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## **Rorty with Irigaray: Toward Culture of Love and Non-Violence**

### **Introduction**

In the lecture, I will first defend the claim, posited by Rosi Braidotti in *Transpositions*, about Irigaray being an “ethical pragmatist” and thus uncover Irigaray’s unspoken but visible and precious feminist link to pragmatism. First I will approach dialogically Irigarayan and Deweyan methods and discuss striking similarities in some of their works. I will then turn to Rorty’s later writings, such as *The Future of Religion* and *An Ethics for Today*, where Rorty appropriates the ethical and horizontal (i.e., a sensible) meaning of spirituality and relates it to his neopragmatist ideas. Rorty’s ideas will be interpreted in close connection to Irigaray’s third phase in her work, devoted to the so called “Age of the Breath” or “spiritual” age, when, according to her, ethical gestures of love and nonviolence will predominate. In her later works Irigaray defends the way of an infinite, and, we may add, experimentalist character of our becoming. It is only possible to secure a world for myself through a projection toward the future horizon of between-us. In this pragmatist-experimentalist character of her work her works can be related to Rorty’s writings on ethics and religion. In the conclusion of the lecture I’ll reflect upon the potential of both thinkers as regards their views on the progress of sentiments and their prospects for the future of democracy and its social hope and therefore try to indicate in which regard both Rorty and Irigaray offer us a series of very fruitful philosophical and ethical strategies for inaugurating a new epoch in politico-ethical thinking, an epoch I would designate as a *democratic culture of love and non-violence*.

### **I**

This essay is an attempt to rethink the issue of democratic experimentalism from an ethical point of view and look at its potential for the future by way of drawing on, in my opinion, two key thinkers of the late 20th and early 21st century: Richard Rorty and Luce Irigaray. It is an attempt to bring both thinkers closer to the rich democratic ideals of Dewey and at the same moment to explore some possible further developments within pragmatism and feminism that would lead to a conceptualization of the idea of democracy as a way toward culture of love and non-violence. Although the original points of departure of Rorty and Irigaray could not differ more (analytical philosophy vs. Lacanian psychoanalysis) there still exists a common ground (especially in their later works) for putting them into a fruitful

dialogue. Beyond the fact that both in fact entered the philosophical arena with a book on the role of “mirrors” and the criticism of the “Eye of the mind” in the history of Western epistemology and metaphysics (Rorty published his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, and her seminal *Speculum of the Other Woman* Irigaray slightly earlier, in 1974), in their later works both Rorty and Irigaray are clearly and passionately committed to one sole goal: they see the progress of sentiments<sup>1</sup> as a most useful way of hoping for any future ethics and culture of democracy. Both are also fervent critics of the “classical” vertical transcendence and pledge for a more sensible and “pragmatist”, horizontal mode of our “between-us” as a mode of associated living. In the very first lines of one of her later works (*Sharing the World*) Luce Irigaray defends her philosophical project in a way that heavily resembles Dewey’s pragmatist ideals:

When the world corresponds to the transcendence projected by a single subject [than ... t]he intuition of the infinite can remain, but the dynamic, indeed the dialectical, relations between time and space somehow or other freeze.... And the proposal of new values is generally contested until the milieu becomes imbued with them and imposes them as an almost eternal reality of truth, after it has become immune to their novelty.<sup>2</sup>

In her works Irigaray defends the way of an infinite, and, we may add, experimentalist character of our becoming. It is only possible to secure a world for myself through a projection toward the future horizon of between-us. In this process I have to acknowledge the irreducible otherness of the other (her/his transcendence) and respect the sexual difference (the difference being both natural/empirical and transcendental). This dialectics – i.e., a process from the closure of subjectivity toward the transcendence of the other – is the first possibility of the revelation or opening of the infinite in me. Only when I am imbued with the irreducible otherness of the other, and fully attuned to its horizons, contesting my fixed and static existence, it is possible to ascertain the dynamic and dialectical (but peaceful) relation between two worlds. It is indeed possible to bring Irigaray to the closest vicinity of pragmatism even more directly.

In her book on nomadic ethics entitled *Transpositions*, Rosi Braidotti labels Irigaray’s work with the term “ethical pragmatism.” Braidotti draws on Irigaray, labeling her as a critic of liberal individualism and characterizing her as a thinker whose

proper object of ethical inquiry is not the subject's moral intentionality, or rational consciousness, as much as the effects of truth and power that his or her actions are likely to have upon others in the world. This is a kind of ethical pragmatism, which is attuned to the embodied materialism of a non-unitary vision of the subject.<sup>3</sup>

This position sees Irigaray's unspoken but visible feminist link to pragmatism as something very precious. It also enables one to approach dialogically Irigarayan and Deweyan methods and consequently mutually enrich both. On the one hand there's the continuity of experience and nature, or a pragmatist constellation of organism(s) and environment (its version of a between-us) that can be enriched by the transcendental projection of a subject, redirected in this process into the world of the other, i.e., into the irreducibility of his/her difference, and on the other, it provides Irigarayan world with a possibility to *dynamize* the dialectics of sexual difference both in the transcendental as well as natural (empirical) sense.

## II

By approaching as well as appropriating the various antagonisms of our age – the many contexts in which violence predominates in its many forms (through language, gender and other intersubjective relations, institutions, religions, ultimately war in its many brutal forms) – it is not an easy task to establish within ourselves a platform for an ethics and politics of otherness that is non-violent, and which could offer a genuine place for the future conversation or communication of humanity through newly invented language or some other gesture of love and respect for the other. For this reason, when we approach the democratic environments and wish to explore their future possibilities, our horizons are ultimately obstructed by the not yet resolved tensions between the ideals and the power in one of its many forms. Irigaray's writings explore the possibilities to think the life of democracy beyond extant power relations and open up new spheres of love and justice. In this sense her work or *oeuvre* is directed toward a new theory of subjectivity that is needed urgently in our times.

From Plato to Hegel, Western humanity (or, Western man) has been tragically caught up in the structural paradox: any theory of subjectivity with its imminent ontology was aiming at something bigger than itself but always somehow stayed within the shell of its closed monosubjective or monocultural identity. When constructing the world for the other man (rarely a woman: a society), for other culture(s) (colonialism and religious violence), or nature (exploitation of nature, including nonhuman beings), it was never respectful toward any of

them in a genuine way. For maintaining and justifying this modality of being, Western man invented ideologies, gods and hierarchies which he then so ardently defended and followed throughout the history. But it was only through Heidegger's presentation of Being as *Gestell*, Levinas's ethics as *prima philosophia* and ultimately Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference that the disastrous consequences of forgetting the (Being of the) other (including nonhuman others and nature) in intersubjective relations were fully articulated within Western philosophy. The culture of true democracy, which, as it were, is the place where our awakening of "consciousness to another stage of its becoming"<sup>4</sup> might happen, was an integral part of this paradox.

In Irigaray's *I love to you* we are faced with a critique of the above mentioned Hegelian heritage: "we have to practice a different sort of recognition from the one marked by hierarchy."<sup>5</sup> With Hegel and a rich (explicit or implicit) legacy of him we were subjected to the constant pressures of relations that were dominated by a conflict, whether within the subject (psychoanalysis), between two subjects (struggle for recognition), within a religion (reason vs. faith), or philosophy and language (the notions of subject and self). This unresolved legacy – sometimes consciously, sometimes in a more hidden manner (and with some important exceptions beyond the ones already mentioned, such as Feuerbach, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Whitehead, Derrida, Bourdieu...) – permeated the air of Western post-metaphysical thinking up to our present age. To offer a distinct notion of subjectivity and to secure its place within the new intersubjective cosmos (with democracy as its most salient part), it is therefore necessary even today to purify our consciousness of its deposits that prevent our turn to the new "epoch of the alliance between women and men,"<sup>6</sup> an alliance or a model, from which the new cultivation of love and peaceful coexistence will spring. A radical *epoché* is therefore needed: it is like a new birth, the awakening of a "spiritual" nature in us. There is a name we can give to this ideal form of our living: it is a culture of democracy, different from the politics/political we have inherited and are now accustomed to and forced to follow; a democracy grounded in the process of our mutual and respectful sharing of love and peace or non-violence. This is what we can find in Rorty's democratic and utopian ideal as a path to social hope and justice, a path, based not on rationality, institutional design, procedures etc., but rather on a progress of sentiments and sympathies of – in Irigarayan terms – a space of between-us.

### III

How is all this related to Rorty's pragmatism? Rorty's ethical theory (if it is appropriate to call it a "theory" at all) is one of the most important contemporary contributions in opening up new possibilities for the ethical and social life of individuals. In this he was indeed following the rich heritage of Dewey's experimentalistic thinking. In his later writings, such as *The Future of Religion* and *An Ethics for Today*,<sup>7</sup> Rorty even appropriates the ethical and horizontal (i.e., a sensible) meaning of spirituality and relates it to his neopragmatist ideas. We read in *An Ethics for Today* about "spirituality" as posited in its old metaphysical (Plato, etc.) and post-metaphysical usages:

If spirituality is defined as a yearning for the infinite, then this charge is perfectly justified.... But if spirituality is thought of as an exalted sense of new possibilities opening up for finite beings, it is not.<sup>8</sup>

Based on this "spiritual" dimension of his late philosophy, I would like to offer a reading of Rorty which is sensitive to the path of love and non-violence as pertaining to the future culture of democracy. Already in James and Dewey, of course, we find explicit thoughts on the spiritual/religious character of ethics: in James we can derive this sense from his notion of intimacy. The passage reads:

the difference between living from a background of foreignness and one of intimacy means the difference between a general habit of wariness and one of trust. One might call it a social difference, for after all, the common *socius* of us all is the great universe whose children we are.<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, for James the universe was still spiritualistically designed and inhabited by a superhuman consciousness (also referred to as the wider self or a larger soul). But according to James, we all "inhabit an invisible spiritual environment" and the superhuman consciousness he refers to "has itself the external environment, and consequently is finite."<sup>10</sup> In this sense, James and Rorty speak the same language. It is precisely in James's subtly nuanced contention that God should "but have the least infinitesimal *other* of any kind beside him"<sup>11</sup> that human beings have been for the first time entrusted with a creative (i.e., experimental) role in this process. The process is marked by as many concrete streams of

individual experiences, reciprocal (and thus common) experiential attitudes, and subsequent acts as possible. It is a social process and it is led by our imagination. An ideal of a (common) faith of a human *socius* grows from it. Finally, in Dewey's beautifully nuanced words:

The things in civilization we most prize are not of ourselves. They exist by grace of the doings and sufferings of the continuous human community in which we are a link.... Such a faith has always been implicitly the common faith of mankind.<sup>12</sup>

It is from this common ground of pragmatism that I think the idiosyncratic – “spiritual” sense – of Rorty's ethics grows. It is not necessarily related to any sense of religion, of course. In his “Pragmatism as Romantic Polytheism,” Rorty already wrote about James's “polytheistic” use of the term “the divine” as being “pretty much equivalent to ‘the ideal.’”<sup>13</sup> He was also very supportive of Dewey's ideas in this regard. What Rorty clearly means by “religion” is religion on the ground, and this undoubtedly secures him a vital place for the future of ethics which must be sensitive to different religious outlooks, and, it goes without saying, to other (secular) versions of faith.

I've already mentioned the tension between power and ideals in the process of social change: Rorty warns us against confusing “ideals with power” and looks for an ethically (and interculturally, we might add) sensitive “horizontal progress toward a planetwide cooperative commonwealth” rather than a “vertical ascent toward something greater than the merely human.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, in his *The Future of Religion*, it is clear that his pragmatism is endowed with a mysterious sense of the holy, “bound with the hope that someday, any millennium now, [our] remote descendants will live in a global civilization in which love is pretty much the only law.”<sup>15</sup> With this Rorty has no doubt embarked on a path of love and non-violence as our most precious hope, an indispensable part of any future vision of democracy.

Let me now bring Irigaray's and Rorty's ethics together. We have seen that a genuine as well as ethically (and “spiritually”)-informed way of thinking is necessarily related to new sensitivities (such as care, sympathy, or more concretely – caress, touch, various gestures, including speech, of course) as a part of our mutual becoming: it is always within a culture (as cultivation) of democracy that we search for greater hope, greater care for and of each other – both being part of our inborn but also socially enacted capacities for future cooperative existence based on love and peaceful coexistence (non-violence). In a civilization of

technological and informational *plenitude*, in which our lives are governed with the insatiable desire for *more*, we forget to nourish what is most natural and intimate (in James's sense) in us: for both Irigaray and Rorty, natural feelings between mother and child (or maternal love)<sup>16</sup> are the finest example of this. Notwithstanding the different views on some aspects of intersubjective relations (on sexual difference, but not on language), they share one very important common feature: moral ideals cannot "be grounded in something larger than ourselves,"<sup>17</sup> but always arise in the ongoing progress of our increasing sensitivities – i.e., enriching our sentiments and sympathies toward others. Elsewhere I have interpreted this view of moral progress with a statement of Rorty that "human beings have only bodies and not souls."<sup>18</sup> It is this well-known alliance of Rorty with the feminism of Annette Baier that in my opinion gives us Rorty at his best.<sup>19</sup>

The foremost question for *an ethics of today* therefore is, how will we – regardless of our sexual, generational, or, as we will see, cultural contexts or milieus – be able to secure a world for us, where our most natural impulses, desires, and hopes will enable us to imagine an *ethico-spiritual* platform for various future intersubjective and intercultural relations. Any impulse toward democratic experimentalism and visionary thinking must be attentive to this part of our lives and of the lives of others: the culture of democracy in its most elemental form is but respect and care for life. Only later can this elementary ethical layer of democracy be supplemented with various institutional, legal and other socio-political elements. I am not thinking here of an epistemological or any other "priority" of ethics over democracy, but, using Heideggerian or Irigarayan language, I am thinking of a primacy of our relation to Being, a primacy not bound to some ontology, but only to a Rortyan hope for a mystery of the "coming into existence of a love that is kind, patient, and endures all things."<sup>20</sup> This is a genuine post-metaphysical ideal, which is common to both (neo)pragmatists and feminists.

## Conclusion

Allow me to conclude this short lecture in a more poetic and romantic tone. Irigaray once wrote that human freedom resembles “the sap that comes out of a delicate plant, and that grows or withers depending on whether or not the surroundings in which it appears are favorably disposed towards its existence, its becoming.”<sup>21</sup> This is another striking similarity between Rorty and Irigaray to be mentioned – I think of their common love and care for the nature. For both Rorty and Irigaray, flowers and birds are important companions in their lives: I find this an important testimony to their sensible nature and to the personal ethics that they share, as well as to their Romanticism, as expressed in the unlimited spaces flowers are providing and birds are inhabiting. Rorty’s passionate love for Wild Orchids is a well-known autobiographical fact, also we know that Rorty was a dedicated birdwatcher. It seems to me that precisely in this both Rorty and Irigaray are the truly guardians of the idea of human freedom.<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

1. Cf. Annete Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments* (Cambridge MA: Cambridge University Press, 1991).
2. Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. ix and xii. I owe my gratitude for this observation to Tomaž Grušovnik.
3. Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2006), 14. She also credits with the same term Deleuze's "ethics of nomadic sustainability" (ibid.).
4. Luce Irigaray, *Democracy Begins Between Two*, tr. K. Anderson (London: Athlone Press, 2000), p. 6.
6. Orig. *La democrazia comincia a due* (1994), p. 4
5. Luce, Irigaray, *I Love To You: Sketch for a Felicity Within History*, tr. A. Martin (New York / London: Routledge, 1996), p. 105.
6. Luce Irigaray, *Key Writings*, p. 169 (»The Age of the Breath«).
7. It is well-known that in *The Future of Religion* Rorty weakened his earlier firm atheistic position in favour of a more narrow (political) view of "anticlericalism" (*The Future of Religion / R. Rorty and G. Vattimo*, ed. S. Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, p. 33).
8. Richard Rorty, *An Ethics for Today* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), p. 14.
9. William James, "A Pluralistic Universe," in W. James, *Writings 1902–1910* (New York: The Modern Library), p. 644.
10. Ibid., pp. 770 and 771. Cf. David C. Lamberth, "Interpreting the universe after a social analogy: Intimacy, panpsychism, and a finite god in a pluralistic universe," in Ruth Anna Putnam, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 245 and 244. I agree with Lamberth's thesis that *A Pluralistic Universe* "can be seen to offer an important vantage on the developing details of James's philosophical position" (p. 237).
11. Ibid., p. 772.
12. John. Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 87.
13. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 29.
14. Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, p. 17.
15. *The Future of Religion / R. Rorty and G. Vattimo*, p. 40.
16. Cf. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and Social Hope* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 78.
17. Rorty, *An Ethics for Today*, p. 8.
18. See chapter 6 of my *Pragmatist Variations on Ethical and Intercultural Life*. Here I reinterpret propose in an idiosyncratic reading of Rorty as "semi-naturalist" that he was probably less opposed to American religious naturalism or various forms of empiricism than he frequently claimed in his writings.
19. On some "pragmatist-feminist" alternatives see: N. Rumens and M. Keleman "American Pragmatism and Feminism," *Contemporary Pragmatism*, Vol . 7, No. 1 (June 2010), 129–148. The

closest similarity to my reading of Rorty and Irigaray as well as Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference in this paper is the perspectivistic position, as (critically and being aware of a danger of inherent essentialist suppositions) explained by the authors as a principle when "men's and women's experiences and outlooks differ" (p. 136). I find an important perspective for the issue of democratic experimentalism also in the following passage: "The pragmatist-feminist ethnographer must show a genuine interest in the future, in the alternatives that may just happen, and in perspectives that are not yet realized" (p. 142).

20. *The Future of Religion / R. Rorty and G. Vattimo*, p. 40.

21. Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World*, pp. xix–xx.

22. On Rorty as birdwatcher see for example Judith M. Green, "On the Passing of Richard Rorty and the Future of American Philosophy," *Contemporary Pragmatism*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (December 2007), 35–44; on Luce Irigaray and birds see "Animal Compassion," in *Animal Philosophy*, ed. Peter Atterton and Matthew Callarco (London: Continuum, 2008), pp. 195–201.

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