

# Exclusive Interview with Luce Irigaray



With the following questions, we have tried to engage in a fruitful philosophical dialogue with Luce Irigaray, who is still one of the most renowned French philosophers of our time. Irigaray is mostly known for her critical engagements with the canonical figures of the Western psychoanalytical and philosophical traditions in works such as *Speculum of the other woman* and *This sex which is not one*, and for her philosophy and ethics of sexuate difference that focuses on establishing a culture of difference in which female and male subjects could finally live

together whilst respecting each other's otherness. It is our interest in the latter issue, and in how such a culture of sexuate difference could come into being, that motivated us to sketch out some questions with regards to Irigaray's more recent works, such as *I Love to You*, *Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, *The Way of Love*, and *Sharing the World*.

The idea of doing an interview with Luce Irigaray, however, arose during the inspiring lecture she gave at the 2012 Luce Irigaray International Seminar and Symposium at Bristol University. Irigaray has been organising these international seminars for quite a few years now, and by doing so, she hopes to bring Ph.D. students from all around the world together, engage in a dialogue with them about her oeuvre, and challenge them to reflect upon the practice of philosophy in general. It is this dialogical aspect that was central to the public lecture Irigaray gave at Bristol University in June 2012, in which she also touched upon the current situation of academia. According to Irigaray, current academic communities are no longer focusing – or have never really focused – on the value of an intersubjective and respectful dialogue. The value of a dialogical, non-appropriating conversation between different subjects has been lost in our academic culture and in Western culture in general, just as the existence of sexuate difference has been disregarded.

**1. What do you think about the current state of academia in general? And do you have any comments with regards to the condition of the academic community in the UK, given that you have been organising most of your recent international seminars at British universities?**

**Luce Irigaray:** Academia in general seems to be in crisis, at least in the West, which is what I know best. It is facing with an accumulation of scientific knowledge, but also with a diversity of cultures and mixed population of students that make it impossible to confine itself to the previous model of organisation and teaching. However, taking a step forward is not an easy task, all the more so since the values that underlie our assessment of truth and ethics are put into question. More often than not evolution amounts to criticising the past era without yet reaching another stage in culture and the education system. In fact, it is the general perspective that has to be reconsidered, as I will try to explain through my answers to your other questions.

My proposals of teaching have been better welcomed in the UK than in other countries, probably because English people are more open to change, more pragmatic and less ideological. My ideas and plan concerning the seminar that I hold for nine years in the UK were first presented to the academic staff of the University of Nottingham when they offered me a post of special professor. To explain my intentions was not always easy, but the international seminar for young researchers doing their Ph.D. on my work has nonetheless already been welcomed by various English universities. This seminar takes place

on the fringes of the university, after the academic year, and thus does not provide a real opportunity to observe the evolution of English academia. Nevertheless, I can add that I already received a few honorary doctorates in the UK, and also invitations from English students themselves to give talks. All these things attest that English academia has the ability to become aware of new cultural horizons, which, furthermore, focus on a subjective evolution related to sexuate difference.

**2. Given the cuts currently facing higher education in the UK and in other European countries, what advice would you give to young female scholars worried about their futures?**

**Luce Irigaray:** My advice would be that they unite, and prove that they can provide other perspectives in academia that could contribute towards an evolution of culture, especially towards a world culture. Instead of all together imposing their values and their relational abilities in particular, women too often are in competition with one another in the name of masculine skills, and have their sights on a traditional job in an unchanged academic context. They agree with the way things are just to make their career in academia. For example, women who are teaching my work accept to suspend their living relations with me in order not to challenge traditional academic customs. According to me, this is an important cultural contradiction that cannot contribute to the recognition of the intellectual capacity of women. Furthermore, this leaves life and sentiments outside academia and culture, as it is the case in a masculine tradition.

**3. If academia indeed is in a stalemated position at the moment, and dialogue and sexuate difference are not cultivated in today's academic culture, then how would we be able to transform academic culture to really share life, or share the world? Could you also elaborate on what you mean with the expression of "sharing the world", as you use it in *Sharing the World*?**

**Luce Irigaray:** It is up to women who already teach in universities to bring about change in academic culture. For example, they could ask for the constructive part of my work to

be added in the syllabus, and not only its critical part, and waiting for that, they could already allude to that constructive part in their teaching and in their way of behaving. They could make the difference between a world in the masculine and a world in the feminine appear, and save some time to organise dialogues between the two worlds, as I did notably with Italian children and adolescents (see for example *Luce Irigaray: Key Writings* (2004), and the chapter "Teaching How to Meet in Difference," in *Luce Irigaray: Teaching* (2008)). They could also propose themes for essays, theses and even Ph.D.'s on how to share in difference at all levels, starting from the most basic and universal difference, namely that between the sexes. I am afraid that women have not yet understood what sexuate difference means and what, not only natural but also cultural, resources lie in relationships in difference. They remain divided between a not-yet-cultivated feminine part of themselves and a culture in the masculine that they still see as the only possible culture that they must reach and teach. They too often criticise masculine behaviour without proposing a real alternative.

No doubt, women must make a very difficult way in a short time. But they sometimes lack more initiative and creativity when they are in academia than when they remain faithful to the girl in themselves. And they are more careful to avoid the so-called feminine stereotypes than the masculine ones!

**4. With regards to your own psycholinguistic work on the differences between how women and men use language and converse amongst and between one another (as for instance explained in the essay "The Question of the Other," or in *I Love to You*), how would you describe the language and manner of communication that is being used in academia, which still appears to be a highly hierarchically organised structure? Could we say that the kind of language and conversations held in academia tend to be more subject-object oriented, and are hence more or less appropriating? Do you think that female scholars could transform academia into a space that is more open to respectful conversations? Or put it differently: since women are more accustomed to using a subject-**

**subject language that wishes to uphold the other subject's otherness, could female scholars play an important role in transforming academia into a space where life and the world could be shared?**

**Luce Irigaray:** One of the most decisive features in the manner of communicating in academia is the fact that the individuals are presumed to be sexless. The only discourse that is allowed there is a discourse in the neuter, which is supposed to be neutral, but in fact amounts to a masculine strategy to liberate men from the power of the maternal origin and world. The apparent neutrality in communication is accompanied by a logic in the masculine and passionate conflicts between academics. The neutralisation of the persons favours the stress on an object, be it material or spiritual, the only place where they can affirm their competence and power. Obviously, the differences between people are, then, quantitative and linked to a material or spiritual appropriation. These differences lead to competition and conflict, and not to the development of intersubjective relations.

Women could transform academia into a place of dialogues respectful of difference(s). However, if the language of girls and female adolescents shows a privileging of subject-subject relations over subject-object relations, this relational quality has to be cultivated as such. This is not yet the case, and the investigations that I conducted in France and Italy – and that other researchers conducted in other countries – prove that sexuate difference vanishes in the discourses of the teachers, because they have been taught to use a unique discourse, in the neuter, as a sign of their cultural competence. Without a cultivation of their intersubjective attitudes, women are not always able to respect the otherness of the other. And they then enter in a process of subjugation or domination that does not make them capable of transforming academic culture into a place of sharing in difference.

**5. Could you comment and elaborate on the interesting, Heideggerian-inspired statement you made during your public lecture at Bristol university, namely that "only thought can save us?" How does this relate to Martin Heidegger's "only a God can save us"**

**statement? Should we for instance see this as a strong critique of Heideggerian philosophy, or rather as a part of your critical dialogue with the latter? And how does your own statement refer to your ethics of sexuate difference and your ideas about transforming academic culture?**

**Luce Irigaray:** This sentence has its origins in the work of Hölderlin, a poet who was really important in Heidegger's intellectual journey, and it refers to "a god", alluding to the aid that the gods brought to humans in Ancient Greece. I do not think that this sentence has the meaning that we attribute to God today. Perhaps I am mistaken. However, the sentence speaks of "a" god and some of us can also transfer the qualities of Ancient Greek gods onto God as they have qualities in common.

I did not intend to criticise Heidegger when saying that according to me a loving thought is what could save us today. Heidegger is probably the philosopher who taught me the most about the value of thinking and the path to approach thinking. It is true that we have entered a new era in which multiculturalism and the problem of plurality of religions are henceforth at the core of a cultural evolution; it is thus no longer obvious to appeal to a god to save us. We are rather facing the task of elaborating another way of treating the divine, in us and between us, as humans who must share at a world level. And this has something to do with an ethics of sexuate difference that a unique Absolute prevented us from seriously defining and practising in the field of sciences, ethics and religion.

**6. This brings us to your philosophical engagement with Hegelian philosophy, and your analysis of Hegel's masters-slave dialectics in *I Love to You*. Could we say that your reading of Hegelian philosophy in this book is much more constructive than in *Speculum*? Although you already touched upon the issue of sexual indifference and the absence of a truly mutual relationship of recognition between Hegel's Antigone and her brother Polyneices in *Speculum*, isn't *I Love to You* even more focused on and working towards a culture of sexuate difference; a culture in which recognition is built upon a double, or even triple dialectics, instead of on a Hegelian masculinised dialectics of the One?**

**Luce Irigaray:** There is no doubt that the chapter on the philosophy of Hegel in *Speculum* is more critical and deconstructing, while *I Love to You* is more focusing on another dialectics which can take sexuate difference into account. However, I would not speak of a sexuate indifference between Antigone and her brother Polyneices, as it is as a masculine member of the family that she must carry out the ritual of his burial (also see "Between Myth and History: the Tragedy of Antigone" in *Interrogating Antigone in Postmodern Philosophy and Criticism* (2010), an essay which appears again in Irigaray's book *In the Beginning, She Was* (Bloomsbury, October 2012). Perhaps my interpretation is now closer to Ancient Greek times. And it is also this faithfulness which, amongst other reasons, compels me to use the term "sexuate" in such a case. The relation between Antigone and Polyneices is a sexuate, but not a sexual one, and Antigone must respect the sexuate identity of her brother as different from hers before fulfilling her sexual desire towards Haemon, her fiancé. A thing that she never had the chance of experiencing, because King Creon sentenced her to death. In other words: becoming able to embody a sexual relation with respect for one another first requires us to acquire a sexuate identity and recognise the identity of the other as different. Something that questions the traditional way of conceiving the family unit as a whole which lacks differentiation.

Hence the need of a double and even triple dialectics: one which serves the cultivation and becoming of a feminine identity; one which serves the cultivation and becoming of a masculine identity; and one which serves their relation with respect for their mutual differences. Which allows them to sometimes form a unity while preserving their duality. Recognition, then, involves recognising the otherness of the other as a real that never can be appropriated in one's own world, that is, taking charge of the insuperable negative existing between two differently sexuated human beings.

**7. With regards to the previous question, how can we step outside Hegel's master-slave paradigm, and how would you define the latter? Could you also comment on the chapter "Frenchwomen', Stop Trying" in *This sex*, in which you allude to Marquis de Sade's *La philosophie dans le boudoir***

**and criticise his phallic, libertine model of sexuality? Can de Sade's libertinism be seen as a philosophy that is based upon such a Hegelian master-slave dialectics in which subjects never really encounter each other in their specificity and otherness? And are there any comparisons to be drawn between these two philosophies and those of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir? Do you think that the latter pair was able to step outside this Hegelian paradigm?**

**Luce Irigaray:** The master-slave struggle takes place within a logic of the one, the same and the One. The master and the slave are presumed to be the two parts of a unity which are in conflict to appropriate the only possible unity. Their roles are quite different, but they represent a division of human being itself in two irreconcilable parts that can merely dominate one another, or subject to one another, without ever being able to enter into dialogue. Each one wants to suppress the other to gain one's unity, but by doing this, one also suppresses oneself, because the other is a part of one's self.

To avoid this insoluble problem, our culture usually leaps over the relation between two, and passes to a relation between many ones who somehow or other are united by a same One, for example a philosophical or religious absolute, or a political leader. Such a gesture does not solve the problem of the master-slave relation which recurs under various forms, notably between man and woman where it has nothing to do. Indeed, man and woman are not two parts of a same unity, but they are two different human unities who do not compose a one. They can sometimes produce a one: in love, in generation, in spiritual desire or creation. However, this is possible only if they keep their duality that traditional Western culture mistook for a logical pair of opposites. Now man and woman do not form a pair and are not opposites (e.g. *In the Beginning, She Was*, Bloomsbury, October 2012). They are two different natural and cultural unities. To situate the master-slave relation between man and woman amounts to confusing a cultural construction with a real which still lacks recognition and cultivation. It means staying within the logic of the one and the same.

Libertinism seems to ignore that sexuality strictly speaking cannot be practised without considering the duality of identities and subjectivities of the partners. It reduces human being to only one aspect of itself with which it would be possible to play without taking into account the unity of the person involved, a thing that allows to fall back into a master-slave relation with a distribution of roles, for example between man and woman. This way of dealing with our sexuality also appears to be a sort of capitalist play that expands our energy without caring about our life enough and respecting its material and spiritual resources. It is not by chance that it is often a really young woman who has to offer her energetic resources to the pleasure of the libertine.

I think that only the transcendence of the other, as naturally and culturally different, can allow us to go further than the Hegelian dialectics, without neglecting its teaching and risking falling into a worst nihilism.

This asks us for recognising that man and woman are two naturally and culturally different subjects, a thing that neither Jean-Paul Sartre nor Simone de Beauvoir did. What we can read and know about their conception of sexual intercourse (see for example the first chapter of *To Be Two*, 2001) does not show a surpassing of a sort of master-slave play from which they try to escape by multiplying the number of their partners and also by perpetuating the traditional split between body and mind that prevents us from reaching our specific individuation and unity, and a possible new relation between two sexuate subjects.

**8. Although you have defined such an ethics of sexuate difference as a carnal ethics in *An ethics of sexual difference*, and have emphasised throughout your oeuvre that such an ethics would primarily develop itself between two sexually different subjects, couldn't the model of *I Love to You* also be expanded by for**





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**instance focusing on the element of “to?” If the “to” in *I Love to You* stands for mediation and non-appropriation, couldn't we then also work towards a broader model of recognition that could implement the multitude of differences between subjects?**

**Luce Irigaray:** Obviously the ethics that I try to define, starting from the difference(s) between man and woman, can be and is already used between other sorts of subjects. But this ethics could not be defined starting from another difference, because difference, then, would not be as irreducible and transcendental as it is between two different sexuate subjects. Furthermore, in this case the difference is not only constructed but also natural, and it corresponds to a universal one: all cultures are more or less clearly elaborated by taking it into account and it can thus serve as a basis to construct a world culture. Another point: this natural and universal belonging is also a privileged place of our relational behaviour. Between man and woman, a negative can be at work without preventing the relation from existing: difference is a source of relational energy and creativity there. It is the existence of a possible and necessary negative, as the guardian of the duality of the persons, that allowed me to define some means of establishing intersubjective relations with respect for mutual difference(s). The “to” of *I Love to You* is one of these means. *I Love to You* means “I love to what and whom you are”, thus to you as a person, a specific person, and not only as an object or a support of my love or desire. I defined other ways of being in communication without domination or subjection, appropriation or fusion: for example, the choice of the verbs, and more generally of the words in a sentence; the choice of the syntactic structures and transformations; the choice of tenses and even moods; the preservation of the sensory, sensitive and sexuate aspects of the discourse, etc. All that can contribute to the respect for the otherness of the other.

**9. To conclude this interview, could you comment upon the importance of dialogue and listening-to in the construction of an ethics, politics, and culture of sexuate difference? And how could we as scholars, but also as human beings, work towards such a culture of mutual and dual recognition? How could we re-establish a culture of humanity in academia and in our daily lives?**

**Luce Irigaray:** If we wish to recognise the other as other, we first must listen to this other in order to enter into relationships with one another. What we already experienced, or have been taught in the name of a presumed neuter and neutral culture, cannot be of use on this occasion, except partly at the level of needs. But needs are not the way to establish friendship with respect for mutual difference(s). Needs are rather what abolishes these difference(s), and it is because we too often stay at the level of needs that we are not attentive to the importance of our difference(s). And yet only cultivating desire and love can make us really human and capable of elaborating suitable ethics, politics and culture. I focus on the importance of listening to the other, especially the different sexuate other, in the chapter “In Almost Absolute Silence” in *I Love to You*, reminding of the need to preserve a place of silence in order to be able to perceive something of the other. I comment on the necessity of listening-to both in thinking and in teaching in “Listening, Thinking, Teaching” in *Luce Irigaray: Teaching*. There you could find a more developed answer to your question.

I could also remind you that, in order to reach mutual recognition, you must learn to dwell in yourselves, know and cultivate the one who you are, building your own world while recognising the irreducible otherness of the other. You must learn to distinguish the manner of addressing a same as you from that of addressing a different from you, going outside of a culture that neutralised our natural and cultural difference(s).

You must reach autonomy, and discover means to create relationships in mutual respect, not only in the name of moral obligations, but towards your human accomplishment.

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