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DOI:
10.1111/j.1527-2001.1996.tb00667.x

Document Version
Peer reviewed version

Citation for published version (Harvard):
Ince, K 1996, 'Questions to Luce Irigaray', *Hypatia A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, vol. 11, no. 2, pp. 122-140. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1996.tb00667.x

Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal

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Name of Dept/ School

French Studies

Author (Year) Title. Journal, Volume, Pages

Ince, K.L. (1996) Questions to Luce Irigaray.
Hypatia, 11, 1: 122-140.

Version : Post print

Date : 1996

This article was published as . 'Questions to Luce Irigaray' (on Irigaray and Levinas), *Hypatia: a journal of feminist philosophy* 11 (1), Spring 1996, 122-140.
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QUESTIONS TO LUCE IRIGARAY

Kate Ince

This article traces the "dialogue" between the work of the philosophers Luce Irigaray and Emmanuel Levinas. It attempts to construct a more nuanced discussion than has been given to date of Irigaray's critique of Levinas, particularly as formulated in 'Questions to Emmanuel Levinas' (Irigaray 1991). It suggests that the concepts of the feminine and of voluptuosity articulated by Levinas have more to contribute to Irigaray's project of an ethics of sexual difference than she herself sometimes appears to think.

A number of Luce Irigaray's most important publications since 1980 have taken the form of poetic "dialogues" with key philosophers in the Western philosophical tradition. Three of these constitute an unfinished tetralogy of texts devoted to the elemental: the four elements -- water, earth, air, and fire -- which were particularly significant to the pre-Socratic philosophers and whose rediscovery Irigaray sees as important to the reevaluation of motifs repressed within mainstream philosophical discourse.<1> In addition to Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche ([1980] 1991), Elemental Passions ([1982] 1992), and L'oubli de l'air: chez Martin Heidegger (1983), Irigaray has written two essays (1991, 1993b) on the thought of Emmanuel Levinas, another philosopher who has gained increasing recognition in recent years. Irigaray has not devoted a book to Levinas, but these two essays can and should (in my view and the view of a small number of feminist theorists) be grouped with the texts in which Irigaray draws upon and critiques the thinking of Nietzsche and Heidegger.<2> In accordance with this view, what I shall attempt to do here is explain the relation

between Levinas's and Irigaray's work and why it is important to feminist philosophy. I shall subsequently trace the "dialogue" between Levinas and Irigaray in detail and try to construct a more nuanced discussion than has been given to date of Irigaray's critique of Levinas, particularly as formulated in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" (Irigaray 1991).

Several of the (feminist) critics who have written about Levinas and Irigaray have observed that Irigaray admires Levinas's philosophy. They also seem to agree about what it is in Levinas's work that Irigaray respects, namely, the concept of the Other around which he develops his central concern, ethics. So despite the critique of Levinas that Irigaray has articulated, Margaret Whitford notes that Irigaray "admires [Levinas] for his ethical approach to the Other" (Whitford 1991, 151). Elizabeth Grosz goes further, stating that "Levinas' conception of alterity is central to Irigaray's understanding of relations between sexually different subjects" (Grosz 1989, 142). The conception of alterity at issue is one in which the other cannot be represented in terms of any sameness of self; the other is independent and irreducibly other. Alterity is a form of exteriority; the other cannot be absorbed into the self through negation, but remains aloof, distant, and different.

It is this unique conception of alterity developed by Levinas, a revival of Hebraic thought repressed by the Greek logocentric tradition, which Irigaray employs to articulate an ethics of sexual difference. Grosz describes how the relationship of alterity and ethics works for both Levinas and

Irigaray. Ethics arises as "a consequence of the self's necessary confrontation with the other. The other is a necessary condition of subjectivity. The other makes possible the subject's relations to others in a social world; ethics is the result of the need to negotiate between one existence and another" (Grosz 1989, 141). Nonetheless, although Levinas is a vital source for Irigaray's conception of alterity, his ethics, like the vast majority of ethical theory written up to and during the twentieth century, recognizes only one sort of subject -- the male. This presumption of masculinity is sometimes avowed and made plain, as with Levinas, whose subject is described as "virile" and "heroic."<3> Much more often the subject of ethical theory is assumed to be gender-neutral, and abstract or universal principles are developed, which, it is claimed, can apply to both sexes indifferently. Masculinity masquerades as neutrality.<4> This failure to take gender into account in ethical theory has recently become of particular concern to feminists. One central issue which gets left out when ethics ignores gender is, of course, embodiment: an ethics which is universalizable, such as Kant's categorical imperative, has to function independently of any particular corporeality. Issues of sexuality and the bodily self are among those which have usually been seen as peripheral to the subject-matter of ethics.

It is for this reason that the Levinas-Irigaray conjunction is important. Levinas is one of few philosophers of ethics to conceive of either subject or other as embodied, corporeal

beings. In Levinas's work subject and other are living, material bodies endowed with and using their five senses; they are incarnate and sexually specific. Irigaray, clearly, has been concerned with questions of the body, sexuality, and gender throughout her work. An exploration of the places in Levinas's texts where he directly addresses the questions of eros and the feminine, and of Irigaray's responses to them, would seem to have much to contribute to feminist philosophy seeking to reopen the question of the relationship of eros to ethics.

The traditional fault of patriarchal ethics is that it can conceive only of a male subject. In Levinas's philosophy as expounded in Totality and Infinity, the space occupied by the male subject is called the realm of the Same. As for Irigaray, the Same can be understood as the order of male subjectivity and social relations. Most patriarchal theories of subjectivity classify woman as the Other of the Same. This implies two things: first, a concept of the Other much less radical than the Levinasian one, in which the Other is opposed and complementary to the Same, and, second, that women are not subjects in their own right.<5> Irigaray is concerned to overturn both these assumptions, to explore both the conditions necessary for the development of a female subject and the kind of alterity that such a subject would presume. This is why she refers to the feminine, in her own work, as the Other of the Other. (The phrase is also one of numerous points at which she is directly challenging Lacan, while not naming him as interlocutor; it is Lacan who insisted that "there is no Other of the Other.")

In the passage following Irigaray's opening question to Levinas in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas", it becomes evident that a conception of sexual difference in which woman remains the Other of the Same is precisely what she is accusing him of: "The feminine, as it is characterized by Levinas, is not other than himself. Defined by 'modesty', 'a mode of being which consists in shunning the light' [...] the feminine appears as the underside or reverse side of man's aspiration towards the light, as its negative" (Irigaray 1991, 178).<6> This is a surprising pronouncement for Irigaray to make, for several reasons. The first is that although the relative importance of the types of alterity Levinas describes is a complex question whose difficulty is compounded by contradictions within his own texts, it does at least seem certain that the feminine represents one highly significant form of otherness: the encounter with the feminine forms a substantial part of the concluding section of *Totality and Infinity*.

Throughout *Totality and Infinity* the relation of Same and Other is described as a face-to-face relation: "the face" is the term Levinas uses to describe the other as it is encountered in the ethical relation between beings. As a term, it emphasizes that direct human encounters are the very stuff of ethical experience.<7> In the "Phenomenology of Eros", the section of *Totality and Infinity* in which Levinas's fullest account of the feminine is to be found, feminine alterity is also described as a face, the feminine face. The feminine face is more equivocal than the face as it is described in the first three parts of

Totality and Infinity; "The feminine presents a face that goes beyond the face. [...] In the feminine face the purity of expression is already troubled by the equivocation of the voluptuous" (Levinas 1969, 260). The equivocation of the feminine is, as we will see, central to Levinas's characterization of it in the "Phenomenology of Eros": it would be shortsighted and inaccurate to claim any equality between the face as it is described throughout Totality and Infinity and the feminine face. But clearly, the feminine and the feminine face are forms of otherness, or alterity, which merit further exploration.

The second surprising element in Irigaray's pronouncement at the start of "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas", quoted above, is her description of the feminine as the negative of man's aspiration toward the light. This is because Levinas articulates the relationship between ethical subjectivity and its Other as an asymmetrical and non-negative dialectic. It is the infinitude and transcendence of the Other to the I which means that the space of the face-to-face relation is essentially asymmetrical: the other is situated in a dimension of height or transcendence to the I described most vividly in the seventh part of section 3B of Totality and Infinity, "The Asymmetry of the Interpersonal". The face-to-face relation can, furthermore, be described as non-negative because Levinas specifies that it is untotalizable; if the constitutive terms of the relation could be characterized as positive and negative, they would in theory be able to fuse and cancel each other out, in much the

same way as a proton and an electron do in physics. "The force of opposition and of dialectical evocation would, in integrating it into a synthesis, destroy transcendence" (Levinas 1969, 151). If the face-to-face relation is untotalizable, why call it a dialectic at all? The sense in which Levinas uses the word "dialectic" is perhaps closer to the Platonic sense of investigation by discussion than the Marxist sense of a method of dealing with (logical or social) contradictory forces. Elsewhere, Levinas explains that there is nothing Hegelian about the structure of the relations he describes, that is, that they are not historical, and that it is not a question of resolving contradictions. When he uses the word "dialectic," it is to refer to a dialectic of being which leads not to unity but to plurality (Levinas 1979, 18-20). It is with this aim of plurality that Levinas sets himself firmly against the Parmenidean conception of the unity of being which has dominated Western philosophy, instigating and maintaining the bias of ontology over ethics which he seeks to reverse.

As noted above, it is in the "Phenomenology of Eros," the section of Totality and Infinity on which Irigaray focuses in her first essay on Levinas, that his fullest account of the feminine can be found. The characterization he gives the feminine here is less "the underside or reverse side of man's aspiration towards the light" than a thoroughgoing equivocation of light and shadow. It is certainly true that in the "Phenomenology of Eros" Levinas aligns the feminine with darkness and the nocturnal, "the night of the erotic" which is

not dispersed (Levinas 1969, 258, 260). This alignment can be set against the metaphors of light, openness and frankness Levinas uses to describe the face "proper": "The face signifies by itself; its signification precedes Sinngebung. A meaningful behaviour arises already in its light; it spreads the light in which light is seen" (Levinas 1969, 261). But although the feminine eclipses the clarity and transparency of the illumined and meaningful face-to-face relation as conceived of by Levinas, its obscurity is not unequivocal darkness, the diametrical opposite or negative of the encounter with the neutral (or masculine) form of the face. In other words, Levinas's feminine oscillates between shadow and light: as he puts it, "Equivocation constitutes the epiphany of the feminine" (Levinas 1969, 264). At one point earlier in Totality and Infinity the light of the face is explicitly associated with femininity, when Levinas, describing the idea of infinity from which the face is indissociable, refers to "the feminine grace of its radiance" (Levinas 1969, 151). Although the purity of expression of the feminine face is "already troubled by the equivocation of the voluptuous" (Levinas 1969, 260), it is not entirely clouded and obscured. To describe Levinas's feminine solely as the underside or reverse side of man's aspiration toward the light, as Irigaray does at the start of "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas", is to underestimate its potential as a deconstructive category.

Returning to the opening sentences of "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas", and comparing Irigaray's emphasis on the opposition of

light and dark with her treatment of the same binary pair in "The Fecundity of the Caress", her first essay on Levinas, it is evident that she polarizes the opposition much more in the later essay. In "The Fecundity of the Caress" the background against which the schism between light and dark takes place -- the primordial half-light of the erotic encounter -- is evocatively described. It is also in "The Fecundity of the Caress" that Irigaray exploits to the full the slighting and degrading terms Levinas applies to the feminine beloved (*l'Aimée*) in the "Phenomenology of Eros", where the beloved is said to resemble "an irresponsible animality which does not speak true words" (Levinas 1969, 263).<8> Childishness, a lack of seriousness, faulty understanding and animality are just some of the characteristics attributed to her. After the caress, the beloved woman is "relegated to an inwardness that is not one because it is abyssal, animal, infantile, prenuptial," whereas the male lover (*l'amant*) "rises up to the greatest heights" (Irigaray 1993b, 202, 194). For the male lover the transcendence and clarity of relations within the world of men-among-themselves pulls him back from the brink, breaking off the erotic relation and abandoning the feminine Other to the unsignifying ultramateriality from which she came. He returns to seriousness and his ethical responsibilities; she is returned to the abyss.

In "The Fecundity of the Caress" Irigaray catches the voluptuousness and equivocality of this encounter and exposes the abandonment of the beloved woman as the patriarchal gesture

par excellence; incapable of risking self-loss in the gulf of erotic desire, the male lover is (re)instated as the subject of love and the beloved woman as its passive object. She remains adrift in the murky light of "profanation," a term Levinas uses to describe the discovery of the hidden as hidden.<9> Light and equivocal darkness are divided and separated, but Irigaray insists that the night to which the feminine is consigned is not eternal and, more specifically, that the new light into which she will emerge will be different from the harsh, impersonal light of universal reason: "allowing herself to sink into the night, she calls forth from there a new morning, a new spring, a new dawn. The creation of a new day? From the source of a light that precedes and surpasses the limits of reason (Irigaray 1993b, 197). This is one point at which Irigaray's deconstructive strategy is evident. The phases through which the deconstruction of a binary opposition must pass are described by Derrida and his interviewer in the interview called "Choreographies" (Derrida 1982). First, there is an overturning of the opposition which gives the traditionally subordinate term primacy, and, second, the forging of new terms between which there is no longer a repressive hierarchy. Strictly speaking, these are not two rigorously separable phases, but "a transformation or general deformation of logic" (Derrida 1982, 72). But the "phases" can be seen at work in just this way in "The Fecundity of the Caress", where Irigaray emphasizes Levinas's association of the feminine with darkness and the night in order to forge a new notion of light, and therefore a

new relationship of light and dark. Irigaray's poetic transformation of this opposition stands in for transformed relations between chains of metaphysical binary oppositions: light, masculinity, universality, reason, and ethics, on the one hand, and darkness, femininity, singularity, emotion, and erotics, on the other. The future envisaged for the feminine is one in which a modified relationship of light to darkness accompanies a conception of the erotic which has gained ethical status. Ethics is no longer aligned solely with the Enlightenment values of neutrality and universality; ethical action is no longer required to be impersonal and free of emotion. An ethics of sensation, materiality, and the body, an _erotic_ ethics, can be substituted for the lucidity of abstract judgment. From their role as the obscured and unthought substratum of metaphysical ethics, the body and eros become the shifting yet fertile breeding ground of new values.

Irigaray's treatment of the opposition of light and dark is just one example of the powerful, deconstructive form of rewriting to be found throughout "The Fecundity of the Caress". The polarization of the same opposition at the start of "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" shows the absence of this transformative rewriting. In the earlier essay Irigaray's deconstructive strategy is applied to several of Levinas's key terms, and the concept that is recast to most sustained effect is "fecundity." Irigaray's title both announces and begins to enact her strategic deconstruction of terminology, since in Levinas's vocabulary to ascribe fecundity to the caress is an

oxymoronic impossibility. What the caress describes is the failure of erotic communion. For Levinas this failure is constitutive not accidental, that is to say, eros can never accomplish the union of lover and beloved. By insisting on this impossibility Levinas poses a direct challenge to Plato's model of erotic fusion: "Neither is the difference between the sexes the duality of two complementary terms, for two complementary terms presuppose a preexisting whole. To say that sexual duality presupposes a whole is to posit love beforehand as fusion.

> The pathos of love, however, consists in an insurmountable duality of beings" (Levinas 1989, 49).

The gesture of the caress is defined by its inability to grasp, "the caress consists in seizing upon nothing" (Levinas 1969, 257). Although its metaphor is that of touch, and the caress reaches out to the feminine other, it cannot hold on. The caress is not teleological; it does not effect anything. It is a gesture and not an act; it describes the tragic limitation or separateness of the erotic "I." As Levinas puts it, "In a certain sense it expresses love, but suffers from an inability to tell it" (Levinas 1969, 258; see also Chanter 1990, 143-46). As pity and suffering transformed into desire and happiness, it is situated on the side of voluptuosity, the first plane of eros to which fecundity forms the second side (see Chanter 1988, 43-4).

The crucial difference between voluptuosity and fecundity as they are set out by Levinas is sexual difference. It is sexual difference which distinguishes the nature of the Other to which voluptuosity and fecundity relate. Voluptuosity fails to

establish a relationship where fecundity succeeds. However, the Other to which fecundity connects is not the beloved woman, but the son. It is clear that despite Levinas's evocative description of voluptuosity, it is subsumed under the telos of patriarchy. Eroticism is judged insufficient if it does not carry within it an entire future of familial happiness:

> On the contrary, the ultimate end of the family is the actual meaning and joy of this present. It is not only prefigured there, it is already fulfilled there. The participation of the present in this future takes place specifically in the feeling of love, in the grace of the betrothed, and even in the erotic (Levinas 1990, 36; the emphasis on even is mine).

The carnality of voluptuosity gives way to the spiritual love evinced in the father-son relation. "Pure eroticism," and all this expression could imply about desiring flesh, gives way to "sentimental love" (Levinas 1990, 37).

What makes this participation of the present in the future possible, for Levinas, is the passivity of the beloved woman, the support lent by the feminine to filiality or the paternal genealogy. The hierarchization of the spiritual and material components of erotic love, the "transformation of the flesh of the other into his own temporality," is the aspect of Levinas's account of Eros subjected to the harshest feminist critique by Irigaray in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas". In contrast,

Irigaray insists that this passivity has its own power, which, rather than aspiring to the spiritual heights aimed at by the male lover, nurtures a slower and more fertile type of creativity. The erotic plane to which the feminine is consigned carries within it its own type of fecundity:

> Intimately tied to universal circulation and vibration that go beyond any enclosure within reproduction. Turning in a cycle that never revolves back to sameness. Continual and patient engendering of an obscure labor. More passive than any voluntary passivity, yet not foreign to the act of creating/procreating the world (Irigaray 1993b, 195).

Fecundity in Irigaray's sense does not transcend the flesh, but describes a material creativity that is set against the spiritual production of which the father's production of his son is the prime example. Fecundity signifies a revitalized exchange between lovers. This is most clearly brought out in An Ethics of Sexual Difference, in Irigaray's reading of Diotima's speech from Plato's Symposium, where (according to Irigaray) Socrates fails to comprehend the extended notion of fecundity Diotima tries to explain to him.<10> "Fecundity of love between lovers -- the regeneration of one by the other, the passage to immortality in and through each other -- this seems to become the condition of procreation and not a cause in its own right (Irigaray 1993a, 26). Whereas giving birth, in Diotima's understanding of it, occurs "in beauty, with relation both to

body and soul" (Irigaray 1993a, 25), Socrates sees the divinity of the union of man and woman as residing solely in the immortality their love gives rise to in the child. Fecundity is definable, for Socrates, only as an immortality that transcends the lovers' bodies; the end or telos of erotic love is the child as spiritual product. According to Irigaray, this reduction of fecundity to productivity marks the failure of love, including for the child, whose role is reduced to that of mediator in its parents' relation. Eros is diverted into the constitution of the family, political wisdom, and affairs of State; sexual creativity is channeled into production at the expense of a fertile "permanent becoming" in male-female relations. The latter can only come about if the third term of the erotic relation is conceived of not as external to it, an exteriority exemplified in the "immortal children" of The Symposium, but as an intermediary (intermédaire) or path (chemin) between lovers, between what is mortal and what is immortal, between the sensible and the transcendental. "Love is fecund prior to any procreation" (Irigaray 1993a, 25-26).

The mobile and material notion of fecundity Irigaray develops in An Ethics of Sexual Difference thus amounts to a wholesale redefinition of what Levinas means by the term. In "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," however, this feminist and deconstructive strategy -- the insistence on an impossible conjunction of fecundity and the caress -- gives way to a predominantly critical stance from which Irigaray accuses Levinas of merely gesturing toward "a future where no day is named for the

encounter with the other in an embodied love" (Irigaray 1991, 179). Levinas is one of few philosophers to displace the metaphor of vision dominating ontological accounts of intersubjectivity into a metaphor of touch, an emphasis which feminist readers have noted and which resonates with Irigaray's own reformulation of subject-object relations in the figure of the two lips. But in Irigaray's view Levinas does not go far enough -- to the merging and fusion of bodies and identities whose fertility empowers ethics. "The caress [...] does not touch the other" (Irigaray 1991, 179).

The absence of any physical communion of lovers is, as has been noted, an essential feature of Levinas's accounts of eros and sexual difference. There are at least two reasons for this impossibility of communion between lovers. The first is that separation is built into the ethics expounded by Levinas in section 1 of _Totality and Infinity_, as is evident in the title and the opening sentences of section D "Separation and the Absolute": "The same and the other at the same time maintain themselves in relationship and _absolve_ themselves from this relation, remain absolutely separated. The idea of Infinity requires this separation (Levinas 1969, 102). In the erotic relationship with the feminine separation operates similarly:
"In voluptuosity the other is me and separated from me. The separation of the Other in the midst of this community of feeling constitutes the acuity of voluptuosity" (Levinas 1969, 265).

The second reason for the absence of any physical communion of

lovers is the priority given to separated being in the Judaic tradition, commented on by Levinas in an essay called "Judaism and the Feminine" when he says "For the Jews, separated existence will be worth more than the initial union" (Levinas 1990, 35). Unlike the Hellenic tradition in which, according to the fable recounted in Plato's *Symposium* which tells of the origins of sexual difference, the separation of beings represents a punishment for the overweening pride of original wholeness and perfection, the separation of the sexes in Judaism is declared by Levinas to be original. To illustrate this he incorporates this separation into the story of Genesis: "The two faces of the primitive Adam from the beginning look towards the side to which they will always remain turned. They are faces from the very outset" (Levinas 1990, 35). This image of an androgynous Adam is in fact the only figure of bodily fusion of the sexes to be found in Levinas's work. It forms part of the description of the feminine which occurs in his speculation on the origin of woman, in Eve: "Did she come from Adam's rib? Was this rib [*côte*] not a *side* [*côté*] of Adam, created as a single being with two faces that God separated while Adam, still androgynous, was sleeping?" (Levinas 1990, 35).

Levinas does not, therefore, project any image of embodied union for the "future" of sexual difference. But this does not imply that the subject of Levinas's ethics is disembodied or transcendent. The ethical "I" is incarnate, dwells, and has a relationship of enjoyment (*jouissance*) with the elements (see Levinas 1969, sec 2). In *Otherwise than Being* (1981) the

subject is described as an embodied sensibility, passive and essentially vulnerable. Irigaray's critique of Levinas in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" is targeted at the erotic relationship of subject and other, but, perhaps misleadingly, implies that the subject of Levinas's ethics transcends the flesh in all its relationships with that other: "Levinas is seeking [...] neither the qualities of the other's flesh nor of his own" (Irigaray 1991, 179).

In the "Phenomenology of Eros" Levinas refers to only one form of community of lovers, the "community of sentient and sensed" or the "identity of feeling" accomplished in voluptuosity (Levinas 1969, 265). This is rejected by Irigaray as "a call for communion in the secret depths of the sensible realm and not for a defloration of herself as a woman" (Irigaray 1993b, 211). Again, clearly, Levinas's erotics are not bodily enough for Irigaray. It is perhaps surprising, however, that she does not observe how voluptuosity, by affording a form of community or identity between lovers, seems to thwart, at least to some degree, the separation of same and other on which Levinas insists throughout <u>Totality and Infinity</u>.

There may be no amorous exchange of the kind Irigaray is looking for in Levinas's "Phenomenology of Eros," but there is a reading of the body she does not appear to address. Levinas's description of the body of the beloved woman states that "in the carnal given to tenderness, the body quits the status of existent" (Levinas 1969, 258). "The carnal, the tender par excellence correlative of the caress, the beloved, is to be

identified neither with the body-thing of the physiologist, nor with the lived body [corps propre] of the 'I can', nor with the body-expression" (258). Erotic equivocation extends to the very form of the body of the beloved: "In the caress, a relation yet, in one aspect, sensible, the body already denudes itself of its very form" (258).

This precariousness and lack of fixed form Levinas ascribes to the beloved in the "Phenomenology of Eros" seems to resemble closely Irigaray's descriptions of the female imaginary. She defines the female imaginary as a mobile and shifting morphology, distinct from the values of unity and containment which have shaped much of Western philosophy, and which reveal how the Western philosophical tradition has been formed under the influence of an imaginary based on the male body. It is because she understands Levinas's characterization of the erotic relation to be entirely shaped by the closure and self-containment of the male imaginary that Irigaray accuses Levinas of not seeing the importance of the "shared outpouring" (effusion à deux) or "loss of boundaries" (effacement des bords) of erotic love (Irigaray 1991, 180). This presupposes that the erotic body Levinas describes has the boundary or boundaries Irigaray says it does, that it has a fixed form. But as we have seen, the carnal and the tender as described by Levinas "denude" the body of its form. The self-containment of the erotic body is also something which the mutually constitutive roles of lover and beloved render far from certain.

Is it possible that the material exchange Irigaray describes

as fundamental to amorous relations is already at work in the "Phenomenology of Eros"? The type of boundary implied by the alternation of separation and fusion she sees as characteristic of erotic relations is a porous or mucous membrane which admits material interchange without total dissolution. If this is also implied in the equivocal status ascribed to the body by Levinas, it clearly has implications for Irigaray's critique. There can be no doubt about the secondary ethical status accorded to the feminine in the "Phenomenology of Eros," and about the derogatoriness of the terms in which "she" is described, but is Levinas's characterization of the body of the feminine as retrograde as Irigaray seems to think?

Irigaray seems to assume that the female form as described by Levinas has a fixed, essential being, a notion which it is hard to locate in Levinas's writing. This is a tendency also uppermost in the second of Irigaray's questions to Levinas, where she asks how the other may be defined. In one sense this question is unanswerable, since to define would be to seek to limit the one who makes infinite demands upon our responsibility. The Other is no longer Other if it is seen as "a postulate, the projection or the remnant of a system, a hermeneutic locus of crystallization of meaning, etc." (Irigaray 1991, 181). In another sense all Levinas's work may be understood as the attempt to answer this question. The other and transcendence are not defined, but met with, as and in the face, accessible only via interhuman experience. When she criticizes Levinas for not defining the other, is Irigaray not

underestimating the difficulty and paradoxical nature of that task?

The body and its senses also appear to form the main sticking point in another of the differences between herself and Levinas Irigaray identifies. The phenomenological relation of self and Other described by Levinas in Totality and Infinity is radicalized, in Otherwise than Being, to become what Levinas calls substitution, a sensuous exposure to the Other which precedes and exceeds the intentionality of consciousness. For Levinas, substitution is a passivity that bears the burden of everything for which the Other is responsible. It describes the very structure of infinite responsibility, the asymmetrical relation with the Other, as Levinas writes in Ethics and Infinity: "I can substitute myself for everyone, but no one can substitute himself for me.[...] It is in this precise sense

> that Dostoyevsky said: 'We are all responsible for all and for all men before all, and I more than all the others'"

(Levinas 1985, 101). A chapter on substitution is central to the development of Levinas's notion of ethical subjectivity in Otherwise than Being. In this book he develops the concept of substitution away from ontological intentional consciousness and into corporeal and material terms: substitution is described as "making a gift of my own skin," as "giving to the other by taking the bread out of my own mouth" (Levinas 1981, 138). The paradigm of substitution is the maternal body, "the body as passivity and renouncement, a pure undergoing" (Levinas 1981, 79). Maternal selflessness is here evaluated, extremely

problematically from a feminist standpoint, not as a constructed social attribute but as a goodness of the flesh, which exists for the other (unborn) child before existing for itself. The structure of substitution is that of anxiously divided flesh that puts the Other before itself but is constituted only in and through its relation with that Other.

Irigaray opposes on two counts the structure of substitution as Levinas describes it. She states first that it represents "a kind of formalism or disordered drift," "an infinite series of substitutions, an operation which seems to me non-ethical" (Irigaray 1991, 182). The implication here is (again) that Levinas's ethics is not grounded in the body, that it is foreign to the passions of the flesh, an assertion that sits oddly with the sensuous character of substitution described in Otherwise than Being. Irigaray's second objection to substitution, linked to the first, is that Levinas has not thought through the relationship of the body to sexual difference. This adds a further dimension to the subordination of sexual difference to ethical difference Derrida identifies in Levinas's work in "At this very moment in this work here I am" (Derrida 1991, 46). Does Irigaray's reiteration, in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas," of the way in which Levinasian voluptuosity "presents man as the sole subject exercising his desire and his appetite upon the woman who is deprived of subjectivity except to seduce him" (1991, 185) suggest an unwillingness to engage with the deconstruction of the priority of the ethical over the sexual which Derrida undertakes in "At this very moment..."?

The privileging of the sole position of maternity in Otherwise than Being compounds the obfuscation of the maternal genealogy and of relations between women Irigaray reads in the philosophers of the metaphysical tradition, and works against rather than toward her sexual differentiation of male from female at all levels of the symbolic economy. When, however, Irigaray points out for a second time that "a place of irreducible non-substitutability exists within sexual difference" (Irigaray 1991, 185), she does not specify what it is which marks out this place of non-substitutability. If Irigaray does not make this clear at this point this is, I suggest, because it requires more and possibly lengthy explanation of the specificity with which she is using the concept of "place," which is distinct from the twin notions of position and identification employed by psychoanalytic theories of sexual difference. Irigaray insists on the difference between the concept of identification and that of place: "Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other -- they are irreducible one to the other" (Irigaray 1993a, 13). A primary way in which her refusal of the exchangeability of male and female may be understood is as a refusal of the Lacanian concept of identification which allows subjects to take up a position on either side of the divide marked out by the law of the phallus.

Not specifying that it is her interpretation and use of the concept of place which accounts for the non-substitutability in sexual difference she insists on seems, then, like an omission

in Irigaray's argument in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas." Irigaray and Levinas seem to be using the term "substitution" in different senses. The example of substitution Irigaray goes on to give, in which the lack of preparedness of the peoples of monotheism to assert that their God is a woman is cited as a reason for the persistence of non-substitutability, also obscures the difference between them. Does the difficulty and/or remoteness of substitution at all levels of the socioreligious economy mean that substitution as Levinas describes it -- not an act, but a structurally passive relationship of responsibility
-- is invalid?

The critical and often hostile tone adopted by Irigaray in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas" marks a shift in approach from "The Fecundity of the Caress" which it is impossible to ignore. Is it because she hoped to engage Levinas in dialogue about the subordination of voluptuosity to spiritual "fecundity" and of the feminine to the telos of paternity, and received no response, that she changes tack? Does the shift from deconstructive reading to oppositional and often aggressive questioning represent "a powerful, necessary and compelling feminist critique of Levinas?" (Critchley 1992, 143 n.10).

Critchley's estimation of the importance of Irigaray's intervention is made in distinction to Derrida's adoption of a woman's voice in "At this very moment in this work here I am," a tactic without which the redistribution of sexual marks between the feminine Other and the masculine economy of the Same which

he effects in that text -- the deconstruction of the priority of ethical difference over sexual difference -- would not be operable. Whether Derrida's mimicry of the feminine is politically dangerous and calls for feminist critique is a question that cannot be broached without entering in detail into the relationship between deconstruction and feminism and its history. That relationship can, however, perhaps be usefully compared to the (non-)dialogue between Irigaray and Levinas I have followed here, a communication or contact Irigaray would wish to be recognized as belonging to both ethical and erotic modes, simultaneously.<11>

But despite the nuptial potential of their respective initials (reversed and placed back to back, like the two faces of the androgynous Adam which figure in Levinas's version of the Genesis story, these generate the most sexually ambiguous of subjects, i.l.l.e.): Irigaray and Levinas make an improbable couple. As an addendum to this unlikely relationship, however, I suggest that there is more ground common to them than either of the textual encounters initiated by Irigaray suggests. The motifs that will guide the envisagement of this *rapprochement* are (once again) fecundity, voluptuosity, the threshold, and the sensible transcendental.<12>

The ambiguity that characterizes Levinas's descriptions of eroticism is an oscillation between silence and speech, or between secrecy and open, frank communication. For Levinas, the feminine *is* this equivocation of language. As we have seen, this ambiguity extends to the morphology of the feminine body,

which hovers between being and non-being, never presenting fixed, transgressible limits to the male lover. Undefinable or constantly shifting borders also characterize the oscillation between oneness and twoness Irigaray finds in the female body, in the image of the two lips repeatedly touching and separating. The lips are a figure for a threshold (seuil) that is not a closed border, a limit whose significance is not that it keeps otherness out, but that it allows it to be hospitably received, redistributed and exchanged:

> (Two sets of lips that, moreover, cross over each other like the arms of the cross, the prototype of the crossroads between. The mouth lips and the genital lips do not point in the same direction. In some way they point in the direction opposite from the one you would expect, with the "lower" ones forming the vertical.) (Irigaray 1993a, 18)

A crossroads is both a meeting-place and a parting of the ways, a point of passage between opposites which allows traditionally conceived-of dichotomies to encounter one another anew, regroup and follow new paths. For Irigaray the female sex (le sexe féminin) is this chiasmic threshold: "A remaking of immanence and transcendence, notably through this threshold which has never been examined as such: the female sex" (Irigaray 1993a, 18).

Unsurprisingly, it is only Irigaray who argues that the status and possibilities of this threshold have always gone

unrecognized, and that it is the reconnection of the transcendental to the sensible which will allow women their "permanent becoming" and refertilize the sclerotic relationships of the masculine symbolic economy. This reconnection is, however, described by Levinas in quasi-identical terms as the mode of the feminine. Alongside and beyond the critique Irigaray articulates in "Questions to Emmanuel Levinas", the way in which Levinas's feminine facilitates the creation of a passage between can also be recognized. To develop and exploit Levinas's articulation of the feminine is not equivalent to asking him to speak on women's behalf.<13>

Another parallel with her project(s) which Irigaray might find in Levinas's writing concerns both the levels at which Eros has been understood as operating, from Plato onward, and the relation of a feminist erotics to temporality. What Levinas terms voluptuosity falls short of the infinite relation with the Other established in fecundity. For Levinas, fecundity has a stable, sustained transcendence that is missing from voluptuosity, whose relation with the face does not prevent its doubling back on itself. In Levinasian fecundity, love has reached its telos, but voluptuosity, "this unparalleled conjuncture of identification" (Levinas 1969, 266) does not ensure complementarity or equal status between lovers such as exists between father and son. Voluptuosity describes an eros that cannot be utilized for procreation, a mingling ebb and flow of desires: "Voluptuosity hence aims not at the Other but at his voluptuosity; it is voluptuosity of voluptuosity, love of the

love of the other" (Levinas 1969, 266).

Revealingly, the English translation of Totality and Infinity genders the Other male at this point, the necessity of sexed personal pronouns in English rendering "sa volupté" as "his voluptuosity." But shortly afterward, Levinas's text makes it clear that the mode of volupté is feminine: the voluptuous "I" returns from transcendence to itself, but the self to which it returns is not the same self from which it departed -- a modification which is effected by feminine erotic difference:

> The subject in voluptuosity finds himself again as the self (which does not mean the object or the theme) of an other, and not only as the self of himself. The relationship with the carnal and the tender precisely makes this self arise incessantly: the subject's trouble is not assumed by his mastery as a subject, but is his being moved [attendrissement], his effemination [...]. There is in the erotic relationship a characteristic reversal of the subjectivity issued from position, a reversion of the virile and heroic I. (Levinas 1969, 270)

Although the feminine is not accorded the status of the subject of love by Levinas, voluptuosity is thus strikingly similar to the "double desire" between the two sexes Irigaray describes as "a chiasmus or a double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself" (Irigaray 1993a, 9). Although it appears "autistic, egological, solitary" (Irigaray 1991, 180),

voluptuosity returns to the self only to move away again; "in this complacence it equally moves away from itself" (Levinas 1969, 266). Erotic voluptuosity does not coincide with itself at its point of origin, but describes an open series of loops that double back on themselves without completing closed circles. The (feminized) subject in love is swept out and ahead of itself and maintained in alteration in this way. The motion and rhythm of these repeated non-identical departures is, I suggest, the same as that described by Irigaray in the self-displacing regeneration she calls "fecundity."

The rhythm and motion of these non-identical repetitions also reveal what may be called an erotic temporality at work -- a temporality of growth in cycles of varying speed. Irigaray differentiates cyclical time from linear time, the time of embodied beings from the time of the machine: "As long as we are embodied, we cannot go beyond a certain rhythm of growth" (Irigaray 1993a, 74). This rhythm is one in which pausing enables the subject to draw on material resources that remain forgotten and unused in an economy of the tekhnè -- the time we have become accustomed to under the reign of Western metaphysics. Metaphysical time is a progressive, linear time that constantly accelerates: "Doesn't the machine unceasingly threaten to destroy us through the speed of its acceleration?" (Irigaray 1993a, 74). What Irigaray calls "man's" "vital speed, a growth speed that is compatible with all his senses and meanings" (Irigaray 1993a, 73), what I am here calling an erotic temporality, requires braking as well as acceleration, periods

for the replenishment of resources. Only this renewed relationship to a natural economy of "the vitality of the soil and the fertility of the great cosmic rhythms" (Irigaray 1993a, 100) can found a new ethical order. For the drive-based mechanical bodily economy of tension and discharge which has dominated Western metaphysics, an erotics of and in the feminine can substitute an organic rhythm "made possible by love that takes and gives time" (Irigaray 1993a, 143).<14>

The time of the passage between the sensible and the transcendental described by Irigaray, and by Levinas in voluptuosity, moves in this revivifying rhythm. It works on the individual body as it does on the relation between lovers. As a type of time, it closely resembles the temporality explored by Derrida in The post card: From Socrates to Freud and beyond, where the rhythm of history is described as a tension between "protentions" (envois) and "retentions" (renvois) (Derrida 1987a; see also Hobson 1987). For Irigaray and Levinas the history in question is that of the individual ethical/erotic subject, whose "growth" follows the same looping or limping motion as history itself. In this feminine erotic temporality, advances are made, some kind of "progress" is achieved, but according to a rhythm of alternate acceleration and braking, a cyclical motion in which each cycle marks a shift of level in the constitution of the subject.

Is it not possible to detect this halting yet fecund movement in the shuttling back and forth of the voluptuous subject of Levinas's erotics? The passivity and tenderness that overtake

the virile and heroic "I" during the erotic relation are at least comparable to Irigaray's fertile passivity of bodily and amorous regeneration (see Irigaray 1993a, 25-28, 72-74). Although Levinas goes on to describe the sublation of voluptuousness into the fecundity of filiality, the passion of voluptuosity traces a passage between the sensible and the transcendental which is both carnal and spiritual, which has not yet been channeled into the procreation of the son. On its own, the occurrence in Levinas's writing of oscillating feminine erotic difference clearly falls short of a feminist gesture, but the alterity introduced into his discourse by the evocation of voluptuosity may perhaps be read as a glimpse of the divinized and mutually fecund amorous relations that would characterize the third era of the West to which Irigaray looks forward, the age of the couple, or of the Spirit and the Bride.