

Feminism against 'the feminine'

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Whilst the distinction between French and Anglo-American feminism was always rather dubious (failing to be accurate, consistent or inclusive at the level of either national origin, language of choice or theoretical commitment; seeming to parcel feminist theory – or at least the feminist theory that *mattered* – out into two Western blocks from which the rest of the world might choose), two very specific linguistic differences between French and English have nevertheless determined two streams of feminist thought, and complicated the relation between them. Since the 1960s, English-language feminisms, in so far as they are distinctive, have centrally either presupposed or explicitly theorized the category of *gender*, for which there is no linguistic equivalent in French. At the same time, much (although not all) that came to be categorized as 'French' feminism has been articulated around the category of *le féminin*, for which there is no ready equivalent in English, although there is an obvious translational choice: 'the feminine'.¹

Various Anglo-American feminisms have, of course, made consideration of what have been seen as feminine attributes and values central to their critical and reconstructive projects, but it is not this (adjectival) sense which is at issue here in the translation of *le féminin*, a noun. For despite the fact that the French and English words connote differently (in particular, *le féminin* also covers most of what is meant by the English 'female'), 'the feminine', as a direct translation of the different and specific uses of *le féminin* in various French discourses, has become a common category in English-language feminist discourse, specifically English-language feminist philosophy of a 'continental' disposition, where it is often presumed to be both the proper object of such a philosophy and the proper goal of feminism.

But is it? Or what exactly is at stake in making it so? Is 'the feminine' a necessary or useful category for feminism today?

A philosophy of our own?

The history of the category of 'the feminine', as it concerns us here, arises within what has often been a peculiarly antagonistic relation between feminism and philosophy. Nothing like a self-consciously 'feminist philosophy' was visible before the 1970s, but since then feminist interest in some of the canonical texts of the Western tradition has revealed aspects of those texts which were previously, to all intents and purposes, invisible. As soon as it became possible to recognize a dreary history of misogyny and sexism in philosophy, the job of documenting it was easy. Proving its philosophical relevance, however, was harder, and feminists quickly moved on to analyses of the systematic gender inflections and biases, hitherto concealed, in philosophical theories (from speculative metaphysics to political philosophy and philosophy of science) and philosophical concepts ('reason' and 'man', for example, came in for a lot of attention).² A concentration on the analysis of the linguistic and conceptual structures constitutive of the symbolic order, as they appear in canonical philosophical texts, marks, in many histories, the distinctiveness of 'French' feminism.³ Especially in the work of Luce Irigaray – perhaps the most influential figure in the continental feminist philosophical tradition, and the one with whom the idea of 'the feminine' is most closely associated – this move was something of a contraction; not an attempt to widen the philosophical canon but to infiltrate it, with subversive intent. This project was in some senses radical: an attempt to expose the linguistic and conceptual roots of the social superstructure; the location of the problem at this deep structural level; the call for revolution.⁴

Who, however, is the subject of radicalism? Who is the revolutionary subject? Who, more baldly, is *the subject*? In her critical, descriptive metaphysics, Irigaray insists on the internal conceptual relation between the masculine and the subject, traditionally conceived.⁵

The subject *is*, in terms of its conceptual history, masculine, as the masculine pronoun in the place of the generic would seem to indicate. Generalizing this point, which means developing it at a sufficient level of abstraction, Irigaray contends that ‘the masculine’, far from being one of the two terms of sexual difference, is the effect, and thus the mark, of the foreclosure of sexual difference in a ‘hom(m)o-sexual’ economy of the same.⁶ ‘The masculine’ is, or is the name for, the absolute standard, the sole yardstick, in relation to which ‘the feminine’ must always be found wanting, or in relation to which ‘the feminine’ may only be conceived negatively. The revisionary (some would say visionary) challenge to the masculine philosophy of ‘the same’ (which does not recognize difference) then brings into play a radically reconceived notion of ‘the feminine’, the adequate (re)articulation of which is at the same time the revisionary aim:

what I want, in fact, is ... to restore the place of the feminine in sexual difference. That difference – masculine/feminine – has always operated ‘within’ systems that are representative, self-representative, of the (masculine) subject. Moreover, these systems have produced many other differences that appear articulated to compensate for an operative sexual indifference. For one sex and its lack, its atrophy, its negative, still does not add up to two sexes. In other words, the feminine has never been defined except as the inverse, indeed the underside, of the masculine. So for woman it is not a matter of installing herself within this lack, this negative, even by denouncing it, nor of reversing the economy of the same by turning the feminine into *the standard for ‘sexual difference’*; it is rather a matter of trying to practice that difference.⁷

‘Practising the difference’, however, appears (especially in Irigaray’s earlier and more influential work) as dependent upon prior philosophical work:

The philosophical order is indeed the one that has to be questioned, and *disturbed*, inasmuch as it covers over sexual difference. Having failed to provide an adequate interpretation of the sway philosophical discourse holds over all the rest, psychoanalysis [for example] has committed its theory and practice to a misunderstanding of the differences between the sexes ... philosophical discourse ... sets forth the law for all others, inasmuch as it constitutes the discourse on discourse.⁸

The first imperative, then, is to inhabit and transform philosophy into a philosophy of ‘the feminine’, feminine philosophy, or philosophy ‘in the feminine’,⁹ and thus Irigaray’s work seems to represent a further stage in the relation between feminism and philosophy, an attempt to satisfy, one might say, the craving for a ‘philosophy of our own’.

Difference: between ‘sex’ and ‘sexual difference’

It is the central category of ‘the feminine’, the driving force of this philosophical project, that marks it off from the critical Anglophone engagements with philosophy that were being undertaken at the same time, and that makes Irigaray’s work emblematic of what has become a clear tendency in feminist philosophy. However, the relation between ‘the feminine’ and feminism – the latter a political practice – is complicated by the fact that, according to Irigaray, ‘political practice, at least currently, is masculine through and through’. Nevertheless, she writes of women’s liberation movements that ‘Something is being elaborated there in the direction [*du côté*] of the “feminine”, with what women-among-themselves might be, what a “women’s” society might mean.’¹⁰ Here feminism is in the service of ‘the feminine’, not vice versa. In fact, feminism, for Irigaray, has to prove itself worthy of ‘the feminine’, and most of what usually counts as feminism fails, betraying or ignoring the feminine in, for example, its too-exclusive focus on demands for equality, for the redistribution of power within existing structures, and other such allegedly masculine political practices. There is a strong sense, then, in which Irigaray’s philosophy of the feminine is *anti-feminist* in relation to what is normally understood by the word ‘feminism’. Irigaray is not alone amongst her Francophone contemporaries in this suspicion of ‘feminism’, presumably because the word, for them, connotes, in a restricted sense, liberal or ‘equal rights’ feminism. This does not, *a priori*, rule out self-confessedly feminist Anglophone appropriations of ‘the feminine’ in which the semantic restriction is lifted, but it does signal the need for a more thorough investigation of ‘the feminine’ when it is being posited as that (an understanding of) which should determine feminist political practice.

One may begin the investigation by noting Irigaray’s indiscriminate (that is, apparently interchangeable) use of the terms ‘the feminine’ (noun), ‘feminine’ (adjective), ‘sexual difference’, ‘sex’ and ‘woman’, as in the quotation above. What exactly are the relations between these terms? In particular, what exactly is ‘the feminine’, or to what exactly does ‘the feminine’ refer, given that it corresponds neither to the English ‘sex’ nor to ‘gender’ exclusively? The question needs to be approached through another: that of the meaning or status of ‘sexual difference’, a general term often used, promiscuously, in feminist discourses to cover a range of what are, in fact, significantly different things.

For Jacques Lacan, the main post-Freudian psychoanalytic influence on Irigaray, sexual difference boils down to the differential relation between subject positions in the symbolic order, defined according to their relation to the phallus. The significance of actual bodily anatomy or morphology lies in the fact that bodies with penises *happen* to find a way of representing a relation to the phallus that happens not to be available to bodies without penises; hence the alleged arbitrary nature of the relation between the penis and the phallus, a relation which makes the symbolic in some sense 'masculine'.¹¹ But sexual difference is also, and perhaps more importantly, the difference that makes all other differences possible. For Lacan, it is the difference that opens up the possibility of the differential relationship between signifiers in a signifying system, for example. 'Sexual difference', then, does not name any pre-representational reality, although it is mapped, opportunistically and reductively, on to anatomical differentia.

To the extent that it is this psychoanalytic understanding of sexual difference that informs Irigaray's work, and the philosophy of 'the feminine' more generally, the structural importance of *some* symbolic configuration of sexual difference is affirmed, but with an insistence on the irreducibly historical nature of the predominant configuration in the West. Accordingly, Lacan's account of a phallogocentric symbolic order is not *descriptively* incorrect, but needs in addition to

admit its own historicity and give up the claim for the necessity of *this form* of symbolic sexual difference. The description of a historical configuration of symbolic sexual difference, just because it is historical, gives rise to the possibility of imagining an alternative, non-phallic, configuration in which the feminine would not have to be defined exclusively in terms of the negation of the masculine. If masculine discourse renders sexual difference as sexual indifference¹² (discourse, determined exclusively in its own masculine image, veils its sexualized character, effaces its sexualization in the wash of the alleged neutral universality of the generic 'man'), Irigaray's speculative, as opposed to descriptive, account would be one in which the *difference* of sexual difference is emphasized and affirmed. For Irigaray, then, 'sexual difference' refers to a speculative, and thus in some sense futural or critical-utopic, symbolic configuration, which is to be achieved. It is first and foremost a philosophical project, such that one may speak of Irigaray's work, and the philosophy of 'the feminine' more generally, as a speculative metaphysics, where metaphysics refers not to the ultimate structure of reality (not to metaphysical substantives) but to conceptual or discursive orderings.¹³

But that there is another sense to 'sexual difference' is revealed in the motivation for the speculative project of affirming symbolic sexual difference. For, according to Irigaray, what is suppressed by the current sym-



bolic configuration of sexual indifference, what cannot speak or articulate itself within that configuration, is ‘woman’s sexuality’ or ‘woman’s desire’. This unspeakable/unnameable sexuality or desire was allegedly acknowledged by Freud with his reference to a more archaic (Minoan–Mycenaean) civilization subtending the civilization of the Greece of Oedipus. This extremely ancient civilization, Irigaray says, borrowing Freud’s metaphor, ‘would undoubtedly have a different alphabet, a different language ... Woman’s desire [*la désir de la femme*] would not be expected to speak the same language as man’s; woman’s desire has doubtless been submerged by the logic that has dominated the West since the time of the Greeks.’¹⁴ Accordingly, the speculative project of sexual difference is, in part, the elaboration of a language, a discourse, a logic, a syntax in which women’s desire or women’s sexuality *would* be able to speak itself. In this reconfigured socio-sexual symbolic ‘this sex’ *would* now be one, ‘this sex’ would now be a sex (although it would still not be *only* one), would no longer be subject to the demands of unity, the discrimination and individualization of form that characterize masculine discourse (women, let us say, would still have ‘sex organs more or less everywhere [*la femme a des sexes un peu partout*];¹⁵ maybe men too).

It seems, then, that the idea of sexual difference understood as an alternative symbolic configuration is elaborated only on the basis of *another* definition of sexual difference, what one might call already or actually existing sexual difference. To speak, at whatever level, of the ‘*eradicat[ion of] the differences between the sexes [de la différence des sexes]*’ by (masculine) philosophical discourse, of the philosophical order as ‘cover[ing] over sexual difference [*la différence des sexes*], of ‘equality’ as cancelling out, ignoring, papering over ‘the difference between the sexes [*la différence des sexes*],¹⁶ is to posit sexual difference or the difference between the sexes as something *prior* to this philosophical order/discourse, something which can be ignored, covered over, misrepresented, and so on. To be able to speak of anything like *women’s* desire or *women’s* sexuality at all seems to presuppose (outside of the order of symbolic sexual difference which denies it) a prior, non-symbolic difference between women and men. Asked about the motivation for her work, Irigaray replies: ‘I am a woman. I am a being sexualized as feminine. I am sexualized female’ [*Je suis une femme. Je suis un être sexué féminin. Je suis sexuée féminin*]. The motivation of my work lies in the impossibility of articulating such a statement ... the articulation of the reality of my sex [*mon sexe*] is

impossible in discourse, and for a structural, eidetic reason.’¹⁷ This is what the project of sexual difference is meant to address: ‘the problem of the articulation of the female sex [*du sexe féminin*] in discourse.’ Referring elsewhere to ‘masculine discourse’, Irigaray asks: ‘How has it been possible even to “imagine” that this economy had the same explanatory value for both sexes [*les deux sexes*]?’¹⁸ It seems, then, that the fact of ‘sex difference’ [*la différence des sexes*] (a classificatory, mainly biological, category) is posited in distinction from the (Lacanian) psychoanalytic notion of ‘sexual difference’ [*la différence sexuelle*] – a symbolic configuration and the subject positions available within it. This sex difference is misrepresented by the (masculine) configuration of sexual indifference but will be more adequately articulated in/by the (feminine) configuration of sexual difference.

A little help from Heidegger

If some such interpretation of Irigaray’s position underlies the most hostile readings of her work as biologically or psychically essentialist, the hostility is not towards the affirmation of sex difference per se (very few of Irigaray’s critics have been willing to deny that there is a biological fact of sex difference) but towards the alleged determination of the psycho-social by sex difference. In the Anglophone world, this reduces, in effect, to the idea that for Irigaray sex determines gender (in the last instance). There are two main objections to this reading. First, the category of *le féminin*, which one finds (quite correctly) translated as both ‘female’ and ‘feminine’, cuts across the sex/gender distinction on which the objection is based, because, more generally, ‘sexual difference’, as understood by Irigaray, is a difference that cuts across the sex/gender distinction. In a sense, however, this still leaves the idea of ‘sexual difference’ in a curious intellectual limbo, in so far as one would like, nevertheless, to understand what sort of difference it is. The second objection to the determinist interpretation answers this:

Let’s say between a man and a woman the negativity is, dare I say it, of an *ontological*, irreducible type. Between a woman and another woman it’s of a much more empirical type, and furthermore, can only be understood and can only live in the *ontological* difference between man and woman.... [T]he principal points of error [in interpreting my work] derive from not being sufficiently attentive to my philosophical training, and especially to my relationship to ontology and to the negative.¹⁹

In insisting on sexual difference as an ontological difference Irigaray taps a Heideggerian source. Ontological difference, or *the* ontological difference [*die ontologische Differenz*] names the basic Heideggerian distinction between Being and beings or entities.²⁰ To make sense of the claim that sexual difference is ontological one needs to stress two points. First, and translating *die ontologische Differenz* fully and more literally, it is precisely *the* ontological difference and not ontological difference *in general* or *an* ontological difference that is at issue. Second, it is upon the moment of difference and not the two things that are differentiated that the emphasis rests. Accordingly, sexual difference is not one amongst other examples of ontological difference and it is not ‘discovered’, as it were, through the comparison of the differentiated terms. For Heidegger, the forgetting of the question of the meaning of Being is also a failure to understand the ontological difference, the historical tendency to interpret Being as a being, an entity. In reconfiguring the ontological difference as sexual difference, then, the point absolutely *cannot* be the comparison of incommensurable masculine and feminine entities if it is, in fact, in any sense related to its Heideggerian source, as Irigaray claims.

One has, then, to try to make sense of the reconfiguration as the mapping of the distinction between Being and beings onto the distinction between ‘the feminine’ and ‘the masculine’. Perhaps, in that case, the ‘masculine’ symbolic order is to be understood as the order of discourse in which no thing may appear except as an entity, or in which what Heidegger calls theoretical ‘assertion’ dominates; its derivation from a more primordial ‘interpretation’, grounded in an understanding of Being, having been forgotten or suppressed.²¹ Within this order of discourse (there being no other) ‘the feminine’, or Being, fails to appear, or only appears in a distorted form as an entity. ‘Masculine discourse’ therefore suppresses the ontological difference, sexual difference. Accordingly ‘the feminine’, very far from an entity of any kind, would name an order of discourse in which the ontological (sexual) difference *is* acknowledged. As Ellen Mortensen puts it:

In Irigaray’s rewriting [of Heidegger’s ‘ontological difference’] *le féminin* is thought in terms of Being, that is, as that which appears as *other* than what it is, or, as that which is *hidden from view*.... [But] *le féminin* has the potentiality to ‘speak’ *difference*.... [*L*e *féminin* may be said to point to an as yet unspoken ontological (sexual) difference.²²

However, we still need to understand the relation between ‘the feminine’, women and the female sex. Given that these terms are often conflated in Irigaray’s writing, we should not be surprised to find the same in Mortensen’s account, where the slippage between ‘the feminine’ and woman is so frequent and unremarked as to imply an identity between the two.²³ If this is not to repeat the very slippage from the ontological to the ontic that the whole Heideggerian problematic is meant to avoid, the terms ‘woman’ or ‘women’ must be understood to name the same philosophical possibility as ‘the feminine’; but then the question of its/their relation to women (no quotation marks) and to feminism remains unanswered. ‘The feminine’ and ‘woman’, on this account, are no more than tropes deployed in or as a certain philosophical discourse, tropes which allow Derrida, for example, to speak of the becoming-woman of philosophy, or ‘the feminine’ as a philosophical style to which he himself aspires. The place – or, as more sophisticated topographers might insist, the non-place – of ‘woman’ or of ‘the feminine’ is one (or two, etc.) which may without inconsistency be inhabited by a man, the attraction of which is undeniable: ‘I am a woman’, says Derrida ‘and beautiful’,²⁴ and there is no doubt something interesting, even exciting, going on here. The inhabitation of the place of woman by a man is, however, very far from what Irigaray understands as the recognition of ontological sexual difference; indeed it is, once again, its erasure.

But Derrida’s position, itself the result of an extended meditation on Heidegger’s distinction between Being and beings, is not a perversion or deliberate colonization (masculine recuperation) of the transfiguration of the question of ontological difference into that sexual difference, if one insists on understanding this as the mapping of the feminine/masculine distinction onto that between Being and beings. It is, rather, its logical conclusion. *Perhaps*, residually, the ontological difference between Being and beings maps on to sexual difference in so far as both Being and ‘the feminine’ represent something like what Joanna Hodge calls ‘the domain of possibility’,²⁵ or a condition of possibility which in each case has been covered over, and in so far as the philosophically reductive hegemony of the entity (beings) is ‘masculine’. In that case, not being on the side of the entity, ‘the feminine’, like Being, cannot be spoken in the language of identification of entities:

The question ‘what is...?’ is the question – the metaphysical question – to which the feminine does not allow itself to submit.... To claim that the feminine can be expressed in the form of a concept is to allow oneself to be caught up again in a system of ‘masculine’ representations.... In a woman’s language, the concept as such would have no place.²⁶

However, this schematic mapping overlooks the fact that what is crucially at stake in the ontological difference is, precisely, *the moment of difference* between Being and beings, according to which the former resists being thought as the latter, or according to which differences between the latter (between entities) become intelligible. Difference in this sense, closely related to *différance* in another, could never be instantiated uniquely or substantially in any one particular difference between entities, although it may ‘reveal’ itself in certain privileged cultural forms. This returns us to the Lacanian understanding of sexual difference, the mark, we might say, of the possibility of difference in general. This is a kind of *formalistic* sexual difference: within it, ‘the masculine’ and ‘the feminine’ are highly abstract terms, which explains why the latter becomes available for theoretical deployment elsewhere as something *unattached to women*. Introduced as a critical category, against the ‘masculine’ economy of the same, ‘the feminine’ functions as a free-floating signifier of difference itself, of disruptive excess, of *jouissance*, of a certain style, and so on. In order for it to function as a category of *feminist* thought, socio-sexual relations and differences between men and women, their various discursive representations and their political meanings, would need to be mapped onto the prior philosophical (metaphysical?) distinction between ‘the masculine’ and ‘the feminine’. That is, the latter cannot be derived from the former, and ‘the feminine’ is not to be identified with women, even if it is sometimes easier to map various of the cultural positionings of women onto it.

The assumption of this sense of ‘the feminine’ as irreducible to an identity with the female or woman/women, or something very much like it, informs much of the philosophy in which it appears, affirmatively, as the driving category. ‘The feminine’, in this sense, is an abstract philosophical category, which is not in itself a problem (indeed, abstractness is its virtue). It is not, however, a category derived from feminist thought, or from the analysis of socio-sexual relations, and so has no *a priori* feminist credentials, as it were. What, then justifies the idea that it ought to determine feminist theory or practice?

Anyone for ‘the feminine’?

Readers sympathetic to Irigaray have often been uneasy with the way the tropes of ‘the feminine’ and ‘woman’ have been deployed philosophically. To take just one example, Kelly Oliver’s *Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy’s Relation to the ‘Feminine’* argues that the use of such tropes often countermands the manifest purpose of their employment:

while Nietzsche and Derrida, in particular, attempt to open up philosophy to its others – the body, the unconscious, nonmeaning, even the feminine – they close off philosophy to any specifically feminine other. While their texts open up the possibility of talking about those subjects that traditionally have been excluded from philosophy, they continue to exclude the feminine, especially the ‘feminine mother’.... The feminine, maternal and woman are constituents of the group of experiences excluded from Western philosophy.... Derrida’s strategies to bring the feminine to philosophy effectively close off the possibility of any philosophy of, or from, the feminine.²⁷

This argument works, albeit mostly mutely, with two different conceptions of ‘the feminine’. Derrida’s use of the trope, that is, is compared with another (Irigarayan) sense of ‘the feminine’ which will not submit to the first. Derrida, she says, values

woman or the feminine ... because it is undecidable [thus] it is valued for what it is not. Woman is still not valued for what she is; she is not valued for her specificity. She is valued as a metaphor for the impossibility of any specificity.... Irigaray [however] deploys ‘the feminine’ in ways that call into question the metaphysics that excludes her instead of redeploying ‘the feminine’ as the excluded. Whereas Derrida uses the exclusion of the feminine in order to try to undermine metaphysics, Irigaray tries to formulate a metaphysics from the side of the feminine.²⁸

The avowed aim of Oliver’s book is to critique the conflation of the feminine, woman and the maternal in Western culture, but in the section mainly devoted to this task it is notable that in the discussion of the meanings of ‘woman’, ‘femininity’ and the abject ‘maternal’ there is no specific account of ‘the feminine’, even though, in conclusion, the virtue of feminist philosophy is said to be that it ‘can listen to, and speak, the excluded feminine(s) and recall the importance of the feminine maternal.’²⁹ ‘The feminine’, then, in what Oliver takes to be the Irigarayan (not Derridean) sense, is presupposed as the feminist Good, or feminism is good in so far as it has this relation to the feminine. Indeed, if we are to believe the back cover blurb, what

is at stake in Oliver's negotiation of these different senses of 'the feminine' is nothing less than 'the future direction of feminism' itself.

The presupposition of the relation between 'the feminine' and feminism obviously appeals to the former as something other – indeed more – than a free-floating signifier of difference, whilst also wanting to detach it from any straightforward identification with women in order to avoid the arch sin of essentialism and/or other naive connotations. But as employed by Oliver and other philosophers of 'the feminine', this is *not* 'the feminine' as understood by Irigaray, from whom those same philosophers believe they derive their inspiration. The derivation of 'the feminine' in Oliver's sense in fact owes more to (an unacknowledged) rethinking of ontological difference as sexual difference in which the latter is just another name or a trope for the former and its various reconceptualizations, especially *différance*. This fails to take into account the critical element of Irigaray's rethinking of ontological difference as sexual difference, as a transposition – the *usurpation* of the priority of the ontological difference by sexual difference. The reconfiguration of ontological difference as sexual difference is the *displacement* of the question of the meaning of Being: 'Each epoch – according to Heidegger – has one thing to think. Only one. Sexual difference is probably that of our time.'³⁰ Accordingly, Joanna Hodge interprets this 'rewriting' as, in effect, a displacement of the first abstract difference onto a 'lived relation' of difference that reveals the fundamental gesture of Western philosophy to be, not the erasure of Being but the exclusion of what Irigaray identifies as 'women and femininity': 'the forgetting of being and of the earth becomes the forgetting of women and the death of the mother'.³¹

What Irigaray calls 'the real and not merely ... theoretical drama of sexual difference ... the ontological difference between man and woman'³² can only be understood as the 'difference' of Heidegger's ontological difference according to a rather narrow analogy (just as the ontological difference means that Being cannot be understood in terms of beings, sexual difference means that 'the feminine' cannot be understood in terms of 'the masculine'). In fact, though, what Irigaray actually seems to mean in naming sexual difference as *ontological* makes most sense in terms of precisely that traditional ontology which Heidegger's fundamental ontology (at least in *Being and Time*) was to destroy: ontology as the study of the being of beings.

Pressed to expand upon ontological sexual difference, Irigaray explains with reference to the difference between herself (a woman) and the man sitting near her:

If I respect reality, you'll never be me or mine because we're different and moreover because we're each at a different intersection of nature/culture, or of nature/relationality, which is not the same thing. You have a different body, you are in a different relational world, you are a boy born of a woman and that implies on your part a whole world-construction different from mine, a different relational world, a different cultural world. Between us there is really a mystery. Yes, there's an irreducible mystery between man and woman. Its not at all the same kind of mystery that exists between woman and woman or between man and man.³³

Interpreting ontological sexual difference as the difference between incommensurable masculine and feminine beings is sadly misplaced if it claims to have any relation to a Heideggerian source. It proceeds as if 'ontological' meant 'in reality', and as if the most important aspect of reality is ultimately the anatomical. In the insistence that human beings come in two kinds,³⁴ 'the feminine', as one of the terms of sexual difference, is (must be) allied unambiguously on the side of women as the female sex, a position which is constantly in danger of sliding into the classificatory, biological meaning of 'sex difference', a difference which is, if anything, *ontic*, operating at the level of beings, separating them out into male and female categories.³⁵

Feminism against 'the feminine'

On the one hand, then, avoiding the biological completely, 'the feminine' is available as a generalized philosophical trope which, purposely distanced from any compelling relation to women, stands in for, variously, difference itself, *différance*, the other of philosophy, a certain style of philosophy, and so on. 'The feminine' thus understood has no intrinsic relation to feminism; it is not necessarily a feminist category and indeed may be used, as Derrida demonstrates, *against* feminism, traditionally understood.³⁶ 'The feminine' in this sense, ultimately a functional, philosophical X, could not possibly be thought to have a right to dictate to feminist theory and practice (in that case feminism would never be in a position to criticize it), although there are, of course, plenty of reasons why feminists might be interested in it, and it is perfectly consistent with its deployment having performed some important philosophical work which may or may not be of use to feminism.

However, in so far as the trope has been employed in Anglophone feminist philosophy it has usually been confused with another, very different, idea of ‘the feminine’ which, having a more than adventitious relation to women, at least looks to be derived from the socio-sexual relations the analysis and transformation of which is the goal of feminism. This ‘feminine’, just because of its derivation from or rootedness in the specificity of women, could never be available for the kind of use to which Derrida puts it, or, in being put to such use, is reduced to precisely that sexual neuter which Irigaray’s entire philosophical output denies and decries.

It is the confusion of these two incompatible senses of ‘the feminine’ in Anglophone (‘continental’) feminist philosophy that gives rise to the illusion that the mere employment of the philosophical concept amounts to feminist practice, or that feminist theory and practice are crucially dependent on the adequate articulation of ‘the feminine’. Advocates of ‘the feminine’, then, as well as needing to be clear about the sense of their invocation of the term, also need to justify, rather than presuppose, the relation between ‘the feminine’ and feminism, especially given that the grounds for the presupposition are also the reasons for its inexorable slide into the realms of biology and biologism. In the absence of such justification, the assumption of the political legitimacy of ‘the feminine’ now amounts to a form of philosophism that can only vitiate the feminist intentions that motivated its deployment in the first place.

Notes

1. Some problems in Anglophone interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir in relation to these linguistic differences are discussed in Stella Sandford, ‘Contingent Ontologies: Sex, Gender and “Woman” in Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler’, *Radical Philosophy* 97, September/October 1999.
2. For details on and analysis of the relation between feminism and philosophy to this point, see Jean Grimshaw, *Feminist Philosophers: Women’s Perspectives on Philosophical Traditions*, Harvester, Hemel Hempstead, 1986.
3. See, for example, Susan Sellars, *Language and Sexual Difference*, Macmillan, London, 1991, pp. xii–xv.
4. The move here from radicalism to revolution is not conceptually necessitated. It is, however, true of Irigaray’s imagined trajectory: ‘the exploitation of women is not a regional problem situated inside politics, and which would only involve a “section” of the population, or a “part” of the social “body”’. When women want to escape from exploitation, they do not simply destroy a few “prejudices”: they upset the whole set of the dominant values – economic, social, moral, sexual. They challenge every theory, every thought, every existing language, in that these are monopolised by men only. They question

the very foundation of our social order, the organization of which has been prescribed by the patriarchal system.’ Luce Irigaray, ‘Women’s Exile: An Interview with Luce Irigaray’, *Ideology and Consciousness* 1, May 1977, p. 68. For reflections on the political mobility of ‘radicalism’, see Peter Osborne, ‘Radicalism and Philosophy’, *Radical Philosophy* 103, September/October 2000.

5. See, in particular, the central section of Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman* (trans. Gillian C. Gill, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1992), ‘Every Theory of the “Subject” Will Always Have Been Appropriated for the “Masculine”’ (translation modified), pp. 133ff. *Speculum de l’autre femme*, Minuit, Paris, 1974, pp. 165ff.
6. On the ‘hom(m)o-sexual’ see, for example, Irigaray, ‘Women on the Market’, in *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1990, p. 171; ‘Le marché des femmes’, *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un*, Minuit, Paris, 1977, p. 168. Future references will indicate page numbers of French editions with ‘F’. Modified translations are signalled with ‘t.m.’
7. ‘Questions’, *This Sex*, p. 159, (t.m.)/F154. Irigaray’s replies here are ideal reconstructions of the answers given to questions raised ‘explicitly or implicitly, by members of the jury during a doctoral thesis defence in the Philosophy Department of the University of Vincennes, on October 2, 1974.’ *Ibid.*, p. 148/F145.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 159–60/F155, 74/F72.
9. The phrase is taken from the most influential English-language reading of Irigaray, Margaret Whitford’s *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine*, Routledge, London, 1991.
10. Irigaray, *This Sex*, p. 127/F126.
11. This is of course highly problematic. The argument depends on the disarticulation of the two terms ‘phallus’ and ‘penis’, and the insistence that the relation between them is, in some sense, arbitrary. On the disingenuousness of this disarticulation see Jane Gallop, ‘Beyond the Phallus’, *Thinking Through the Body*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1988.
12. *This Sex*, p. 128/F127. See also p. 69/F67: ‘in the process of elaborating a theory of sexuality, Freud brought to light something that had been operative all along though it remained implicit, hidden, unknown: *the sexual indifference that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse.*’
13. With an emphasis on the psychoanalytic dimension of her work, this is broadly Whitford’s reading of Irigaray: ‘The task of philosophy – of thought – is ethical and symbolic: to resymbolize sexual difference at all levels from the most corporeal to the most abstract and “divine”, and to develop ways of making symbolically available the divisions *within* each sex or genre.’ (Whitford, *Luce Irigaray*, p. 97.) With an emphasis on the ontological/metaphysical dimension of her work, this is also not unlike Christine Battersby’s reading of Irigaray in *The Phenomenal Woman: Feminist Metaphysics and the Patterns of Identity*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1998. See, for example, p. 101: ‘Irigaray’s tactics suggest an alternative symbolic: one in which identity remains in contact with otherness and does not entail a “cut” from the Other. As such, Irigaray begins to open up an ontological alternative to a metaphysics of substance and a metaphysics of presence as she maps identities that emerge from flesh and from flux.’
14. *This Sex*, p. 25/F25.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 28/F28.

16. Ibid., pp. 74/F72, 159/F156, 166/F160.
17. Ibid., p. 148–9/F145. ‘Sexe’ in French refers both to male/female classification (as on passports, application forms, and so on), but also to one’s sexual ‘organ’. ‘My sex’ is thus both my femaleness and my vulva/vagina/labia/clitoris (and, of course, for Irigaray, my breasts/cervix/neck/feet/shoulders etc., for I have sex organs more or less everywhere).
18. Ibid., pp. 76/73F, 116/114F.
19. Luce Irigaray, Elizabeth Hirsch and Gary Olson, “‘Je–Luce Irigaray’”: A Meeting with Luce Irigaray’, trans. Elizabeth Hirsch and Gaëton Brulotte, *Hypatia*, vol. 10, no. 2, Spring 1995, pp. 110, 113 (emphases added). There is no published version of the French transcript of this meeting.
20. The idea of ontological difference, which appears in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (trans. Albert Hofstadter, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1982) is also foundational to *Being and Time* (trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990) even if Heidegger does not use that exact phrase there (as, for example, in Part I of the Introduction). In *Basic Concepts* (trans. Gary E. Aylesworth, Indiana University Press, Bloomington/Indiana, 1998), which dates from 1941, he speaks simply of ‘the distinction between being and beings’. (pp. 22ff.)
21. ‘When assertion has given a definite character to something present-at-hand, it says something about it as a “what”; and this “what” is drawn from that which is present-at-hand as such. The [existential-hermeneutic] as-structure of interpretation has undergone a modification. In its function of appropriating what is understood, the “as” no longer reaches out into a totality of involvements. As regards its possibilities for articulating reference-relations, it has been cut off from that significance which, as such, constitutes environmentality. The “as” gets pushed back into the uniform place of that which is merely present-at-hand.... This levelling of the primordial “as” of circumspective interpretation to the “as” with which presence-at-hand is given a definite character is the speciality of assertion.’ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 200–201, H158.
22. Ellen Mortensen, ‘Woman’s (Un)truth and *le Féminin*: Reading Luce Irigaray with Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger’, in Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor and Margaret Whitford, eds, *Engaging With Irigaray*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1994, pp. 213, 223.
23. Glossing a passage in Irigaray’s *Marine Lover* Mortensen writes, for example (ibid., p. 219): ‘**The/a woman** can already sub-sist to be double in herself, that is, be both the one and the other. In this way she continuously exchanges herself in the other, without ever exercising any ownership over herself or over the other. **Thus, le féminin** is totally foreign to the possibility of unity ...’; ‘Within this [phenomenological] framework **woman** can therefore only “give herself for/as” something that she is not, namely femininity. Irigaray **thus** emphatically rejects phenomenology as a valid structure through which **le féminin** could be approached.’ (p. 220) ‘**Le féminin** is for Irigaray this oblivion of the primordial (sexual) difference that cannot be thought in Western metaphysics in general and phenomenology in particular. From the position of outsider **woman** nevertheless supports this representational economy.’ (p. 224) ‘What these connotations [of femininity with death, abyss etc] all have failed to confront is **le féminin** as the total potential of **woman**, which cannot be appropriated into any fixed form/idea.’ (p. 225) All bold emphases added.
24. Derrida, ‘The Law of Genre,’ cited in Kelly Oliver, *Womanizing Nietzsche: Philosophy’s Relation to the ‘Feminine’*, Routledge, New York and London, 1995, p. 25.
25. Joanna Hodge, ‘Irigaray Reading Heidegger’, in Burke, Shaw and Whitford, eds, *Engaging With Irigaray*, p. 203.
26. *This Sex*, p. 122/F122–3. Nor, in Heidegger, can Dasein be understood when we enquire about its being in this way: ‘*Existentialia* and categories are the two basic possibilities for characters of being. The entities which correspond to them require two different kinds of primary interrogation respectively: any entity is either a “*who*” (existence) or a “*what*” (presence-at-hand in the broadest sense).’ *Being and Time*, p. 71, H45.
27. Oliver, *Womanizing Nietzsche* pp. xi, xii, xiv.
28. Ibid., pp. 70, 133–4.
29. Ibid., pp. 129–136, 200. In fact, ‘the maternal’ is the central affirmative articulation of ‘the feminine’ for Oliver and for many others. This ‘maternal’ could – indeed should – be subject to the same critical scrutiny as ‘the feminine’.
30. Irigaray, ‘Sexual Difference’, *The Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. Carolyn Burke, Athlone, London, 1993; ‘La différence sexuelle’, *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, Minuit, Paris, 1984, p. 13.
31. Hodge, ‘Irigaray Reading Heidegger’, pp. 203, 196.
32. “‘Je–Luce Irigaray’”, pp. 111, 110.
33. Ibid., p. 110.
34. ‘The human species is divided into *two genders* [*deux genres*] which ensure its production and reproduction.’ Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*, trans. Alison Martin, Routledge, London and New York, 1993, p. 12; *Je, tu, nous: Pour une culture de la différence*, Grasset, Paris, 1990, p. 10.
35. The distance from Heidegger is apparent in Rosi Braidotti’s Irigarayan-inspired explanation of ontological sexual difference as follows: ‘Ontology being the branch of metaphysics that deals with the structure of that which essentially *is*, or that which is implied in the very definition of an entity, I will argue for the ontological basis of sexual difference.... Sexual difference is ontological, not accidental, peripheral, or contingent upon socio-economic conditions; that one be socially constructed as a female is an evidence [*sic*], that the recognition of the fact may take place in language is clear, but that the process of construction of femininity fastens and builds upon anatomical realities is equally true.’ ‘The Politics of Ontological Difference’, in Teresa Brennan, ed., *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London and New York, 1990, pp. 93, 101.
36. In Derrida’s reading of Nietzsche in *Spurs*, for example, he deploys ‘the feminine’ against feminism’s dogmatic, fetishistic assumption that there is a ‘truth’ to woman which is suppressed in patriarchy. Ironically, the feminism he has in mind is probably Irigaray’s. See *Eperons: Les styles de Nietzsche*, Flammarion, Paris, 1978, pp. 43, 50; *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Style*, trans. Barbara Harlow, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1979, pp. 55, 64.