

Book Review

Conversations. Luce Irigaray. Continuum: London (UK) and New York, 2008; XII + 188 pages; ISBN 1-8470-6036-6, 978-1-8470-6036-5; \$26.95US (paper).

Sharing the World. Luce Irigaray. Continuum: London (UK) and New York, 2008; VII + 160 pages; ISBN 978-1-84706-034-1; \$19.95 (cloth).

Luce Irigaray has been, since the 1970s, a key figure in feminist philosophy. Her work is central to theories of sexual difference, to the concept and exploration of writing in the feminine, and to contemporary theories of embodiment. It was with a view to understanding her theory and ethics of two, as well as her continuing influence on contemporary feminist theory, that I took up her recent books *Conversations* and *Sharing the World*.

Conversations consists of a series of interviews, the title of which introduces a central theme of her work: the opening up of a loving dialogue between two who are not the same. The interviews, conducted from the point of view of disciplines such as philosophy, architecture, education and theology, demonstrate the diversity of fields in which her work has had an impact. Through these, Irigaray develops her argument that sexual difference (her term) must be both recognized and cultivated. This difference is neither strictly biological, nor strictly cultural. It is rather produced at the interface of nature and culture and forms the bridge between them. It arises from the relation to the mother's body, lived as sameness or difference, and to engendering within or outside one's own body. It is thus produced through the differential relation with the m/other.

Irigaray's concept of sexual difference is central to her argument that we must re-think relations between the body, subjectivity and society so that a culture of respect for the other, for alterity, can become a reality. This rethinking of the materiality of the body is the reason that her work is important for theories of embodiment. It is disappointing when, on occasion, Irigaray enumerates specific differences between women and men, which I would argue contradicts her claim that one must open a space for the other to speak, to define him or her self, a self that is necessarily in-process and to some degree unknowable. On the other hand, *Conversations* is most interesting when Irigaray develops her concept of sexual difference and replies to her critics, especially regarding essentialism and the privileging of sexual difference over cultural or other differences. Irigaray's concept of sexual difference cannot be dismissed as essentialism as it undermines the opposition between nature and culture central to Western modes of thinking by re-conceiving their relationship, a relationship that she sees as neither one of opposition nor of complementarity. She argues rather that biology is always interpreted and lived intersubjectively within a specific cultural context. Since the other, like the self, is always a subject-in-process, the relation to the other is in process as well. In as much as

each one lives in their own “world,” or has their way of viewing the world, no one can define or understand the other. Her work is therefore part of the critique of Western philosophical traditions and their claim to truth, based on a single (masculine) point of view. In as much as a great deal of feminist theory has been rooted in Western modes of thinking, including binary thinking, and the privileging of the mind over the body, Irigaray's work on sexuate difference is a cautionary voice for feminist theory and politics as well.

The implications of difference for ethics, or how to build a world based on two who are not the same, is taken up in the book *Sharing the World*. Here, Irigaray attempts to show how sexuate difference can be cultivated, through her style of writing as much as through what she says. For her, a culture and ethics of two must begin on an individual level, not on the basis of broad categories such as gender or ethnicity. Each must retain an integrity or faithfulness to who they are, and leave a space for the other in an open-ended process animated by desire. This entails recognizing the limits of one's own world or point of view, and the creation of an initial silence so that the other can speak. It also entails acceptance that one will be changed by the encounter with the other, at the same time that the other will always remain to some degree unknowable. This acceptance of alterity and the limits of knowledge is necessary for the creation of something new, different from the world of either the one or the other, something that can only arise through dialogue--a third space. *Sharing the World* elaborates Irigaray's position, stated in *Conversations*, that sexuate difference is the aim rather than the beginning point of feminist politics. The book is an attempt to show how this might be achieved, without defining what it will be beforehand (an impossible task according to her). However, there are two questions that arise from this elaboration. The first is the privileging of difference between the sexes and heterosexual desire. Differences within either sex and homosexual desire are either modeled on heterosexual relations or unthinkable. How is the encounter with the other of the same sex also an encounter with alterity and what is its contribution to an ethics of two? The second question concerns the assumption that the other will share the same ethics of two. When this assumption is not shared, when the difference of the other includes their desire for power or when opening a space for dialogue is interpreted as an opportunity to impose the other's view, how can one act?

Those who are not scholars of Irigaray's work may find her style of writing disconcerting. This is especially true of *Sharing the World*, which remains close to a French style of philosophical writing. The choice of certain terms is also problematic, especially the word “gender.” Given its roots within the social sciences and its current popularity within the theory of performativity, it seems incompatible with Irigaray's philosophy. More appropriate terms would be “sexual difference” and “alterity.” However, her writing style is to some degree deliberate as Irigaray's stated aim is to let new meanings emerge from her work. It is thus best read as poetry-theory. For this reason these books are not recommended for teaching at an undergraduate level. Nevertheless, given her contribution to the critique of Western modes of thinking and the important questions that her work raises for feminist theory, *Conversations* is a useful introduction to her current work. *Sharing the World* is recommended for those who are already familiar with her work and want to understand more about her ethics of two.

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