

# Sexing the state

## Familial and political form in Irigaray and Hegel

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In her political writings since the mid-1980s, Luce Irigaray has developed a highly original and provocative conception of the good society, according to which every aspect of social life should be so arranged as to promote the expression, cultivation and accentuation of the sexual difference between women and men. The law should allocate rights and obligations only to individuals qua members of a sex, never to individuals defined in sex-neutral terms; and all institutions and activities should be organized upon sexually differentiated lines. Irigaray is unusual among feminist thinkers in believing this intensification of sexual difference, rather than its minimization or deconstruction, to be necessary to secure justice for women. Rather surprisingly, her unusual vision of society has received little attention from feminist philosophers, who tend to take her political thought less seriously than her earlier studies of masculinism in the Western philosophical tradition. This neglect stems largely from the popular and often hyperbolic tone of her political writings, which has unfortunately concealed from most readers the complex and sophisticated philosophical background to her social and political thought. This article has as its general aim the reconstruction of this background in order to make possible a richer appreciation and evaluation of Irigaray's political claims.

Irigaray's conception of the good society is informed and shaped, more specifically, by her long-standing engagement with Hegel's political philosophy, especially his reflections on the relationship between the family and the state.<sup>1</sup> Commentators frequently note Hegel's centrality to the development of Irigaray's political thinking,<sup>2</sup> but generally oversimplify the nature of her relationship to him, portraying it as purely antagonistic. According to the standard, oversimplified, picture of this relationship, Irigaray thinks that social and political life should allow people to express and realize their corporeality, breaking with the purportedly Hegelian view that the organization of

social life should reflect non-natural, exclusively spiritual, principles.<sup>3</sup> Irigaray's relationship to Hegel is, in fact, more complicated and subtle than this, unfolding in two phases: an early reading of his *Phenomenology of Spirit* in her 1974 book *Speculum of the Other Woman*, and later rereadings of the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* in *Sexes and Genealogies* (1987) and *I Love To You* (1992).<sup>4</sup> The project that emerges through these successive readings is to identify a relationship between family and state in which the state neither opposes the family – as did the ancient republics, according to Hegel – nor simply acquiesces in the injustice to women that the family naturally breeds, a trend Hegel endorses in modern, post-Enlightenment, states. Irigaray proposes that the state should, instead, 'cultivate' the family out of its natural form, thereby enabling a just relationship between men and women within the family and making possible women's full participation in wider social life. Irigaray also draws from her readings of Hegel a further argument that the cultivation of the family must involve its structuration by laws expressing what she considers to be the metaphysical reality of sexual difference. She then derives the conclusion that the organization of all social practices, and the content of all laws, must reflect the same metaphysics if public life is to remain continuous with, rather than oppositional to, family life. Thus, Irigaray's interpretations of Hegel generate an intricate argument for her unusual conception of the good society.

Of course, that Irigaray's political claims are rigorously grounded in Hegel's thought does not in itself show them to be attractive. On the contrary, Irigaray's filiation with Hegel afflicts her politics with serious problems: in particular, she inherits his belief that the family is based in naturally heterosexual desires. Despite this, I will argue, her political views remain interesting to the extent that they attempt to envisage a form of political community which remains connected

with, yet irreducible to, bodily life and intimate affective relationships.

### Hegel's account of ancient Greek society

Irigaray's first engagement with Hegel in *Speculum* sets the parameters for all her subsequent interpretations of him and for the development of her political thought generally. She focuses on his account of the conflict between the polis and the family in chapter VIA of the *Phenomenology*, 'The True Spirit. The Ethical Order'. As with all her readings of canonical philosophers in *Speculum*, Irigaray follows Hegel's discussion closely, paraphrasing and imitating his own words to foreground particular aspects of his argument. Understanding her early reading of Hegel therefore requires some familiarity with his initial account of this conflict. He sees the polis and the family as the two central social institutions of ancient Greece, whose conflict precipitates the collapse of Greek life and its supersession by Roman society. In narrating this conflict, Hegel's central aim is to show how the ancient Greek form of political community rendered itself unstable and ultimately unviable by refusing validity to family life. His account is thus intended both as a historical description of ancient Greece and as a normative critique of its political institutions.

Hegel claims that citizens of the ancient polis were 'immediately' united with their community: they identified wholeheartedly with the good of their community, articulated in its laws.<sup>5</sup> This was possible because ancient citizens lacked any sense of 'singular individuality' (*einzelne Individualität*). Certainly, according to Hegel, they regarded themselves as distinct from one another – as 'particular' (*besondere*) community members with special traits and distinct social tasks – but they lacked any sense of having purely individual interests, separate from their interests as members of the community, just in virtue of being particular individuals.<sup>6</sup> Since members of the polis lack a consciousness of separate individual interests, such purely individual interests as they have must find fulfilment outside the polis – in the family: 'The individual who seeks the pleasure of *enjoying his individuality*, finds it in the family'.<sup>7</sup> The family, Hegel claims, is the 'law of individuality', where the person's 'individuality, his blood, still lives on'.<sup>8</sup> This view of the family may seem odd: surely, one may think, the family *is* a community. In fact, Hegel claims that the family forms a community which resembles the polis in that family members, too, lack any sense of separate interests beyond those they have qua family members.<sup>9</sup>

The familial community differs from the political community, however, in being 'unconscious': family members cannot explicitly articulate the content of the communal norms they follow, because these norms are not expressed in publicly accessible laws, but only tacitly enshrined in unspoken traditions and practices. These tacit familial norms (prescribing veneration for ancestors and household gods) comprise the 'divine law', which Hegel contrasts to the 'human' – public, explicit – law of the polis.

Why do the family's communal norms remain tacit and inarticulate? Hegel replies that these norms are grounded in family members' *natural* relationships to one another, what he repeatedly calls their 'blood-relationships' (*Blutsverwandtschaften*). The family is, then, a '*natural* ethical community'.<sup>10</sup> It is based on the natural sexual relationship between husband and wife, which generates in them an awareness of and adherence to a shared good. Crucially, then, Hegel assumes that the family is a heterosexual unit, grounded in desires presumed to be naturally heterosexual. Because the content of the common good which family members share is given by nature, they can access it only by participating in the appropriate natural relationships (their ethical attitude, Hegel states, is inevitably 'mixed with a natural relation and with sensation').<sup>11</sup> Thus familial norms necessarily remain tacit due to their basis in natural relationships (between men and women, and, derivatively, parents and children, and among siblings). Having understood that, for Hegel, family relationships derive from nature, we can see why he regards the family as both a community and a place where purely individual interests and desires can be met.<sup>12</sup> Family relationships are natural in that they arise from desires for sex, reproduction and sustenance which people inherently have qua individuals, not as community members. More precisely, people have these desires as *physical*, corporeal, individuals. So, for Hegel, family relationships stem from individuals' inherent corporeal desires, yet these very relationships that people generate in gratifying their desires become the source of an exclusively communal identity which prevents people from consciously acknowledging the individuality of their desires.

Continuing his account of ancient Greece, Hegel analyses how polis and family clash. He emphasizes that the two institutions are sexually divided: only men progress out of the family into political life. He attributes this division, rather vaguely, to the sexes' 'diverse dispositions and capacities'.<sup>13</sup> Clearly, the point is not that men, on reaching maturity, permanently relinquish family life, but that they abandon

their earlier identification with their familial community and henceforward participate in family life without conceiving this participation as internal to their identity. The sexual division between the two spheres of Greek life, according to Hegel, engenders their conflict: women cannot identify with the political community and consequently can see no validity in actions which promote its good, while conversely men can see no validity in actions promoting the good of families. Sophocles' *Antigone* consummately illustrates the problem: Creon denies Antigone's right to bury her brother Polynices just because he is her brother; conversely, Antigone denies Creon's (and the polis's) right to value people solely for their contribution to public life and hence to condemn Polynices for declaring war on Thebes. Hegel argues, however, that because the agents of polis and family are incessantly drawn into conflict, they come to realize that the institutions they oppose exist necessarily and so must have some validity. This fills people with guilt for having violated valid institutions, prompting a further realization that the institutions they themselves supported led to these violations. In realizing this, agents have acquired an individual capacity for social criticism and can no longer embrace their social institutions wholeheartedly. This heralds the end of classical Greek society and the transition to a more individualistic way of life.

An unmistakable note of nostalgia pervades Hegel's portrayal of the polis, hanging over from his earlier tendency to idealize the ancient republics as paradigms of social integration and civic virtue. But the overriding theme of *Phenomenology* VI A is to criticize republican political life for its predication upon an ultimately unrealistic disavowal of the separate physical interests of individuals. With this point, Hegel is simultaneously criticizing the polis for denying validity to family life, which originates in individuals' inherent corporeal interests and desires. Hegel's analysis implicitly contrasts the polis with a preferable scenario in which citizens conceive it as integral to their political identity that they also have separate interests and hence recognize the necessity and legitimacy of interspersing politics with the pursuit of those interests, and with the participation in the familial relationships that arise as a result. Later, in his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that this scenario materializes in modern society, whose citizens no longer oppose, but recognize, family life and its ethical norms.

## Family life and the individual good

Irigaray discusses *Phenomenology* VI A in the section of *Speculum* named '...the eternal irony of the community...' (hereafter 'Eternal Irony'), after Hegel's famous dictum that 'womankind' is 'the eternal irony [in the life] of the community'.<sup>14</sup> Irigaray broadly accepts Hegel's criticisms that the polis unrealistically denies its citizens a sense of their separate interests and illegitimately opposes familial norms, but she deepens these criticisms with the further charge that the polis is constituted through men's violent repudiation of family life, which they then reorganize in a way unjust and injurious to women. In developing this charge, however, Irigaray combines it with an uncritical endorsement of the natural 'blood relationships' of the family, which proves politically unproductive, and ultimately casts her whole critique of the polis into question.

Irigaray endorses Hegel's account of the polis both as historical description and as normative critique: 'In his *Phenomenology* Hegel clearly traces the way that spirit develops in our culture' and he 'diagnosed the



fact that the ethical order was heading precipitously down, ... in the unresolved opposition between human law and divine law'.<sup>15</sup> But while approving Hegel's general characterization and criticism of the polis, she introduces a subtly transformed conception of the ancient family, which underpins her sharpened assessment of the faults of the polis. Irigaray claims that this revised conception of the family is already present within the *Phenomenology*, submerged under Hegel's dominant conception of it. The hidden conception of the family is (supposedly) implicit in Hegel's repeated references to family relations as 'blood relationships', which suggest that he sees blood as incarnating the inherent physical desires of an individual. Confirming

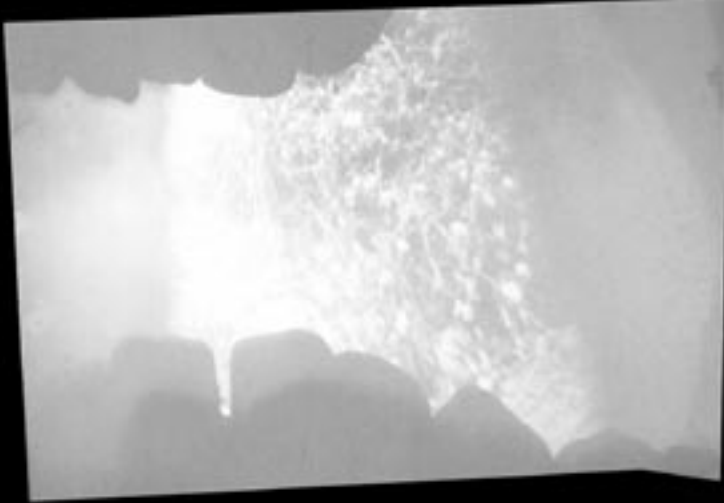
this suggestion, his *Philosophy of Nature* theorizes blood as the expressive vehicle of individual desires (as black bile contains and expresses melancholy in the theory of humours).<sup>16</sup> Irigaray infers that since Hegel sees blood as this expressive vehicle of individual desires, his 'blood relationships' must involve individuals allowing and encouraging one another to express, fulfil and cultivate the individual desires expressed in their 'blood', or more broadly their body and corporeal style.<sup>17</sup> Family members, Irigaray says, 'recognize one another in their singular individuality'.<sup>18</sup> To occupy a 'blood relationship' to another person means, for Irigaray, to respect and attend to the good that person has as a separate individual, as corporeally revealed. Although blood relationships are ethical, they can only arise from natural – sexual or parent–child – relationships, since only these bring individuals into the close physical proximity that allows them to appreciate and interpret the corporeal manifestations of one another's desires. It is this conception of family members as acting from naturally arising principles of respectful attentiveness to one another –

Its limitations notwithstanding, Irigaray's (partly) revised conception of the family leads her to a new understanding of polis/family conflict, in which the polis denies validity to family relationships in the sense of 'blood relationships' oriented to family members' good as corporeal individuals. This revised account of polis/family conflict, sketched in 'Eternal Irony', embodies a deeper critique of the polis than Hegel originally presented. Irigaray builds upon Hegel's allusion to Oedipus as a paradigmatic political agent, whose exclusively civic identification causes him to violate the entire structure of norms constituting his family (committing both murder and incest).<sup>20</sup> Irigaray extends this hint that the typical citizen leads an Oedipal sexual life. She suggests that republican citizenship, premised on the idea that citizens have no separate individual interests or desires, is a quintessentially masculine identity – an identity which men are uniquely motivated to assume, owing to a childhood difficulty in accepting that their bodies differ from those of their mothers. For girls, birth and separation from their mothers do not constitute an

irreparable break because they can (so Irigaray assumes) give birth themselves. For boys, though, their corporeal difference from their mothers makes birth an irrecoverable loss.<sup>21</sup> This motivates boys/men to deny that they have physical desires or interests separate from those of others. But since the family is premised upon recognition of and attentiveness to its individual members' separate interests, boys/men become motivated to break with the family and institute, or enter, a type of community – the polis – predicated upon its members lacking a sense of separate, particular, interests.<sup>22</sup> Republican citizenship has an underlying psychical function: to sustain the male fantasy of unbroken fusion with one's mother. Inevitably, therefore, ancient Greek citizens re-enact this fantasy in all

their sexual relationships, equating the women they desire with their mothers; Oedipus only dramatizes this. As Irigaray summarizes in *Sexes and Genealogies*: 'Citizens as a kind [*genre*] are cut off from their roots in the body, even as they remain bound, as bodies, to their mother-nature. Unable to resolve this issue, they let it determine their relations with women, whom they restrict to the role of mothers'.<sup>23</sup> Irigaray thus explains the historical emergence of the polis from the family, and, simultaneously, the exclusive masculinity of the polis, as conjoined consequences of men's peculiar difficulty in separating from their mothers. Interestingly, then, she does not reject Hegel's

er's individual, corporeally expressed, desires which Irigaray discerns beneath Hegel's dominant conception of family members as espousing a (still naturally arising) common good. This hidden conception is more historically accurate, according to Irigaray; above all, it is better attested to by the Greek tragedies (from which Hegel also drew his faltering insights into the true character of the ancient family).<sup>19</sup> Significantly, though, Irigaray remains faithful to Hegel in conceiving 'blood-relationships' as naturally *heterosexual* in so far as they ground biological families. As we will see, this assumption persists throughout Irigaray's thinking about the family, severely limiting its critical force.





claim that ancient Greek institutions were sexually divided due to the sexes' 'diverse dispositions and capacities'. Instead she specifies the sexually differentiated disposition that generates this division: men's tendency to resist separation from their mothers. Just as Irigaray accepted, and adapted, Hegel's view that natural desire is heterosexual, so she accepts, and adapts, his belief in essential psychical differences between the sexes which arise naturally.

Irigaray's attribution of 'Oedipal' sexuality to ancient citizens underpins her further argument that their sexual conduct progressively transforms the family into an oppressively communal institution which forbids its members any sense of individual identity. Men dwell in the family according to a fantasy of fusion with its various female members, who come to lose their own sense of individuation because men's attitude destroys their 'genealogies'. For Irigaray, mothers and daughters can only individuate themselves by referring to a sense of generational difference – that is, of different location in a genealogical chain. Because women in ancient Greece imbibe from male citizens an identical understanding of themselves as mothers, they lose this psychical ability to separate themselves from one another.<sup>24</sup> Antigone repeats the suicide of her mother Jocasta:

Whatever her current arguments with the laws of the city may be, another law already draws her along her path: identification with her/the mother. *But how are mother and wife to be distinguished?* Fatal paradigm of a mother who is wife and mother to her husband.<sup>25</sup>

The Oedipal attitude of citizens within the family converts it into what Irigaray later calls a 'sea of primitive undifferentiation' which precludes anyone individuating him- or herself relative to the other members. Reduced to this condition, family members can no longer act from the ethical principle of attention to one another's interests and instead start to promote their common good – the only good their fused condition allows them to recognize. Irigaray's narrative suggests that when Hegel defines the family as a community like the polis, he confuses the *secondary*, 'Oedipal', form of the family – acquired only via conflict with the polis – with the family per se, as a natural ethical structure whose members are oriented to one another's individual good.

Hegel criticized ancient Greek citizens for an unrealistic lack of awareness of their separate individual interests and for illegitimately opposing the norms of the family, which are as valid as the family is necessary. Irigaray agrees with Hegel that republican

citizenship presupposes an unrealistic unconsciousness of one's separate interests, but adds that this identity arises precisely *in reaction against* the attention to individual interests practised in the family. Citizen identity is constituted in a violent repudiation of natural corporeal relationships. Moreover, male citizens go on not only to oppose valid familial norms but also to transform the family into an oppressive institution that inflicts psychical fusion upon all its members, most harmfully its female members, who derive no emotional benefit from this transformation.

Irigaray derives these extended criticisms of the polis from her alternative conception of family life as promoting the individual good of its members, a conception she claims to retrieve from Hegel's *Phenomenology*. But she attributes this conception to Hegel because of the misguided assumption that he equates lack of awareness of separate non-political interests with lack of awareness of being a distinct individual with particular traits. This assumption is revealed when Irigaray claims that the polis assuages men's fear of bodily *distinctness* from others and that the family resembles the polis when its members lose all sense of *distinct* individuality (she remarks that the polis has 'resolved the ties (of blood) between singular individuals into *abstract* universality').<sup>26</sup> Irigaray projects onto Hegel her own – typically liberal – assumption that people can have no sense of individual identity without a sense of separate, non-political, interests. Since a sense of individual identity is plausibly regarded as a condition of both humanity and wellbeing, Irigaray's liberal assumption connects naturally enough with a further conviction that social relationships and institutions can be legitimate only if they allow and encourage individuals to pursue their separate interests. These background assumptions facilitate Irigaray's inference that if, as Hegel says, ancient family members pursued their separate interests, this must have gone together with their recognizing and respecting one another as individuals, and seeking to further one another's separate good. Irigaray errs exegetically in attributing this view of the family to Hegel, who firmly denies that 'particularity' requires 'singular individuality'.

Despite its exegetical inaccuracy, Irigaray's reading of Hegel generates an independently interesting account of the polis/family conflict. However, the same liberal assumption that misleads her reading of Hegel also causes Irigaray to endorse the ancient family unequivocally, with decidedly problematic consequences for the political force of her critique of the polis. Whereas Hegel criticizes both citizens *and* family members

– the latter for their inability to appreciate the good of the community as a whole – Irigaray does not chastise family members for refusing to recognize political norms, instead praising Antigone for defying state authority and insisting on the ethical asymmetry of Creon's and Antigone's actions.<sup>27</sup> Behind Irigaray's approval for the family lies the presupposition that its respect for individual interests makes it a uniquely legitimate social institution. Politically, this implies that society should be rebuilt around the nucleus of the family in its original, just, form, a programme indicated in some of Irigaray's later writings.<sup>28</sup> But this programme is infeasible from her own standpoint, which already implies that the family can never endure as a stable basis of social life: the very natural relationships between individuals which (according to Irigaray) originate familial ethical relationships of mutual attentiveness include the natural relationship between mothers and sons that motivates sons to deny their separateness and reject family life. Because familial ethical life exists on a purely *natural* basis, then, it invariably elicits in men precisely the tendency to break out into political life. The family is internally unstable, inherently tending to generate the political agents who resist and transform it. In this sense, Irigaray's analysis of ancient Greece tacitly incorporates a pessimistic philosophy of history in which natural, just, ethical relationships necessarily engender the very political community that repudiates and destroys them.<sup>29</sup> This undercuts the force of her critique of the polis, now positioned as historically inevitable. Irigaray's valorization of the ancient family exists only as nostalgia for the time preceding its inescapable self-subversion, not as advocacy of a viable alternative to life in the state.

### The state we're in and civil society

On first reading, Irigaray's later writings appear sharply distinguished from *Speculum* by their concentration upon concrete political themes. Yet, on closer inspection, all her political views are orchestrated by a project of ascertaining the appropriate relationship between family and state, which emerges from and reworks her thoughts on that topic in *Speculum*.<sup>30</sup> The change vis-à-vis *Speculum* is that Irigaray now specifically seeks a practically viable form of social life and so cannot simply valorize the archaic family, but, given the historical inevitability of the state and the 'Oedipal' family, must ask how they could be reformed and brought into more equitable coexistence. This gives her a new interest in assessing Hegel's account in the *Philosophy of Right* of how state and family should be reorganized to overcome the opposition

they exhibited in ancient times. As in the *Phenomenology*, Hegel's discussion in the *Philosophy of Right* blends description with justification, since he believes that the affectionate nuclear family and the liberal constitutional state as realized in post-Enlightenment Europe are ideally rational and legitimate, overcoming the opposition that ruined their ancient Greek precursors. Irigaray accepts his account of the modern family and state as a description, but rejects his normative conclusion, arguing that these institutions are inherently unjust towards women. Her understanding of the specific injustice of the modern family and state motivates her alternative conception of how they should be interrelated.

Although, for Hegel, the modern state and family differ markedly from their ancient precursors, they share with them certain essential features which continue to define them *as* state and family. The state remains the sphere in which the common good of the community as a whole is determined and executed, while families remain small-scale communities arising from relationships of natural (and still presumptively heterosexual) desire between particular individuals. Families, then, remain ethical communities whose members share a sense of their common good and lack any sense of purely individual interests – in Hegelian jargon, the family embodies the principle of 'immediate universality'. As in ancient Greece, this 'universality' arises from the natural relationships men and women initiate to fulfil their sexual and reproductive drives,<sup>31</sup> relationships that sustain in them 'the consciousness of ... unity with [one] another', in the inchoate, rationally inarticulable, shape of the feeling of 'love'.<sup>32</sup> It is characteristic of modernity, though, that the members of the family and state *recognize* one another: modern citizenship incorporates a recognition of the validity of what Hegel calls the 'principle of self-subsistent particularity', and, reciprocally, modern family members recognize the state, educating their children for civic life:

The state is the actuality of concrete freedom. But *concrete freedom* requires that personal individuality and its particular interests should reach their full *development* and gain *recognition* of their right ... and also that they should, on the one hand, *pass over* of their own accord into the interest of the universal, and on the other, knowingly and willingly acknowledge this universal interest even as their own *substantial spirit*, and *actively pursue it* as their *ultimate end*.<sup>33</sup>

This reconciliation between 'particularity' and 'universality' is only possible, for Hegel, because individual interests no longer find satisfaction exclusively

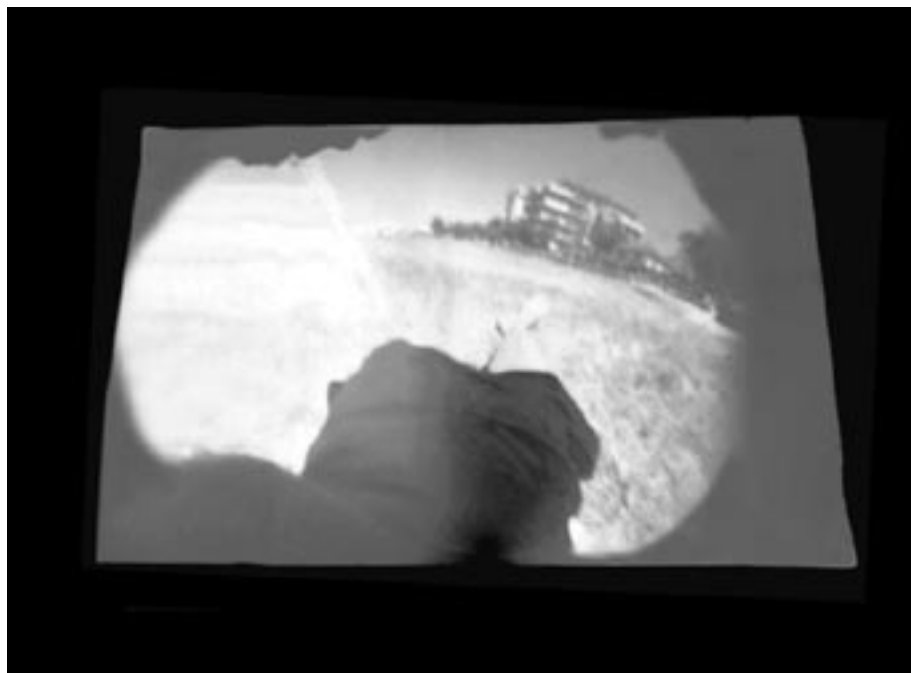
in the family. The *differentia specifica* of modernity is that individuals gratify these interests in both the family and the newly arisen realm of 'civil society', the sphere of economic activity and public institutions dedicated to individual wellbeing. Material production, formerly conducted within the family, has branched off to comprise this distinct area of social life, which can 'mediate' between the extremes of family and state. Because civil society interconnects, oversees and protects *all* the economic agents of the community, it can educate them to adhere to the good of this community as a whole, whereas family members can only ever endorse the good of the limited, small-scale community that is their family. Civil society enables and guides its members to become aware that their pursuit of individual ends simultaneously serves the common good as well. So although family life per se remains antithetical to politics, it achieves reconciliation with the latter by ceding its productive functions to civil society. In turn, civil society allows family members to contribute indirectly to political life by educating their children for the economic activity that is its condition.

Because people's pursuit of their separate interests now typically elevates them to adhere to the common good, members of the state can, reciprocally, recognize the validity of pursuing private interests, which no longer signals the dissolution of political community. Members of the state recognize the 'principle of particular individuality' in several more determinate ways, most centrally by conceiving it as integral to political membership that one also has purely individual interests which merit satisfaction. Also crucially, the state legally protects, supports and regulates the family and civil society. In short, 'the end of the state is both the universal interest as such and the conservation of particular interests within the universal'.<sup>34</sup>

As in *Speculum*, in her later writings Irigaray broadly accepts Hegel's description of the interlocking functions of family, civil society and state.<sup>35</sup> But she denies that this configuration is legitimate, maintaining, on the contrary, that it is inherently unjust, necessitating women's confinement within the family. Hegel's description captures this aspect of modernity, stressing women's exclusion from civil life. Hegel, though, tries to justify this exclusion by – notoriously – deriving it from women's essential domesticity:

Man ... has his actual substantial life in the state, in learning, etc., and otherwise in work and struggle ... so that it is only through his division that he fights his way to self-sufficient unity with himself. ... Woman, however, has her substantial vocation in the family, and her ethical disposition consists in this [family] *piety*.<sup>36</sup>

This idea of women's essential domesticity is clearly too vacuous to explain convincingly the gendered division of labour Hegel describes. This might suggest that he has no good reasons for endorsing women's confinement in the home, merely accepting it out of nineteenth-century prejudice. Irigaray claims, however, that there *are* strong philosophical reasons why Hegel attempts to justify women's restricted role. He dimly perceives that the family/civil society/state configuration he endorses results *necessarily* in the exclusion of women from civil and political life, and, though he is unable to grasp the mechanism of this, he sees that he must justify this exclusion for his defence of the modern social order to succeed. Irigaray, in contrast, proposes to identify the mechanism that makes women's confinement in domesticity necessary



to modern society, in a way that will clearly expose its injustice.

According to Irigaray, the central problem with the social configuration Hegel describes is that it leaves the family in a 'natural' state. The modern family 'is where spirit fails to penetrate into nature to spiritualize it', so that 'the natural immediacy of the couple is not spiritualized'.<sup>37</sup> This looks odd: for Hegel, the family is not exclusively natural, as its constitutive natural relationships directly inspire its members with

a specifically ethical attachment to their common good. But this fact that familial ethical relationships originate in nature is exactly what Irigaray objects to, on grounds rehearsed in *Speculum*. She argues that, due to its natural basis, the family both elicits in men the tendency to deny separation from their mothers, and leaves them free to re-enact their subsequent fantasy of fusion in all sexual relationships. The predictable result is that the family becomes ‘a *substantial* unity in which the individual units ... fuse’,<sup>38</sup> and, in particular, women lose all sense of their individual interests or identity. Since a sense of individual interests is necessary for economic participation, the naturally based family effectively deprives women of any capacity for extra-domestic life. Male family members, by contrast, remain capable of entering civil society, since they react against the familial homogeneity they create. ‘In the bosom of the family, man drowns in an ocean of primitive undifferentiation. He can regain his individuality only when he leaves the family. This means that the living development of [male] individuals in the family is interrupted, split’.<sup>39</sup> Irigaray’s critique

of the family as a unit both natural and heterosexual. While criticizing his view that the state should sanction this ‘natural’ family, she leaves unquestioned the prior assumption that the family *has* a natural basis in heterosexual desires. Presupposing that the family is natural in this way, Irigaray assigns herself the project of ascertaining how political institutions could avoid not only the violence and destructiveness of the ancient polis towards the natural family, but also the modern state’s sanguine acquiescence in the injustices supposedly endemic to family relationships. Her solution is that the state should ‘cultivate’ family relationships out of their naturally arising forms. Concretely, this cultivation must consist in the reorganization of family relationships by sexually specific laws, which must derive force from their pervasive application within society at large.

### Cultivating the family

Irigaray’s latest writings lay increasingly pronounced emphasis on the need to overcome the allegedly natural basis of family relationships which renders them unjust.

If [sexual relationships are] left solely to natural identity, to reproduction, to the parental function, the alliance between man and woman does not achieve human maturity, and the singular identity of each one disappears in the familial unity.... [Then t]he family does not correspond to the place where human maturity can be accomplished. It remains a more or less animal tribe. The path to the realization of human identity should, rather, be found ... [in a] sharing which is capable of overcoming [*dépasser*] instinct, ... capable of going beyond the submergence or disappearance of [individual] consciousness in ... nature that ignores all difference.<sup>41</sup>

At first, it sounds as if Irigaray is proposing, in Kantian fashion, that family members must learn to respect one another’s desires according to principles of justice that they hold on non-natural grounds, hence independently of whatever norms their natural relationships motivate them to follow. She stresses, though, that the ‘sharing’ family members must undertake should be a ‘carnal’ sharing, not a renunciation of carnal relationships. She is not urging people to transcend the norms arising from their natural relationships, but to actualize certain non-natural principles of justice *through* their continuing pursuit of natural ends. In Irigaray’s view, principles of justice should not supplant but ‘sublate’ natural norms, in Hegel’s sense which combines ‘preservation’ with ‘cancellation’. These principles should



of the naturally based family restates the point from *Speculum* that the natural family inherently subverts its originally just organization, but this point is now explicitly formulated *as* a critique.<sup>40</sup>

Irigaray’s basic objection to the social configuration Hegel commends is, then, that it provides legal and political sanction for the family as a naturally grounded and hence endemically unjust institution. By protecting natural family life, the state collusively reinforces women’s exclusion from civil and political existence. Noticeably, Irigaray continues to accept Hegel’s picture



allow and, indeed, require individuals to continue acting from natural norms, but also ‘cancel’ the exclusively natural basis and content of those norms by infusing them with a further non-natural justification and direction. Generally, it is clear what motivates Irigaray to propose that natural family relationships be ‘sublated’ into principled, just, relationships: this would enable men to respond to their relationship with their mothers not simply as nature impels them – that is, unjustly. ‘Man’, she states, ‘must be[come] capable of sublimating his instincts and drives ... [must] train his instincts and drives’.<sup>42</sup> Yet she cannot urge men to act exclusively from non-natural principles, since this would invest the transcendence of nature with unique moral worth in a way that reinforces men’s inherent desire to repudiate their natural condition. Irigaray hopes that principles which can be realized only *in* natural relationships would surmount this problem.

Irigaray’s idea that natural families could be ‘sublated’ into ethical families has obvious affinities with Hegel’s account of how the pursuit of individual ends becomes sublated within civil society into a simultaneous pursuit of the general good. In loose analogy to civil society, the Irigarayan family is defined by natural relationships that orient its members to attend to one another’s desires purely as individuals. But the family should be so reorganized that, in promoting one another’s good as individuals, family members would simultaneously promote some further goal as well. The analogy with Hegel’s conception of civil society implies that this further goal must be the good of the community as a whole, which Irigaray calls the ‘universal’. The family ‘is where sensible desire must become potentially universal culture ... [where people can] realiz[e] the transition from nature to culture, from singular to universal’.<sup>43</sup> From Hegel’s perspective, Irigaray’s vision is self-contradictory, as the small scale of families means that their members can never embrace the collective good of the wider community but only that of their immediate kin; yet from Irigaray’s viewpoint, Hegel fails to see the potential of the naturally arising family for ‘spiritualization’, infusion with a communal spirit. Somehow, then, pursuing non-natural principles of justice in the family equates, for Irigaray, with pursuing the general good of the community. But how can this equation hold when the notion of the general good makes no reference to justice towards individuals as such? Moreover, whatever ‘spiritual’ principles Irigaray countenances must be such that individuals can actualize them in following naturally arising norms, which apparently entails that such principles cannot anyway mandate

justice towards women, to whom men (according to Irigaray) naturally relate *unjustly*. Irigaray avoids this last problem by arguing that the principles must be such as to transform men’s experience of their natural relationship to their mothers. This transformed experience would elicit from men spontaneous adherence to a new set of norms consonant with the principles of justice now governing the family (and with, also, the norms of individual respect all other natural relationships generate). Schematically, then, the injustice of the natural family must be rectified through its structuration by non-natural principles of justice, which must (1) be realizable within natural ethical relationships; (2) express the general good, while remaining realizable within natural, individual-regarding relationships; and (3) transform men’s experience of their relationship to their mothers.

Irigaray centrally claims that all three requirements can be met only if the principles to structure family life express a general good explicitly conceived as *the good of the two sexes*, as distinct kinds. That is, the general good must be conceived as *double*: both as the general good of the female sex as a whole and as the (distinct) general good of the male sex as a whole. Irigaray emphasizes that any principles expressing this dual conception of the general good must embody an understanding of the two sexes as kinds (*genres*) or universals instantiated, respectively, in all particular women and all particular men.<sup>44</sup> The hitherto merely natural character of the family could be overcome if family members espoused this conception of the sexes as universals as the basis for principled conduct towards their kin. The ethical outlook Irigaray proposes is more Platonic than Kantian, involving individuals learning to conceive of the two sex-universals as intrinsically valuable and becoming motivated to promote the good of these universals in their actions (to promote, e.g., whatever is good for the female sex as a whole). Irigaray allocates to law (*droit*) the crucial role of educating family members to grasp and appreciate the two sex-universals. An important passage from *I Love To You* outlines (obliquely) how law can educate family members to uphold principles expressing the general good of the two sexes, and why principles of exactly this type are suitable for cultivating the family. Family life should be structured by

a law of persons appropriate to their natural reality, that is, to their sexed identity. By virtue of this law: Universal and particular are reconciled, but they are two. Each man and each woman is a particular individual, but universal through their gender [*genre*], to which must correspond an appropriate law, a law

common to all men and to all women. In the face of the universal that law represents, each person or individual ... receives the right to be woman or man ... No longer does the natural, then, have to be abolished in the spiritual, rather the concrete spiritual consists in the cultivation of the natural. An appropriate civil law is required as mediator for this cultivation.<sup>45</sup>

The law can raise family members to grasp the reality and worth of the two sex-universals by ascribing rights to individual family members only qua members of a particular sex. Family law should ascribe no rights to neutral individuals, defining only sexually specific rights. (Irigaray suggests, for example, that girls be granted a specific right to protection from violence and abuse from male relatives, and women a specific right to defend their living space.<sup>46</sup>) By furthering the good of their kin in ways prescribed by law, family members learn to view their kin not only as individuals whose desires command attention just as their separate desires but also as members of a certain sex, whose desires command attention as desires necessarily specific to that sex. This change in perspective directs family members to conceive of sex-universals manifested in the particular women and men to whom they relate, and to perceive those universals as valuable, thereafter promoting the good of these women and men *because* it contributes to the general good of their sex. This does not mean that the legally inculcated awareness of one's kin as members of a sex merely replaces, or gets added to, one's initial awareness of their singular individuality. Rather, that initial awareness gets 'sublated' into a new understanding that singular individuality just *is* the irreducibly particular way someone instantiates their sex-universal.<sup>47</sup> With this new understanding, one re-evaluates one's concern for the other's individual desires as a concern to contribute to the good of their sex, via that of one of its instances. Promoting the dual general good of the sexes can thus be done *within* natural norms oriented to the good of individuals. However, it is not clear that *only* this end can be so realized – why not, for example, pursue the good of humanity as a whole through that of its individual instances?

Irigaray's answer is that only the conception of the general good as sexually dual can fulfil her third requirement, transforming men's experience of separation from their mothers. Perceiving the two sex-universals as intrinsically valuable would lead men to re-evaluate their maleness as (derivatively) good, as a sharing in the value of their sex. Men could

then accommodate the pain of separation as merely a negative moment within their overwhelmingly positive experience of embodying the male sex.<sup>48</sup> They could *affirm*, instead of striving to negate, their bodily difference from their mothers. Thus, restructuring the family by laws inculcating a conception of the two sexes as intrinsically valuable universals has a unique capacity, according to Irigaray, to deflect men's natural tendency to injustice, ensuring just treatment for all family members.

For Irigaray, a legitimate relationship of state to family will exist when the state neither opposes nor acquiesces in natural family relationships but cultivates them, promulgating laws that educate family members to act – justly – from an appreciation of the two sexes as universals manifested in all particular individuals. This vision of the cultivation of the family is, undeniably, highly original and suggestive. It is also deeply problematic, thoroughly imbricated with Irigaray's troubling essentialist and heteronormative assumptions. Before I address this problem, let me tie up the strands of my exposition by clarifying how Irigaray's proposals for transforming the family, first, relate back to Hegel and, second, point forward to her broader vision of the good society as one that ubiquitously accentuates the salience of sexual difference. Her objection to Hegel's normative account of modern society, as we saw, was that he endorsed the state in protecting the naturally arising family (something possible, unlike in ancient times, due to the role of civil society in bridging family and state). But, in seeking a preferable model of the state–family relationship, Irigaray still follows Hegel's dialectical approach, advocating that the state neither negate nor preserve the family but 'sublate' it, by legally cultivating and 'civilizing' it, instilling its members with a concern for the general good. As she notes, this task 'in no way implies the destruction of Hegel's philosophy since he points out the method'.<sup>49</sup> The same dialectical approach connects Irigaray's ideal of the cultivated family to her broader normative vision of a societal accentuation of sexual difference. One might assume from her account of the cultivated family that its members – of *both* sexes now, of course – progress into civil and political life in realizing that their pursuit of the good of the two sexes (implicitly) promotes humanity's good as a whole. Civil and political life would be devoted to the common good of humanity *sans phrase*, devoid of further reference to sexual duality. Irigaray rejects this view. Following the principle of sublation, public life, while indeed devoted to humanity's common good, must yet promote it, not to the exclusion of, but *within*,

furtherance of the sexually dual good. Humanity's common good must be advanced through that of its component sexes, otherwise public life will embody a break with natural family life that aligns it exclusively with the masculine psyche. This means, concretely, that all civil and political life should be informed by the same metaphysics of sexual difference to prevail in the family. This metaphysics should be reflected in laws pertaining to individuals and groups only qua members of a sex and in the sexually divided organization of all forms of social activity (e.g. work should be arranged differentially to suit men's and women's rhythms; there should be male and female cultural, religious and political traditions, etc.). Thus, Irigaray advances – by a series of small steps – from the idea that the family must be legally restructured to correct its native injustice, to the claim that these laws must express the metaphysical reality of sexual difference, and finally to the provocative conclusion that social life in general must be organized, continuously with the same metaphysics, to realize and accentuate sexual difference.

### Rewriting Irigaray

The central problem with Irigaray's political argument for maximizing sexual difference is its dependence on beliefs in an essential psychical difference between the sexes and in the naturally heterosexual orientation of desire. On the first point, Irigaray maintains that all men have a specific psychical difficulty in separating from their mothers. Although men can overcome this difficulty, given an appropriate culture, the difficulty itself necessarily arises, given their anatomical difference from their mothers. Irigaray's belief in men's essential difficulty originates in her reading of Hegel. Following Hegel, she assumes that the sexual division between ancient Greek institutions must be explained by a basic psychical difference between men and women, and she singles out a putative male fear of separation because this can make sense of the extreme homogeneity of republican communities. The problem is that Irigaray ends up projecting onto all men a difficulty more plausibly seen as emerging only in historically specific circumstances: when women have exclusive child-rearing responsibility, as Nancy Chodorow suggests. Thus, Irigaray falsely treats as prior to, and explanatory of, sexual inequality a psychical disposition that arises only in *consequence* of a pre-existing inequality.

Again, because Irigaray reaches her political conclusions by reinscribing Hegel's account of state–family relations, her politics imbibe his heteronormative

conception of the family, as we have repeatedly seen. Hegel presumes that desire is heterosexual because (implicitly) he defines it as the urge to appropriate an other who is maximally different in belonging to a distinct sex. Irigaray denies that desire is appropriate – for her it involves wonder, admiration and respect for the sexually different other – but this model of desire remains within the generally heteronormative conceptual parameters which Hegel's picture of the family establishes.<sup>50</sup> In her concern to criticize and rethink Hegel's conception of how the state should treat the family, then, Irigaray leaves unchallenged his belief that the family is a naturally arising structure. Confronted with her deeply traditional view of the family, one might reasonably conclude that her politics merit no serious consideration after all.

This conclusion would be premature, since Irigaray's politics reflect a legitimate concern to overcome the relationship of entrenched separation, and simultaneous complicity, which obtains between state and family in modernity. As Hegel conveys, the modern state supports the family while remaining firmly separated from it, in that family members must transcend their intimate allegiances to enter the public realm. We may not accept Irigaray's claim that this configuration leaves men free rein to indulge their 'naturally' unjust proclivities within the family, but she is surely broadly right to connect the state–family disjunction with women's historical exclusion from public life. Historically, the family has been conceptualized as the realm of bodies, desires and intimate affective bonds, where embodiment and passion are traditionally defined as female. In contrast, the state has been conceived as the sphere of impartial and impersonal relationships which are rationally undertaken, with impartiality and rationality figuring centrally into traditional constructions of maleness. These gendered constructions mean that women's full participation in public life will become possible only when the political realm is radically redefined so that (somehow) it remains inherently connected to the world of intimate bodily relations. Irigaray provides a powerful model of how this could be accomplished. As we have seen, she maintains that public life can remain continuous with the affective domain only if the common good is pursued through the pursuit of relatively specific ethical goals which have their primary application and reference within the bodily based realm of intimate relationships. Thus, Irigaray's basic thought is that we need transitional ethical principles, structuring both the family and the state's pursuit of the common good, and thereby mediating between these domains.<sup>51</sup> These transitional

ethical principles would cultivate the family and give it a politically educative role, yet also remain operative within the public sphere so that it stays connected to affective and corporeal life. The problem is that, because Irigaray understands families as heterosexual units containing members of two essentially different sexes, she believes ethical principles enshrining the value of two sex-universals to be most appropriately suited for this mediating role. This problem does not, however, affect the fact that her general proposal for mediating ethical principles to overcome the gendered state–family split opens up a fruitful line of enquiry.

In view of the fruitfulness of her suggestion that we need transitional ethical principles to render political community continuous with affective bodily life, Irigaray's political vision repays reformulation outside the essentialist and heteronormative framework in which she embeds it. This reformulation would, necessarily, be far-reaching, issuing, in fact, in a conception of the good society very different from that which Irigaray sketches.

## Notes

1. Irigaray has stated: 'For a very long time, but more continuously since 1981, I have been looking at Hegel's work' (*I Love To You* [1992], trans. A. Martin, Routledge, London, 1996, p. 12). She praises Hegel's 'gigantic speculative project' – that is, his 'global consideration of issues that relate to natural law, civil law, and religious law' (*Sexes and Genealogies* [1987], trans. G.C. Gill, Columbia University Press, New York, 1993, p. 128). Translations of Irigaray are sometimes amended.
2. See Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, Routledge, London, 1995, ch. 3; Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz, 'Of Being-Two: Introduction' to *Irigaray and the Political Future of Sexual Difference*, *Diacritics*, vol. 28, no. 1, 1998, pp. 7–9; Morny Joy, 'Love and the Labor of the Negative: Irigaray and Hegel', in D. Olkowski, ed., *Resistance, Flight, Creation: Feminist Enactments of French Philosophy*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 2000, p. 113; Naomi Schor, 'French Feminism Is a Universalism', *differences*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1995, p. 31; Lisa Walsh, 'Her Mother Her Self: The Ethics of the Antigone Family Romance', *Hypatia*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1999, pp. 113–15.
3. See, for example, Cheah and Grosz, 'Of Being-Two', p. 8; Joy, 'Love and the Labour of the Negative', p. 123; Walsh, 'Her Mother Her Self', p. 115.
4. Most relevant are 'The Female Gender' and 'The Universal as Mediation' in *Sexes and Genealogies*; and chs 1–4 of *I Love To You. Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1985.
5. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977, pp. 265, 289. Translations of Hegel are sometimes amended.
6. See Michael Hardimon's explanation in *Hegel's Social Philosophy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 146–53. As Hardimon clarifies, Hegel also

thinks the Greeks had no sense of purely individual rights or capacities for moral judgement or social criticism.

7. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 276.
8. Ibid., pp. 267, 277.
9. Ibid., p. 269.
10. Ibid., p. 268.
11. Ibid., p. 273.
12. Hegel draws no distinction here between interests or individual purposes (*Zwecke*), desires (*Begierden*) and needs (*Bedürfnisse*).
13. Ibid., p. 276.
14. Ibid., p. 288.
15. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, pp. 114, 110. Much of Irigaray's discussion of Hegel in *Sexes and Genealogies* summarizes her earlier analysis in *Speculum*, so can retrospectively illuminate the latter.
16. Hegel, *Philosophy of Nature*, trans. A.V. Miller, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1970, §354, p. 360.
17. Irigaray's inference does not as such follow, but, as we will see, is driven by additional background assumptions.
18. Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 216. Irigaray's conception of 'blood relationships' is only insinuated, not systematically expounded, in *Speculum*. But it can plausibly be read back into *Speculum* from her many later discussions of ethical corporeal relationships in the family, as the latter ultimately derive from 'Eternal Irony' anyway.
19. Ancient tragedies, which for Irigaray describe 'the historical passage from matriarchy to patriarchy' (*Speculum*, p. 217), define the family in terms of 'blood bonds' (most conspicuously in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*). Irigaray's historical approach to Greek tragedy is influenced by the anthropologist J.J. Bachofen; see his *Myth, Religion and Mother-Right* (1861), trans. R. Manheim, Routledge, London, 1967.
20. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, p. 283.
21. "'Je – Luce Irigaray': A Meeting with Luce Irigaray", interview with E. Hirsh and G.A. Olson, *Hypatia*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1995, pp. 107–8; *Thinking the Difference* (1989), trans. K. Montin, London, Athlone, 1994, p. 110.
22. The polis, then, emerges in a deliberate break with the family: 'the stratification above/below of the two ethical laws, of these two existences of sexual difference ..., comes from the Self' (Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 223).
23. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 136.
24. Irigaray, *Speculum*, p. 224.
25. Ibid., p. 219.
26. Ibid., p. 220; my emphasis.
27. Ibid., pp. 222–3. Irigaray's partiality for Antigone becomes increasingly pronounced in later discussions: see *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1984), trans. C. Burke, Athlone, London, 1993, pp. 118–20; *Thinking the Difference*, pp. 67–70.
28. For example, her enthusiasm for the 'era of female law' (*droit féminin*) in *Je, Tu, Nous* (1990), trans. A. Martin, Routledge, London, 1993, pp. 89–91.
29. This pessimistic philosophy of history, in which the original family necessarily splits into the polis and the Oedipal family, invokes Hölderlin's idea that history begins with the original division (*Ur-teilung*) of primordial being into subject and object; see his 'Judgment and Being' in *Essays and Letters on Theory*, trans. T. Pfau, SUNY Press, Albany NY, 1988.
30. In *Sexes and Genealogies* Irigaray avows her overarching



- concern to think how family and state, or 'divine' and 'human' law, should coexist (pp. 127–8). In *Je, Tu, Nous* she insists that 'I have always been concerned with [this] issue of law from the perspective of the difference between the sexes. In *Speculum*, for instance, I discuss it quite explicitly on pages 148–54 ['Eternal Irony', in the French edition] ... there is no break between my earlier and later texts, especially on this matter' (p. 82).
31. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821), trans. H.B. Nisbet, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, §161, pp. 200–201.
  32. Ibid., §158, Addition, p. 199. Defined as tacit universality, love becomes similar to tacit consciousness of the divine law – hence Hegel likens love to Antigone's 'piety' (§166 Remark, p. 206).
  33. Ibid., §260, p. 282.
  34. Ibid., §270, p. 290.
  35. Irigaray, *I Love To You*, pp. 20–21.
  36. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §166, p. 206.
  37. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, pp. 139, 135.
  38. Ibid., p. 130. The same critique of the natural family is summarized in *I Love To You*, pp. 28–9.
  39. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 140.
  40. Irigaray's critique of the modern family remains shaped by *Speculum*'s misunderstanding of the relationship between particularity and individuality in Hegel. Irigaray again thinks that Hegel sees the modern family as foreclosing all sense of individuality, stating that his 'family unit ... necessarily strikes us as the death of the individual' (ibid., p. 136).
  41. Irigaray, *Entre Orient et Occident*, Grasset, Paris, 1999, pp. 151–2. Irigaray insists that men and women must learn a mutual respect through which they 'go beyond natural immediacy' and 'overcome their immediate instincts and drives' (*I Love To You*, pp. 50–51).
  42. *I Love To You*, pp. 27, 28.
  43. Ibid., p. 28.
  44. On the sexes as universals, see "'Je – Luce Irigaray'", p. 106; *I Love To You*, chs 2–3.
  45. Ibid., p. 51.
  46. Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous*, pp. 88–9.
  47. 'The task of making the transition from the singular to the universal thus remains for each person in his or her own unique singularity' (Irigaray, *I Love To You*, p. 27; my emphasis).
  48. Irigaray says that man needs 'the possibility of defining himself as man' so that his 'male desire [can] become desire for oneself as man' (ibid., p. 27, 28). This would 'pull' him 'out of his immediate existence' (p. 39).
  49. Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogies*, p. 138.
  50. Thus, although Irigaray advocates a non-traditional form of heterosexuality (as Cheah and Grosz ['Of Being-Two'] stress in her defence), it remains after all a form of heterosexuality.
  51. Relatedly, Cecilia Sjöholm argues for an ethics of the family ('Family Values: Butler, Lacan, and the Rise of Antigone', *Radical Philosophy* 111, January/February 2002) – although for Sjöholm this is necessary to separate the family from the state, not to integrate them.

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