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**SEXUAL DIFFERENCE AS A QUESTION OF ETHICS:  
ALTERITIES OF THE FLESH IN IRIGARAY  
AND MERLEAU-PONTY**

Although Luce Irigaray's *An Ethic of Sexual Difference*\* is a feminist reading of selected philosophical works, we should perhaps not be so clear about what that means. Feminist in an unfamiliar sense, her text is not primarily a criticism of how various philosophers have represented women, and it is not a philosophy offered from a feminist or a feminine point of view. It is, I would suggest, a complex engagement with philosophical texts, one which in the first instance appears to accept the terms of the texts, as evidenced by the lengthy and elaborated citations from those texts. In this sense, then, one might at first glance conclude that by virtue of these profuse citations, Irigaray seeks to make herself accountable to the texts that she reads; indeed, one might even conclude that there is a certain self-subordination in the way that she foregrounds again and again passages from the male philosophers that she reads.

But the way in which she cites from these texts suggests a different kind of relation, neither a simple subordination, nor a simple practice of mockery or derision. Indeed, I want to suggest that in her very practice of citation, Irigaray enacts an ambivalent relation to the power attributed to these texts, a power that she at once attributes to them, but also seeks to undo. What is perhaps most paradoxical and enigmatic about her textual entanglement with these texts, and with Merleau-Ponty's in particular, is that it enacts and allegorizes the kind of entanglement – or intertwining – that characterizes relations of flesh. In this sense, then, the text enacts the theory of flesh that it also interrogates, installing itself in a hermeneutic circularity from which it cannot break free and in whose hold it appears quite willfully to stay.

Irigaray's reading of Merleau-Ponty's "The Intertwining" is in many ways quite dismissive and contemptuous, attributing to him an arrested development, a maternal fixation, even an intrauterine fantasy. And yet, her dependency on his theorization of tactile, visual, and linguistic relations seems absolute. There is no thinking outside his terms and, hence, there is always an attempt to think against his terms. This involves her in a spectacular double-bind: thinking against him within his terms, attempting, that is, to exploit the terms that she also seeks to turn against him in an effort to open the space of sexual difference that she believes his text seeks to erase.

Consider the implication of her strategy of writing for both the implicit relations of power that hold between the two writers and the theory of the flesh that appears to be both thematized and enacted in the intertwined reading

that Irigaray performs. First, her presumption is that his discourse sets the terms by which the critique of that discourse becomes possible; second, the terms of his work also have, in her view, the power to constitute the intelligibility of bodies and the flesh; third, that constitutive power is based in a refusal of the feminine, in her terms, or an erasure and covering over of sexual difference; fourth, that Irigaray's miming and citing of his work are the exclusive ways in which his terms are exposed to failure, which means, fifth, that the power to counter his work is derived from the very work that is countered.

Whereas it might be plausible to conclude from the above that Irigaray, in countering the presumed power of Merleau-Ponty's essay, can only and always *confirm* and *enhance* that power, is it not possible to read that doubled reflection of his work in hers in a different way? Whereas one might be tempted to conclude that for Irigaray the feminine is radically outside of dominant philosophical discourse and, hence, Merleau-Ponty's reflection on the flesh, or that, perhaps equivalently, power is exclusively located in that dominant discourse, the textual engagement that characterizes her reading suggests a more conflicted and ambivalent deployment of power, radically implicated in what it opposes, opposing the Other through a strange participation and consumption of his terms. Distinct from a view in which the feminine is radically other and phallogocentrism, radically itself, appropriating sexual difference, Irigaray textually enacts a kind of entanglement that suggests that the "outside" to phallogocentrism is to be found "within" its own terms, that the feminine is insinuated into the terms of phallogocentrism, rendering *equivocal* the question, *whose voice is it, masculine or feminine?* Significantly, then, the relation of power and the relation of the flesh, understood as allegorized by the textual relations that Irigaray draws from his text to hers, is not one of *opposition*, rallying the feminine against the masculine, but of exposing and producing a mutually constitutive relation. On the one hand, this means that the masculine is not being able to "be" without the "Other," that the repudiation of the feminine from phallogocentrism turns out to be the exclusion without which no phallogocentrism can survive, that is, the negative condition of possibility for the masculine. Conversely, Irigaray's miming of Merleau-Ponty's prose, her insinuation into his terms, not only proves the vulnerability of his terms to what they exclude, but exposes that vulnerability to the excluded as a constitutive vulnerability. His text is disclosed as having her text intertwined within his terms, at which point his text is centered outside itself, implicated in what it excludes, and her text is nothing without his, radically dependent upon that which it refuses.

In fact, I would suggest, in citing the texts as she does, she quite literally dislocates the philosophical tradition by relocating it within her own text; she does not refuse this tradition, but incorporates it, in some odd way, making it her own. But what, we might ask, happens to these texts by virtue of this strategy of citational appropriation? Do they remain the same, and if not,

what is Irigaray telling us, what is she exemplifying, about how it is that feminist philosophy should proceed in relation to the masculinism of the canon from which it is spawned? Can it be that her reading exemplifies an appropriation and refusal at once?

Before I propose what her answer to this question might be, I would like to underscore that one purpose which unifies this text, which recurs throughout these lectures, is the elaboration of what Irigaray will call the ethical relation between the sexes. The ethical relation between the sexes, she will argue, cannot be understood as an example of ethical relations in general; the generalized or universal account of ethical relations presumes that men and women encounter each other as subjects who are symmetrically positioned within language. This language, she argues, is not, however, neutral or indifferent to the question of sex; it is masculinist, not in the sense that it represents the contingent interests of men, but in the sense that it consistently disavows the identification of the universal with the masculine that it nevertheless performs. If language asserts its universality, then every specific disposition of language is subsumed under this postulated universality. Language becomes that which not only unifies all specific dispositions, but, in her view, refuses to consider the salient distinction between the sexes as a difference that establishes different kinds of languages, a difference which contests the very notion of universality or, rather, reveals that what has passed as universality is a tacit or unmarked masculinity. We might want to learn more about what Irigaray thinks is the characteristic mark of a masculinist use of language, and what, a feminine, but there are no “empirical languages” which correspond to the sexes; oddly, it seems, it is only this very pretension to be universal which characterizes the masculine, and it is this very contestation of the universal which characterizes the feminine. In other words, it is not that certain masculine values yet to be named are elevated to the status of the universal, but rather that whatever those values might be, their very elevation to the status of the universal, this tendency to universalization itself, is what constitutes the characteristically masculine. Conversely, this rupture or unassimilable difference which calls into question this universalizing movement is what constitutes the feminine in language; it exists, as it were, as a rupturing of the universal or what might be understood as a protest within the universal, the internal dissent of the feminine.

What precisely is meant by “the universal” in the above characterization? And what is its relation to the ethical relation between the sexes that she imagines and promotes, and which she understands to be central to the project of feminist philosophy? Let us remember that for Irigaray, to universalize a norm, or to substitute oneself for another, would be examples of an ethical procedure which presumes the symmetrical positioning of men and women within language. Indeed, if women and men were symmetrically or reciprocally positioned within language, then ethical reflection might well consist in imagining oneself in the place of the other and deriving a set of rules or practices on the basis of that imagined and imaginable substitution.

But in the case that men and women are positioned *asymmetrically*, the act by which a man substitutes himself for a woman in the effort to achieve an imagined equality becomes an act by which a man extrapolates his own experience at the expense of that very woman. In this scenario, for Irigaray, the act by which a man substitutes himself for a woman becomes an act of appropriation and erasure; the ethical procedure of substitution thus reduces paradoxically to an act of domination. On the other hand, if from a subordinate position within language, a woman substitutes herself for a man, she imagines herself into a dominant position, and sacrifices her sense of difference from the norm; in such a case, the act of substitution becomes an act of self-erasure or self-sacrifice.

One might well conclude that for Irigaray, given her view of the asymmetrical position of men and women in language, there can be no ethical relation. But here is where she offers a way of thinking about the ethical relation which marks an original contribution to ethical thinking, one which takes sexual difference as its point of departure. In her view, the ethical relation cannot be one of substitutability or reversibility. On the contrary, the ethical relation might be said to emerge between the sexes precisely at the moment in which a certain incommensurability between these two positions is recognized. I am not the same as the Other: I cannot use myself as the model by which to apprehend the Other: the Other is in a fundamental sense beyond me and in this sense the Other represents the limiting condition of myself. And further, this Other, who is not me, nevertheless defines me essentially by representing precisely what I cannot assimilate to myself, to what is already familiar to me.

What Irigaray will term masculinist will be this effort to return all Otherness to the self, to make sense of the Other only as a reflection of myself. This is what she will call the closed circuit of the subject, a relation to alterity which turns out to be no more than a reduction of alterity to the self. Importantly, it is not only men whose relations are characterized by this closed circuit, this foreclosure of alterity; but it will be called "masculinist" when and where it takes place. Paradoxically, and we shall see, consequentially, Irigaray will herself manifest the ability to identify with this position, to substitute herself for the masculinist position in which alterity is consistently refused, and she will mime that universal voice in which every enunciatory position within language is presumed to be equivalent, exchangeable, reversible. We might read the profusion of citations in her text as sympathetic efforts to put herself in the place of the Other, where the Other this time is a masculinist subject who seeks and finds in all alterity only himself. Oddly, in miming the masculinist texts of philosophy, *she puts herself in the place of the masculine*, and thereby performs a kind of substitution, one which she appears to criticize when it is performed by men. Is her substitution different from the one which she criticizes?

Although readers who know Irigaray from *Speculum of the Other Woman* might expect that she will now turn and destroy this position, this

masculinism, with a cutting edge, indeed, with a threatened castration, I would like to suggest that the exchange that she performs with the masculinist texts of philosophy in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* is more ambivalent and less cutting than in that earlier text. Whereas the earlier text tended to underscore the way in which the feminine was always and relentlessly both excluded and presupposed in the theoretical constructions of both Plato and Freud, this later text does that, but also does something more. Here she seems, paradoxically, to acknowledge her debt to those philosophical texts she reads, and to engage them in a critical dialogue in which the very terms she uses to engage critically these texts are borrowed from these texts, or one might say, borrowed against them. She is, as it were, locked in dialogue with these texts. The model for understanding this dialogic relation will not be one which presupposes simple equality and substitutability, nor will it be one which presupposes radical opposition. For let us remember that Luce Irigaray is a philosopher and is, thus, part of the enterprise she will subject to criticism, but she is also a feminist and, according to her view, that means that she represents precisely that which has been excluded from philosophical discourse and its presumptions of universality.

Irigaray's reads the final chapter of Merleau-Ponty's posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible*, called "The Intertwining – the Chiasm" as an example of this monologic masculinism, even as it is a text from which she also clearly draws the philosophical means to offer an alternative way of understanding the ethical relation. Merleau-Ponty's text is one in which he considers how the philosophical effort to understand knowledge on the model of vision has underestimated the importance of tactility. Indeed, he will suggest that seeing might be understood as a kind of touching, and he also suggests that in the touch, we might be said to be "perceiving", and further, that touching or seeing something has a reflexive dimension, and that the realm of the visible and the realm of the tactile imply each other logically, and overlap with each other, ontologically. His writing is filled with purposefully mixed metaphors in order to suggest that language, vision, and touch intertwine with each other and that aesthetic experience may be the place in which to investigate that synaesthetic dimension of human knowledge. In the place of an epistemological model in which a knowing subject confronts a countervailing world, Merleau-Ponty calls into question that division between subject and world that conditions the questions characteristic of the epistemological enterprise. He seeks to understand what, if anything, brings the subject and its object into relation such that the epistemological question might first be posed.

In an argument which can be seen to extend Heidegger's effort in *Being and Time* to establish the priority of ontology to epistemology, Merleau-Ponty seeks to return to a relation that binds subject and object prior to their division, prior to their formation as oppositional and distinct terms. Heidegger insisted that every interrogative relation that we take toward an object presupposes that we are already in relation to that object, that we would not

know what to ask about a given object if we were not already in a relation of affinity or knowingness about the object. In the "Introduction" to *Being and Time*, Heidegger considers not only what it might mean to pose the question of the meaning of Being, but what might be derived, more generally, from an explanation of "what belongs to any question whatsoever"(24). He prefigures for us what will come to be called the hermeneutic circle when he writes, "all inquiry about something is somehow a questioning of something... so, in addition to what is asked about, an inquiry has that which is interrogated (ein Befragtes)... [and] what is asked about is determined and conceptualized. Furthermore, in what is asked about there lies also *that which is to be found out by the asking* (das Erfragte)... Inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way."(24-25)

In this move whereby the question, the interrogative, is referred back to an already established, and already available set of ontological interrelations, Heidegger seeks to show that the questions we pose as a subject of an object presuppose are themselves a sign that we have lost or forgotten some prior ontological connection to the object which now appears to us as foreign and unknown. In Merleau-Ponty, a similar move takes place, but unlike the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, Merleau-Ponty will argue in *The Visible and the Invisible* that the web of relations which condition every interrogative, and which every interrogative might be said to forget or conceal, is a *linguistic* web; sometimes he will use the term "mesh" or "weave" or even "interconnective tissue", but the implication is clear that it is a *binding* set of relations, in which all apparent differences are superseded by the totality of language itself. Here one might say that Merleau-Ponty has transposed the problematic introduced by Heidegger as one in which ontology is shown to precede epistemology to the framework of structuralist linguistics in which language is said to precede epistemology in a restricted sense. By "epistemology" here, we mean only a set of questions which seek to know something which is not yet properly or adequately known. Like Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty's point is to try to overcome a subject-object distinction that he understands to be presupposed and reenforced by the epistemological tradition. The subject-object distinction presupposed and instituted through this tradition presupposes that the subject is ontologically distinct from its object, but it does not ask whether there might be some common substrate or genesis from which both subject and object emerge, and which join them in some original way.

Irigaray will enter this discussion with the following question: if every question presupposes a *totality* of already established relations, ones which are temporarily forgotten or concealed in the asking about something apparently unknown, what place is left for the asking of a question about what is not already known? The presumption of an already established totality of relations, whether they are conceived as ontological or linguistic, is symptomatic, in her view, of the self-circuit of the subject according to which

every moment of alterity turns out to be presupposed by the subject, to be always already this subject and, hence, not to constitute a moment of alterity at all. Indeed, the much touted “always already” which in phenomenology designates the pre-judicative realm of taken-for-granted meanings would be paradigmatic of this kind of masculinist monologism in which alterity and the not yet known, and not yet knowable, are refused.

What, Irigaray effectively asks, do we make of *the never yet known*, the open future, the one that cannot be assimilated to a knowledge that is always and already presupposed? For Irigaray, the ethical relation will be represented by the question as an act of speech, the open question, the one which does not claim to know in advance the one to whom it is addressed, but seeks to know who that addressee is for the first time in the articulation of the question itself. In her words, the ethical relation consists in the question: “Who are you?” This is the question that seeks to cross the difference that divides masculine from feminine, but not to cross that difference through a substitution which presupposes the equivalence and interchangeability of masculine and feminine. “Who are you?” is the paradigmatic ethical question, for her, in the sense that it seeks to cross the divide of sexual difference, to know what is different, but to know it in such a way that what is different is not, through being known, assimilated or reduced to the one who seeks to know.

And yet, this “ethical” dimension appears in some conflict with the textual strategy elucidated at the beginning of this essay. In the “ethical” view, sexual difference is precisely an unfathomable and irretraversable difference, constitutive of masculine and feminine in relation to one another. Their relation is considered on the model of the encounter, and the ethical problem they face is how best to approach, without assimilating, the Other? In her view, there is no masculine without a prior implication in the feminine, and there is no feminine without a prior implication in the terms of the masculine; each term admits to its own internal impossibility through its relation to the Other. The relation is not primarily that of an *encounter*, but, rather, of a constitutive intertwinement, a differentiation in proximity.

A few difficulties emerge in relation to this way of circumscribing the ethical relation. It makes sense to ask whether Irigaray’s focus on the ethical deflects her critical attention from the prior and constitutive relations of power by which ethical subjects and their encounters are produced. Open to challenge is the presumption that the question of alterity as it arises for ethics can be fully identified with the question of sexual difference. Clearly, problematic dimensions of alterity take a number of forms, and sexual difference – though distinct in some ways – is not the primary difference from which all other kinds of social differences are derivable. Regarded as an ethical question, the relation of sexual difference presumes that it is only the masculine and the feminine who come into an ethical encounter with the Other. Would one, within this vocabulary, be able to account for an ethical relation, an ethical question, between those of the same sex? Can there even be a relation of fundamental alterity between those of the same sex? I would

of course answer yes, but I think that the peculiar nexus of psychoanalysis and structuralism within which Irigaray operates would be compelled to figure relations among women and among men as either overly identificatory or narcissistic and, in that sense, not yet of the order of the ethical. Must there be a difference between the sexes in order for there to be true alterity? Similarly, there are other sorts of social difference that distinguish interlocutors in language, and why is it that these social differences are considered somehow as less fundamental to the articulation of alterity in general, and to the scene of the ethical in particular? Finally, is it not the case that Irigaray portrays the masculine, and Merleau-Ponty in particular, in ways that do not do justice to the ethical dimension of his own philosophical explorations in *The Visible and the Invisible*?

Rather than take these questions on their own terms, I suggest that we consider how the textual production of intertwinement calls into question the ethical framework that Irigaray defends. For what emerges between Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty is not “difference” *per se*, but a founding implication in the Other, a primary complicity with the Other without which no subject, no author, can emerge. And this situation poses an even more difficult “ethical” question than the one that Irigaray articulates: how to treat the Other well when the Other is never fully Other, when one’s own separateness is a function of one’s dependency on the Other, when the difference between the Other and myself is, from the start, equivocal.

Taking this last question first, let us consider Merleau-Ponty’s text in relation to Irigaray’s “reading” and consider what in that text might resist the interpretation that she brings to it. Merleau-Ponty will be accused by Irigaray of a “labyrinthine solipsism”. In support of this characterization, she calls attention to the following kind of argument that he makes. In relation to the phenomenological description of touch, he argues that one cannot touch without in some sense being touched by what one touches, and one cannot see without entering into a field of visibility in which the seer is also potentially, if not actually, seen. In both cases, there persists a relation of reversibility between what might be called the subject and object poles of experience. But there is, in addition to these two reversible relations, the one of touch, and the one of sight, a criss-crossing of the two reversible relations. Consider the following citation from “The Intertwining – The Chiasm” in *The Visible and the Invisible*:

It is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body, [to] which is attested in particular when the body sees itself, touches itself seeing and touching the things, such that, simultaneously, *as* tangible it descends among them, *as* touching it dominates them all and draws this relationship and even this double relationship from itself, by dehiscence or fission of its own mass. (146)

Merleau-Ponty is describing something like the unfolding and differentiation of the lived world of flesh, where flesh is understood not only

as both agent and object of touch, but also as the ground or condition of seeing and the seen. In an important sense, this term “flesh” is what is being described by both the reversibility of touch and the reversibility of seeing, and it is what conditions, and what is articulated by, both reversibilities.

But what is this “flesh” and can it be said to be other than the articulations, differentiations, and reversibilities by which it is described? Is it the same as this set of reversible relations, or is it that with which Merleau-Ponty cannot finally come to terms? She will argue that in Merleau-Ponty’s account, there is nothing outside the selfsame touching and touched body, seeing and seen, and that this closure attributed to the reversible relation constitutes its solipsism. Although this “flesh of the world” of “flesh of things” appears to designate some domain which encompasses and exceeds either pole of that reversible relation, the term remains obscure, and, for Irigaray, the term works as a sign of that closure and, hence, in the service of a solipsism. For Irigaray, this is a central problem with Merleau-Ponty. She writes of such passages that “the subtlety of what is said of the visible and its relation to the flesh does not rule out the solipsistic character of this touch(ing) between the world and the subject, of this touch(ing) of the visible and the seer in the subject itself.”(157)

Although his formulation is meant to overcome the isolation of seeing and touching subject, and to argue that that subject, through its sight and touch, is implicated in and by the very world it explores, for Irigaray the effect of his formulation is that the subject himself becomes extolled as that to which all worldly relations return. And yet, is her assessment fair? Consider that the phenomenological counter to Cartesianism that Merleau-Ponty articulates is, in part, a refusal of that perceptual distance postulated between the reflecting subject and the world of objects. In breaking apart this distinction, the perceiving “I” acquires a flesh that implicates him or her in a world of flesh. Hence, for Merleau-Ponty, the embodied status of the “I” is precisely that which implicates the “I” in a fleshly world outside of itself, that is, in a world in which the “I” is no longer its own center or ground. Indeed, it is only upon the condition of this philosophical move toward a more embodied “I” that Irigaray’s intervention becomes possible. Underscoring the dependency of that embodied “I” on a body prior to itself, she identifies the maternal body as the literal condition of possibility for the epistemic relation that holds between the embodied “I” and its embodied objects. Although Irigaray reads this primary and constituting “world of flesh” as a diffusion of the maternal, a deflection or refusal of the maternal, what is to secure the primacy of the maternal? But why reduce the world of flesh, the world of sensuously related significations, to the maternal body? Is that not an “appropriation” and “reduction” of a complex set of constituting interrelations that raises the counter-question of whether Irigaray seeks to have “the maternal body” stand in for that more complex field? If one is “implicated” in the world that one sees, that does not mean that the world that one sees is reducible to oneself. It may mean quite the opposite, namely, that the I who sees is in some sense abandoned to the visible world, decentered in that world; that the “I” who

touches is in some sense lost to the tactile world, never to regain itself completely; that the "I" who writes is possessed by a language whose meanings and effects are not originated in oneself.

Although Irigaray might be read as having "lost" herself to Merleau-Ponty's text in a similar way, it remains curious that the "ethical" model she invokes for understanding this relation appears to obscure this relation of primary implicatedness and the consequently equivocal status of sexual identity. The masculinism of this subject is never put into question by Irigaray. She will claim that it is the mark of the masculine to assimilate all alterity to the preexisting subject. But what makes this refusal of alterity, a refusal which takes the form of incorporating the Other as the same, a specifically masculine or masculinist enterprise? Here is where Irigaray's philosophical argument rests on a use of psychoanalytic theory in which the masculine is understood to be defined in a less than fully differentiated relationship to a maternal origin. The mother becomes for him the site of a narcissistic reflection of himself, and she is thus eclipsed as a site of alterity, and reduced to the occasion for a narcissistic mirroring.

Irigaray accepts the psychoanalytic account which argues that the individuation of the masculine subject takes place through a repudiation of his maternal origins, a repudiation both of the *in utero* bodily connection to the mother as well as the vital dependency on the mother in infancy. This break with the maternal is thus the condition of his becoming a masculine subject, and the condition of his narcissism, which is, as it were, an appreciation of himself as a separated and bounded ego. In what is perhaps the least persuasive of Irigaray's arguments, she suggests that Merleau-Ponty not only repudiates this "connection" with the maternal in classic masculine fashion, but that he then reappropriates this "connection" for his own solipsistic theory of the flesh, which he describes as the "medium" or "connective tissue". In a sense, she reads his theory of the flesh as a philosophical transposition of the infant's connection with the maternal body, a repudiation of that connection and a return of the repudiated within his own philosophical text. She reads him as taking this "connective tissue" as what he, the masculine subject, occasions, and which, far from connecting him with anything, returns him to a solipsistic circle of his own making. It is then on the basis of this argument that she concludes that for Merleau-Ponty, there is no connection with what is not the subject, for what is different, with the feminine and, hence, with alterity in general.

But if one refuses to accept her account of the formation of masculine narcissism through the repudiation of the maternal, her argument becomes more difficult to support. If one refuses as well the thesis that sexual difference is the key or decisive index by which relations of alterity are established and known and, further, refuses to accept the easy transposition of a psychoanalytic account of masculine narcissism into a philosophical account of solipsism, then her position becomes increasingly untenable.

But let us consider what is, after all, most important about her contribution to the thinking of the ethical relation here, namely, the claim that a relation of

substitutability between masculine and feminine constitutes a kind of appropriation and erasure, and the call for some other kind of ethical relation, interrogative in structure and tone, which marks an open relation to an Other who is not yet known. Irigaray considers the complex interrelations in Merleau-Ponty's account of language, sight, and touch to amount to a masculine solipsism. We will follow her reading here, but not merely to show what she means and how she comes to support what she means. For it will be shown, I hope, that Irigaray is more implicated in the text she criticizes than she herself concedes, and that, considered rhetorically, her text avows the availability of Merleau-Ponty's text to a feminist appropriation and, hence, stands in an unintended dialogic relation to Irigaray, even as she accuses that text of being closed to dialogue.

The argument she makes against Merleau-Ponty proceeds in the following way: to claim, as he does, that the relation of touch or sight is reversible is to claim that the one who touches, can be touched, the one who sees, can be seen, and that the subject and object poles of these experiences are bound together by a connective "flesh of things". This reversibility presupposes the substitutability of the subject pole with the object pole, and this substitutability, she argues, establishes the *identity* of both touched and touched, seer and seen. ["The reversibility of the *world* and *I* suggests," she writes, "some repetition of a prenatal sojourn where the universe and I form a closed economy..."(173)]

But remember that there is a relationship between these two reversible relations, between touch and sight, and that relationship is not fully reversible. Of this relation, she reiterates Merleau-Ponty's position with some measure of apparent sympathy:

Of course there is a relation of the visible and the tangible. Is the doubling redoubled and criss-crossed? This is less certain. The look cannot take up the tangible. Thus I never see that *in which* I touch or am touched. What is at play in the caress does not see itself. The in-between, the middle, the *medium* of the caress does not see itself. In the same way and differently, I do not see what allows me to see...this is perhaps, as far as I am concerned, what Merleau-Ponty calls the site of flesh in which things bathe? (162-63)

Hence, there is something which conditions the reversibility of these relations, which is itself not reversible, an enabling condition that persists as a kind of substratum, indeed, a *hypokeimenon*, without which no visibility or tactility would exist. And it seems to be the self-same substratum which conditions the reversibility of tactile relations and visible ones, and which, in neither case, can be fully touched or fully seen.

Of what is this substratum composed? Irigaray will, in a predictably psychoanalytic way, read this flesh out of which all sensate experience is composed as the flesh of the maternal, and as in her reading of the *Timaeus*, she will suggest that this unnameable substrate is the repudiated maternal

itself. In this sense, the feminine might be said to condition the masculine solipsism, understood as the closed circuit of those reversible relations, but what conditions them is what must be excluded from them, their defining limit, their constitutive outside. Excluded, unnameable, but a necessary precondition, the feminine resides metaphysically as the diffuse “flesh of things.” But here as before, it seems crucial to ask whether it is appropriate to “correct” this diffusion, and to reassert the primacy of the maternal, or to question instead this putative primacy. After all, the maternal body is situated in relations of alterity without which it could not exist, and these relations, strictly speaking, precede and condition the maternal body (indeed, often, such relations, understood as norms, restrict certain bodies from becoming “maternal” bodies altogether). The “flesh of the world” in its very generality refuses the synecdochal collapse by which all sensuousness becomes reduced to the maternal as the sign of its origin. Why does the maternal figure that origination, when the maternal itself must be produced from a larger world of sensuous relations? To what extent does Merleau-Ponty’s insistence on this prior world of flesh offer a way to disjoin the feminine from the controlling figuration of the maternal, and offer bodies a way to signify outside the binary trap of mothers and men?

Significantly, for Merleau-Ponty, this fleshly substrate of things cannot be named (and cannot be reduced to any of the names by which it is approached, thus signifying the limits of the indexical function of the name). For Merleau-Ponty, language enters this scene as precisely what can trace and encode the peregrinations of reversible relations, trace and encode substitutions, but which cannot itself reveal that conditioning “flesh” which constitutes the medium in which these relations occur, a medium which would include the flesh of language itself. Indeed, language is secondary to this ontological notion of the “flesh” and Merleau-Ponty will describe it as the second life of this flesh. At the same time he will claim that if we were to give a full account of the body and its senses, we would see that “all the possibilities of language are given in it.”(155)

If language then emerges from and directly reflects these prior movements of bodily life, then it would seem that language is as subject to the charge of solipsism as were these prior relations. And part of what he writes seems to support this point. In a lyrical and unfinished set of notes that constitute the closing paragraphs of his essay, he recalls the circularity of the interrogative in Heidegger: “... in opening the horizon of the nameable and the sayable... speech acknowledge(s) that it has its place in that horizon... with one sole gesture [the speaker] closes the circuit of his relation to himself and that of his relations to the others...” (154)

It is the closing of this circuit which Irigaray will read as a sign of a pervasive solipsism. As a caricature of his position, she writes: “Speech is not used to communicate, to encounter, but to talk to oneself, to duplicate and reduplicate oneself, to surround, even to inter oneself.” (178) This is speech that closes off the addressee, which is not properly allocutory, or which can only figure the

addressee on the model of the speaker himself. This presumption of the substitutability of the speaker and the addressed is, for Irigaray, the denial of sexual difference, which she will argue always sets a limit to relations of linguistic substitutability. Of Merleau-Ponty's final remarks, she writes,

No new speech is possible here... A Word that no longer has an *open* future and consequently shuts out certain enunciatory practices: cries for help, announcements, demands, expressions of gratitude, prophecy, poetry... Necessarily, an other is present in these practices, but not that allocutor for whom I can substitute myself, whom I can anticipate. The circuit is open. Meaning does not function like the circularity of something given and received. It is still in the process of making itself. (178)

This language, then, is not yet ethical, for it cannot yet pose a question the answer to which it does not already possess:

In a certain way, this subject never enters the world. He never emerges from an osmosis that allows him to say to the Other, "Who art Thou?" But also, "Who am I?" ... The phenomenology of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty attempts is without question(s). (183)

But is this right? Does her critique not rest on the faulty presumption that to be implicated in the Other, or in the world that one seeks to know, is to have that Other and that world be nothing more than a narcissistic reflection of oneself? Does Irigaray's own textual implication in Merleau-Ponty's text not refute the very thesis that she explicitly defends? For she finds herself "implicated" there but she is not, for that reason, the source or origin of that text; it is, rather, the site of her expropriation. One might well conclude that for Merleau-Ponty as well, to be implicated in the world of flesh of which he is a part is to realize precisely that he cannot disavow such a world without disavowing himself, that he is abandoned to a world that is not his to own. Similarly, it is not the "Other" is so fundamentally and ontological foreign that the ethical relation must be one of sanctimonious apprehension from a distance. On the contrary, if he "is" the Other, without the Other being reducible to him, then he meets the Other not in an encounter with the outside, but with a discovery of his own internal impossibility, of the Other who constitutes him internally. To have one's being implicated in the Other is thus to be intertwined from the start, but not for that reason to be reducible to – or exchangeable with – one another. Moreover, to be implicated elsewhere from the start suggests that the subject, as *flesh*, is primarily an intersubjective being, finding itself as Other, finding its primary sociality in a set of relations that are never fully recoverable or traceable. This view stands in stark contrast both to the Freudian conception of the "ego" understood as the site of a primary narcissism and to the various forms of atomistic individualism derived from Cartesian and liberal political traditions. Indeed, the flesh that is understood to reflect the narcissism of the subject establishes the limits of that narcissism in a strong way.

Finally, let me draw attention to one dimension of his philosophical writing which seems to me to resist closure, and to resist the circularity of solipsism that she describes. Let us return to the relation between touch and sight. Is there something which underlies or connects these relations? And can it be described at all? He writes, “my left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but I never reach coincidence; the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization.” “This incessant escaping” – as he calls it – “is not a failure..it is not an ontological void... it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world.”(148) But here it seems the phenomenological experience of not being able to close this circuit, of being as it were in a perpetual relationship of non-coincidence with oneself, is asserted only then to be retracted through the postulation of a body and world which overcomes all such appearances of non-coincidence. Can Merleau-Ponty’s own description hold? Or does he give signs that he cannot describe what holds these relations together, that the criss-crossing between touch and sight and language is not always reducible to a continuous and self-referential body?

Remember that he describes this “chassé-crossé” as a chiasm, and that the rhetorical figure of the chiasm is such that two different relations are asserted which are not altogether commutative. A chiasm or chiasmus is defined by Websters as “an inverted relationship between the syntactic elements of parallel phrases” but in the OED is specified as “a grammatical figure by which the order of words in one of two parallel clauses is inverted in the other.” But note that while there is a formal symmetry in the figure of the chiasm, there is no semantic equivalence between the two phrases. For when we say, “when the going gets tough, the tough get going” we actually use two different meanings for “going” and two different meanings for “tough” so that the statements appear to be commutative without in fact expressing a relationship of semantic equivalence. What is it that escapes substitutability or equivalence here? I think it is the very capacity of language to mean more and differently than it appears, a certain possibility for semantic excess that exceeds the formal or syntactic appearance of symmetry. For the hand that touches is not identical to the hand that is touched, even if it is the same hand, and this non-coincidence is a function of the temporally non-coincident ontology of the flesh. And the “tough” who get going are not quite the same as the “tough” that adjectivally qualified a certain kind of going. Here meaning is displaced in the course of the claim, as a kind of metonymic effect of writing itself. And this might be understood as precisely the kind of “exceeding of itself” or “escaping of itself” of language that cannot be quite closed up or closed down by the putative project of solipsism that Irigaray claims governs Merleau-Ponty’s text.

In this way, we might ask whether Merleau-Ponty’s own writing, a writing which, importantly in this chapter, did not have closure, remained open-ended, and finally failed to make peace with its burgeoning set of claims, whether this excessive text did not in the end need its editor and its reader –

shall we call this its allocutory “Other”, its Irigaray – in order to exist for us at all?

After all, it will be this text from which Irigaray cites and derives her own notion of the “two lips,” and which she mimes into a feminist usage that Merleau-Ponty could not have intended. Does this not signify a life of the text that exceeds whatever solipsism afflicts its inception, and which makes itself available for an Irigarayan appropriation, one in which in substituting herself for him, she derives a feminist contribution to philosophy which is continuous with and a break from what has come before.

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TEXTS CITED:

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- Irigaray, Luce, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, tr. Carolyn Burke, Catharine Porter, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *The Visible and the Invisible*, tr. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968.

\* The publication of the translation of Luce Irigaray’s *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* offers the opportunity for english-speaking readers to consider her most sustained considerations of the history of philosophy. The text is composed of a set of lectures, ranging from chapters on Plato’s *Symposium* and Aristotle’s *Physics*, to Descartes on *The Passions of the Soul*, Spinoza on God, and a final set of reflections on Merleau-Ponty’s posthumously published *The Visible and the Invisible* and Emanuel Levinas’ *Totality and Infinity*.