrates finally gives the floor to a woman Diotima not present at the banquet; hence her discourse on love is recounted by Socrates. And Irigaray emphasizes its non-Hegelian dialectics that presents love as an already-here third term, an *intermediary*. Thus one needs not to give up love in order to become wise or learned. "It is love that both leads the way and is the path. A mediator par excellence . . . or the in-stance of that which stands *between*"(1993:21).

In Irigaray's reconception, "[t]he mediator [Love] is never abolished in an infallible knowledge," it is "[never] fulfilled, always becoming" (Ibid.). As a link between God and man, he is the child of Plenty and of Poverty. He concerns with the fecundity of both body and soul. "[L]ove is seen as creation potentially divine, a path between the condition of the mortal and the immortal. Love is fecund prior to any procreation. . . . Love's aim is to realize the immortal in the mortal between lovers" (Irigaray 1993:25-6). Thus, fecundity becomes the condition in its own right; heterosexual love relationship is considered beyond the demands of procreation.

Yet Irigaray also points out that Diotima's speech suffers from an internal contradiction because Socrates attributes two incompatible positions to her. The first one as recounted above regards love as an intermediary. The second regards love as a mere *means* to the end and duty of procreation, through which the lovers lose one another. No doubt Irigaray argues in favor of the first position, and takes it as a point of departure for her ethics.

Thus "Diotima's speech" as represented by Socrates is an instance of women's lack of her own space-time, and of phallogocentric mode of representation.

Irigaray's interpretation of Diotima's speech is of course controversial. However, at the end of "Sorcerer Love," she departs from her deconstruction of the speech of Plato's Socrates' Diotima to contemplate the possibility of the *sensible transcendental*. After securing an intermediary position for love, she rebukes the traditional idea of treating woman as man's "place," and consequently as a thing. Thus in her rereading of Aristotle's *Physics*, she endeavors to restore an integral place to woman. She points out that insofar as the maternal-feminine remains the place separated from "its" own place, she is deprived of her own place.

Irigaray also emphasizes the importance of "love of self" for woman. She declares that "[w]omen can no longer love or desire the other man if they can not love themselves. Women want to find themselves, discover themselves and their own identity" (Irigaray 1993:66). Yet she admits as well that the female version of the love of self is more difficult to realize. In this sense Irigaray is referring to Freud's theory of sexuality which claims that woman has to put love for her mother and for herself aside in order to begin to love men. On the other hand a man would be able, and indeed is expected, to continue to love himself. In other words, we have to recognize the difference between man and woman, and the necessity of love of self for woman. According to Irigaray, "[i]t takes at least two to love"; yet "[u]ntil the present day, in most cases, love took place in the One" (Irigaray 1993:66). Thus man and woman have "[t]o know how to separate and how to come back together. Each to go, both he and she, in quest of self, faithful to the quest, so they may greet one another, come close, make merry, or seal a covenant" (Irigaray 1993:71).

Hence Irigaray introduces "wonder" ("l' *admiration*"), the first of all the passions according to Descartes, which becomes an *opening* to the world, the Other, the other, and "the motivating force behind mobility in all its dimensions." (Irigaray 1993: 73) It happens

"When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be, that causes us to wonder and be surprised; and because that may happen before we in any way know whether this object is agreeable to us or is not so, it appears to me that wonder is the first of all the passions; and it has no opposite, because if the object which presents itself has nothing in it that surprises us, we are in no wise moved regarding it, and we consider it without passion." (Ibid.)

Wonder, to Irigaray, is indispensable to the creation of an ethics. And she claims it to be "the passion of the encounter between the most material and the most metaphysical, of their possible conception and fecundating one by the other. A third dimension. An intermediary... The forgotten ground of our condition between mortal and immortal, men and gods, creatures and creators" (Irigaray 1993:82).

Yet when the reader is confronted with a strange term "envelope" in Irigaray's ethics, it is to be remembered that in her metaphorical conceptualization, human bodies are envelopes, material limits, or boundaries, which give each person his or her place. Yet bodies should not merge or swallow each other up. Moreover, the mother's body as envelope is always ajar. Whereas men have conceived of enveloping forms as closed, constricted surroundings, Irigaray emphasizes that the openings of the woman's body are thresholds through which the other--the man, the child--enter to be enveloped, contained for a while before they leave, separating themselves

again from her. Third, human bodies are always in at least two places at once, in such a way that they are at once enveloping and enveloped.

Thus for Irigaray, both man and woman should be conceptualized as body and thought, which "provide each other with finiteness, limit, and the possibility of access to the divine through the development of envelopes" (Irigaray 1993:86). In other words, "[w]ithin sexual difference, therefore, *finiteness*, *limit*, and *progression* are needed: and this requires two bodies, two thoughts, a relation between the two and the conception of a wider perspective" (Ibid.). Thus she reconsiders the traditional split between body and thought, i. e. the split between the empirical and the transcendental. Traditionally, the feminine remains in perception, while the conception is the privilege of the masculine. Yet according to Irigaray, man and woman both have the capacity to conceive and perceive without any hierarchy between the two. She summarizes the present man-woman relations:

Faithless to God, man lays down the law for woman, imprisons her in his conception(s), or at least in accordance with his conceptions instead of covering her only for God, while awaiting God. Woman, who enveloped man before birth, until he could live outside her, finds herself encircled [i.e. enveloped] by a language, by places that she cannot conceive of, and from which she cannot escape. (Irigaray 1993:94)

In other words, woman is always engulfed by man's totalizing desire to be both man and woman. Consequently, according to Irigaray, there is only love of same among men or in the masculine, yet with no counterpart as a love of same among women and in the feminine. For the maternal-feminine has always been assimilated by the masculine before any perception of difference. Thus

If we are not to relive Antigone's fate [death], the world of women

must successfully create an ethical order and establish the conditions necessary for women's action. This world of female ethics would continue to have two vertical and horizontal dimensions:

--daughter-to-mother, mother-to-daughter;

--among women, or among "sisters."( Irigaray 1993: 108)

Such dimensions of female ethics are important because there would be no love of other without love of same. Traditionally, female genealogy has always been suppressed on behalf of the son-father relationship, and the idealization of the father and husband as patriarchs. Woman has to be wife and mother without desire. In other words, pure obligation dissociates her from her affect; she as the other is reduced to be merely a projection of the same.

Such an emphasis on "love of self among women" would dispel doubts leveled against Irigaray that she has recently abandoned her "lesbian" trend in her earlier writings and is concerned only with heterosexual love. The attempts to label her as either a lesbian, or a heterosexual feminist would prove to be futile and meaningless. For love among women should come before our variant sexual orientations.

Thus "[a]n ethical imperative would seem to require a practical and theoretical revision of the role historically allotted to woman." (Irigaray 1993:117) "A world for women" has to be created anew, which involves, first of all, a revolution in the discursive world. That is why in the last section (Section IV) of the book, Irigaray starts with a chapter entitled "Love of the Other," which at first recognizes and discusses the traces of sexual difference in language. We need first to recognize the existence of sexual difference in language because according to Irigaray, it is the body which is structured by an already spoken language, not the other way around. Hence after our recognition that the subject of utterance is already sexed and assumed as the male, not neutral, we need to "bring the maternal-feminine into lan-

guage" (Irigaray 1993: 152).

Consequently, in the penultimate chapter, Irigaray turns to a reading of Merleau-Ponty's posthumous and unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible*, a work full of phenomenological insight, to further approach the unknown other, i. e. to bring the maternal-feminine into language. Like Merleau-Ponty, Irigaray pays attention to the crossing of the tangible in the visible and of the visible in the tangible. To her, the unknown other is the invisible, the prediscursive of the flesh, alluding to the in trauterine life, or the strange domain of carnality, the feminine "flesh." Yet in language, "[t]here is no trace of any carnal idea of the other woman nor of any sublimation of the flesh with the other" (Irigaray 1993: 181, emphasis Irigaray's).

However, since "[t]he entire speaking body of the subject is in some way archaeologically structured by an already spoken language," "[t]o signify to him that this language must or can be modified amounts to asking him to modify body, his flesh" (Irigaray 1993: 176). The modification requires that we make room for another signification put together differently. In other words, "if a meaning which has not yet been heard is to come into existence," Merleau-Ponty's hypothesis of reversibility should be questioned. And because he still accords an exorbitant privilege to vision, effectively a sense that totalizes and closes the circuit of the subject's relations with the universe in all its dimensions, he reduces the tactile into the visible, and perpetuates the linguistic circularity between the subject and his speech. Hence Irigaray restores attention to the *sensible* medium, i. e., the *mucous* of the carnal which Merleau-Ponty neglects. In other words, she tries to create a spacing or interval for the freedom of questioning between the subject and the other.

In the final chapter entitled "The Fecundity of the Caress," Irigaray further elucidates the new and future-oriented condition of sexual encounter.

In this response to the ethics of alterity of another contemporary French philosopher-theologian Emmanuel Lévinas, she preempts caress, or touch, as "the most profound intimacy" (Irigaray 1993:187) in order to replace the gaze which conditions a rigid and traditional sexual relation. For "[t]ouch perceives itself but transcends the gaze" (Irigaray 1993:192), i. e. it transcends the specular economy which sees woman as lack (of the privileged phallus). Differentiating an active female lover (*amante*) from a passive loved one (*aimée*), Irigaray proposes a mutually fecund and amorous sexual exchange to replace the culturally valorized sexual hierarchy of an active male lover over a passive female loved one. Such "fecundity" has nothing to do with the traditionally valorized "birth of the son," since "[p]rior to any procreation, the lovers bestow on each other--life. Love fecundates each of them in turn, through the genesis of their immortality" (Irigaray 1993:190). In other words, Irigaray intends to bridge the traditional gap between the "carnal" and the "spiritual" love. She is dissatisfied with the current mode of the male reducing the body of the other (woman) for the purpose of his own becoming.

Written in a crisp tone, "The Fecundity of the Caress" encourages that both amorous partners take actions. And it is apt that Irigaray ends the book here. For in order to prevent it from becoming just philosophical or literary talk, it is urgent that the new sexual ethics be put into practice. And it should not be limited within a heterosexual situation. For a sexual encounter is only the beginning of ethics, or the threshold of ethics. It requires that we recognize "the unavoidable alterity of the other" even in the person of the same sex. Thus sexual difference is no longer located in a decisive biological fact.

To sum up, for Irigaray, truth, ethics, and spirituality begin from difference. They begin from the recognition that every living human body is

sexed, male or female, and that Divinity, enveloping mortals and at least partially enveloped in them, inhabits the copula of masculine and feminine in their interaction and difference. She rejects the collapse of gender difference into the Derridean sort of doubly sexed, predominantly male Everyperson, together with the "pseudo-neutrality which believes that it is possible to definitively annul one gender, the question of gender, of the genders."

But how can we apply Irigaray's new sexual ethics to our own ethical concern? Does her ethical charge illuminate every immediate practical undertaking for women's liberation? For the reader to understand her peculiar way of argumentation, perhaps Irigaray has first to describe (if not to define) her use of sexuality, difference, and ethics. For despite Irigaray's interesting and imaginative reading, it is hard for the reader to grasp the coherence among the chapters. And her rereading of western philosophical writings is still limited to and premised on the white and middle-class paradigm of heterosexuality. As Stephen Heath comments: "an ethics of sexual difference cannot separate itself and sexual difference from race and class," Irigaray's new sexual ethics needs to be extended. For instance, she has to take into consideration the possible homosexual scenario. Eager to construct a utopian world, she overlooks probable interventions from other cultures.

Could Irigaray's new sexual ethics be more concerned with actions? There are obvious gaps between chapters in *An Ethics*. For instance, the issue of time is never elaborated in any obvious and straight way. And what are the links between Plato and Aristotle when the former is talking about "love" and the latter about "place"? How can the reader construe the archaic texts without strong background knowledge in philosophy? And when there comes section III of which the two chapters are entirely Irigaray's own speculations, or theorizations, we are at a loss how to deal with them. Indeed, to understand Irigaray is a demanding task. In order to comprehend her reco-

ceptualization of space and time, a guided reading is needed for the classical philosophical texts of Plato, Aristotle, Decartes, and Spinoza, etc., from a different perspective.

If Irigaray's "theory" of sexual difference is to be an intervention in the present political-ethical space, as well as in time, we have to recognize that sexuality is bound up in sexual difference in more than one paradigmatic way. That is, we should take into consideration the existence of homosexuality, or whatever other forms of sexuality. I would suggest that if Irigaray continues to presuppose her readers to be familiar with the western classical philosophical texts, such assumption would hamper its reception.

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# 伊希迦黑的新兩性倫理

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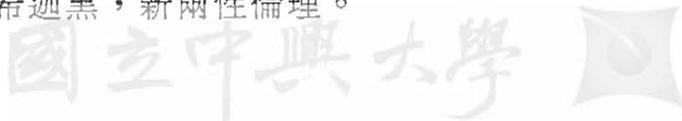
## 摘 要

本論文首先點出政治自覺之性別差異倫理的迫切性。伊希迦黑所著《性別差異的倫理》（英譯本出版於1993年）就提出了這樣一個迥異於現行的父權倫理。藉由重新概念化時空觀念，伊氏從另一個觀點重讀了柏拉圖、亞理斯多德、笛卡兒、史賓諾沙等人的哲學經典。在伊氏對界限、地域以及聯結的重新思考中，人體成了封套、物質界限、或是疆域，賦與每個人她或他的地位。

換言之，對伊氏而言，真理、倫理，以及靈性皆需從差異出發。他們的出發點是一共識，亦即每個人體皆有性別差異，可區分男女。她拒絕推翻性別差異，接納德希達式的雙性（實偏男性）。

之後筆者評估伊氏新兩性倫理的實際可行性。雖然伊氏對哲學經典的重讀有趣又充滿想像力，卻仍然受限於白人中產階級所尊奉的異性戀傾向，並未考慮同性戀的可能性。由於急於想要建構一個烏托邦社會，她也忽略了其它文化可能有的干擾。假設她的性別差異理論真想在政治倫理的地盤攻城略地，她必須承認同性戀的存在。同時，假設她繼續假定她的讀者對西方的哲學經典非常熟悉的話，這樣的假定亦將阻擋了它的流傳度。

關鍵詞：伊希迦黑，新兩性倫理。



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