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The invisible world between us

Touch and self-affection in the philosophy of Luce Irigaray

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The invisible world between us: Touch and self-affection in the philosophy of Luce Irigaray

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Abstract

In this dissertation and through the phenomenology of the body, I explore the nature of touch, affect and implicit meaning in the formation of meaning in Luce Irigaray's philosophy linked to her concept of sexual difference, embodiment and action in perception. I argue that interaction and inter-affectation brings forth the knowable world whereby we shape ourselves and the world.

In chapter one, I begin by exploring touch as a haptic engagement, as a sense of touch that precedes perception and is thus irreducible to our sensory perception such as tactile touch and vision. I then unfold how Irigaray rejects Merleau-Ponty's notion of touch based on his idea of the two touching hands as he misses the alterity of the other and the way we transcend each other in a vital process of inter-affectivity. Touch does not obey subject-object logic but rather belongs to the unpredictability of the affective responding being in the invisible space between us — with its source in the material maternal touch.

Then in chapter two, I explore how sexual difference is intrinsically linked to touch and affect, having transcendental, spiritual and ethical implications and qualities based on our essential desire to connect in relation to difference or to the irreducible other so as to be whole. A pivotal concern in my dissertation is the *interval*, our place of relationships, and our possible creation of lateral intersubjectivity without subjugation and outside the master narrative of the one, the neuter.

In chapter three I continue to investigate how the concept of self-affectation is linked to sexual difference as the political power of transformation and change to overcome dualisms in Western culture such as the binary between subject and object, body and mind, nature and culture, and traditional gender binaries that uphold the hegemony of the one. The real problem does not concern the longstanding debating discourses between essentialism and constructionism, but how we can enter into a culture of being two that is of a sexual nature.

Finally, in chapter four, based on the phenomenology of the fluid and the in-between, I explore our relation to time. I unfold how the temporal affective/affected body precedes subjectivity and other categories and how this temporality allows the transcendence from immanence towards a novel state of being that goes against

metaphysical binaries. By relating to the discontinuous time of affect, it is possible to disrupt the idea of the self-producing subject and the linear time of the same and redeem the past towards a cultivation of sexual difference and a more creative future.

Ágrip

Í þessari ritgerð og í ljósi fyrirbærafræði líkamans tekst ég á við eðli snertingar, eðli sjálfshrifa og hins undirskilda í myndun merkingar eins og hún birtist í heimspeki Luce Irigaray, en viðfangsefnið tengist kynjamismun, líkamleika og gerandavirkni. Ég færi rök fyrir því hvernig stöðug víxlverkun okkar við heiminn leiðir af sér hinn þekkingarbæra heim sem felur í sér að við mótum heiminn og okkur sjálf.

Í fyrsta kafla greini ég snertingu sem skynhrif sem er alltaf víðfeðmnari og flóknari en skilningarvit okkar og því ekki unnt að smætta snertinguna og samlaga hana skynfærum okkar eins og snertiskyni og sjónskyni. Þá geri ég grein fyrir því hvernig Irigaray hafnar kenningu Merleau-Pontys um snertingu sem grundvallast á hugmynd hans um tvær hendur sem snerta hvor aðra, en hugmyndin nær ekki utan um annarleika hins og hvernig við yfirstígum hvert annað og þróumst í líflegu ferli sjálfshrifa. Snertingin hlýðir ekki lögmáli sjálfveru og viðfangs og tilheyrir frekar ófyrirsjáanlegri skynfinningu viðbragðsvera, sem er í senn forhugtakanleg og gagnverkandi og á sér stað í hinu ósýnilega rými á milli okkar — sem á jafnframt upphaf sitt í móðurlegri snertingu.

Í öðrum kafla kanna ég tengsl kynjamismunar, snertingar og skynhrifa sem gefa kost á hreyfingu handanverunnar og leiða jafnframt af sér vitsmunalega og siðferðilega verðleika grundvallaða á eðlislægri þrá mannsins til að tengjast mismuninum eða hinum „óþættanlega hinum“ til að verða heil. Þungamiðja ritgerðar minnar er *millibilið*, staður tengsla okkar sem fela í sér endalaus möguleika á láréttum samveruleika án stigveldis og undirokunar — utan rökfræði einsleikans sem birtist sem hlutlægni í tungumálinu.

Í þriðja kafla rýni ég áfram í tengsl sjálfshrifa og kynjamismunar sem pólitísku afls umbreytinga og sköpunar sem miðar að því að yfirstíga skautun vestrænnar menningar eins og hún birtist í tvíhyggjupörun sjálfsveru og viðfangs, líkama og hugar, náttúru og menningar sem og hefðbundna tvíhyggju kyngervis sem viðheldur lögmáli yfirráða hins eina sanna. Hið raunverulega vandamál varðar ekki hina langvinna deilu milli eðlishyggju og mótunarhyggju heldur hvernig við getum skapað láréttan samveruleika tveggja sjálfsvera grundvallaða á kynjamismuni.

Í fjórða kafla og í ljósi fyrirbærafræði millirýmisins og hins fljótandi, skoða ég tengsl okkar við tímann og beini sjónum að því hvernig skynhrifin fara á undan

sjálfsveruleika og hugtökum. Þá er hugað að því hvernig tími líkamsvitundar gerir handanverunni kleift að yfirstíga íveru/staðveru sína sem gengur í berhögg við frumspekilega tvíhyggju. Með því að aftengjast línulegum tíma einsleika og hverfa til skynhrifa er unnt að hrekja hugmyndina um hinn sjálfskapaða einstakling og endurheimta fortíðina í átt að viðurkenningu mismunar og sköpun framtíðar.

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List of Abbreviations

Books by Luce Irigaray:

- CON:** *Conversations* (2008)
- DBBT:** *Democracy Begins Between Two* (2001)
- EDP:** *Prières quotidiennes: Everyday prayers* (2004)
- EP:** *Elemental Passions* (1992)
- ESD:** *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993)
- IBSW:** *In the Beginning, She Was* (2013)
- JTN:** *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference* (2007)
- LTY:** *I Love to You* (1996)
- ML:** *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1991)
- S:** *Speculum of The Other Woman* (1985)
- SNN:** *To Speak is Never Neutral* (2002)
- STF:** *Sharing the Fire* (2019)
- STW:** *Sharing the World* (2008)
- TBB:** *To Be Born* (2017)
- TBT:** *To Be Two* (2000)
- TS:** *The Sex Which is Not One* (1985)
- TTD:** *Thinking the difference* (1994)
- TVB:** *Through Vegetal Being* (2016)
- WOL:** *The Way of Love* (2002)

Books edited by Luce Irigaray:

- BNW:** *Building a New World* (with Michael Marder) (2015)

- LIKW:** *Luce Irigaray's Key Writings* (2004)
- TEA:** *Teaching* (with Mary Green) (2008)
- TNHB:** *Towards a New Human Being* (with M. O'B. C. Hadjioannou) (2019)

Articles by Luce Irigaray and an interview:

- JLI:** ““Je — Luce Irigaray”: A Meeting with Luce Irigaray” (1996)
- PCTS:** “Perhaps Cultivating Touch Can Still Save Us” (2011)
- ENHB:** “The Emergence of a New Human Being” (with Tobias Müller) (2022)

1. Introduction

1.1 The aim of research

The aim of this dissertation consists of finding the means for speaking outside the traditional discourse that is logo- and vision-centric and leaves out interrelational and pre-conceptual knowledge based on sexual difference. Sexual difference is an experiential and interactive term and refers to the nature of our being and becoming that includes the irreducible other. As a concept of our age and new thinking of the new human being, sexual difference breaks down the hierarchical dualism between body and mind, nature and culture, that has dominated Western thinking and split us apart.

The point of departure is that Irigaray's notion of sexual difference has been misinterpreted as heterosexuality, which has given rise to longstanding charges against Irigaray as an essentialist, but that is an unfair interpretation. Essentialism implies a pre-given meaning of subjectivity as well as an objective standard of representation that holds thinking in place and represses our capacity to think embodied and for ourselves. Even though some of Irigaray's interpreters have defended her work from these charges of essentialism by pointing out the ontological status of sexual difference as being "at least two," the concept needs to be elaborated on as an *embodied term that is intrinsically linked to touch and self-affection*. Touch and affect are always related to the other in the way we are touched and moved in an open interaction with the world and cannot be reduced to binaries.

Finding the means to speak outside the traditional discourse requires that we incorporate the *lived logic of touch and affect* in thinking that includes the other. The aim is to illustrate how touch and inter-affection function with our speaking, reasoning, and the production of meaning. This means a move from the patriarchal logocentrism that upholds the hegemony of the one, which is also a move from a neutral way of speaking based on dualist discourses that have shaped us to our *nature of being two* that takes place in the *interval*, which is the place of our relationship. My argument is that to shift the logical barriers and concepts that define us we need to uphold a relational ontology anchored in sexual difference as the most universal and natural part of our living. This implies that we need to give intimate processes

of interaction and inter-affection, as displayed in Irigaray's philosophy, increased attention.

In light of Irigaray's philosophy and diverse findings in relation to embodiment, the aim is to demonstrate how we can *transform binary thinking into lateral intersubjectivity* that can provide us with a more fertile world that is fluid, non-possessive and life-affirming. The main goal is to show that we are relational from the very beginning and that sexual difference is the premise for human becoming and blossoming. When recognizing and cultivating sexual difference in faithfulness to nature we can make a change in perception, or in *how* we think and speak, that enables us to speak outside of the traditional discourse of binaries that has permeated our thinking.

1.2 Irigaray's way of thinking of the interval, touch, and affect is a revision of subjectivity and of the traditional dualist sex-gender distinction

This dissertation focuses on Luce Irigaray's analysis of touch and affect as a way of thinking of the interval between two based on her concept of sexual difference. Irigaray argues that sexual difference may be the major issue of our age "[...] which could be our salvation if we thought it through" (ESD.5). Through her analysis of the sexes, male and female, she poses the two of sexual difference with the aim of debunking the dualisms of Western metaphysics and a patriarchal logic that upholds the hegemony of the one.

Throughout history, the male and the female have been positioned against each other as two entities, as substances in a hierarchical dualism that prioritizes the mind, the logos and the active male speaking subject. Which relegates the woman as a passive object, as well as embodiment and feelings, leading to prejudices, domination and exclusion. This implies a *total ignorance of the different other and of our relationships*, as well as the elaboration of one master narrative, presented in a supposedly neuter, universal perspective that in fact belongs to the male. This holds thinking in place which means that we must speak the same and share the same experiences, and we become the same (IBSW.9). Within this order, there is a huge paradox; if the male is the main reference of the production of meaning and creator of the world, then the meaning *cannot be neuter*. Thus, repeating and imitating the

same is a false narrative that reinforces power structures imposed upon us that we must deal with.

The problem of our time is a failure to think about sexual difference and our human nature of being two, leading to the philosophical valorization of the same over difference, and to the repression of touch and affect and of the constitution of each in relation to the other. This failure entails an idea of the self-producing and self-reliant subject that forecloses a lateral transcendence between two, a new horizon and the generation of meaning that increases repression, frustration, and fear among us.

Through her analysis of sexual difference, Irigaray works out an alternative representation of the subject that is based on our nature of being at least two rooted in an essential desire to connect to the other who is different and relational to me (STF.1-5) — a desire taking place in *the interval*, *the in-between space*, the place of our relationships where nothing is given or ordered in advance. Her way of thinking of the interval makes room for a dialectical dynamic relation between the two, as well as for felt thinking, female specificity and unforeseen marginal voices that have been repressed in the history of philosophy in favor of reason and argumentative thinking that is always marked male. In her philosophy, our ongoing vital interaction and relationship become the main criterion of cognition and subjectivity that overrides the logic of the same.

Elaborating on touch and affect is most relevant because affect can only take place in relation to the difference of the other. Thus, affect invites us to pay attention to the real other and the (affectionate) movement between us — different from the self-same who can only be affected by himself. Irigaray turns the attention from the economy of the same and the closure of language to the open void space in the interval, the place of our relationships where everything can happen, making room for all possible voices.

The interval is a model of a *new perception*, a *relational ontology* and a new thinking of the human being based on *touch*. Touch includes both tactile activity and somatic felt experience, and, in this dissertation, the focus will primarily be on the somatic felt aspect of touch in our ongoing process of coming in touch with the other and the world. When I touch the sexual other in my meeting with the other, I am always *touched back* in a vital inter-affectivity that enables me to transcend my limited self and become in an unforeseen way in relation to the difference of the

other. Thus, touch can never be anticipated, finally expressed or fully known; it is lived and (pre)reflectively experienced in dynamic interactions with others. Touch is intuitive and functions as the sensitive medium that connects us. As the prime mover of experience, touch is a kind of continuation of our interactions and exchanges in the interval (STF.24) — and is a manifestation of the fact that life comes first, before subjectivity and conceptual ideas and theories. Touching between two people belongs to the non-representational aspect of our being that is always underlying knowledge — the visible representational world.

In a continuous process of “touching and being touched” the singular being is *affected* (IBSW.160), touched (heartfelt), moved or hurt by the other which is the quality or the meaningfulness of bodily experience that is pre-conceptual and implicit — always underlying our knowledge. Affect is not a categorial affect or a simple experience such as sadness and happiness (TBT.23) but more intuitive and immediate and refers to what emerges and stirs in-between, belonging to the discontinuous time of self-affection (Söderbäck 2019). Self-affection means that one is touched as affective/affected sexual being outside the linear time of the logic of the same (the opposites of active-passive, subject-object) and means that we are only affected in relation to the other. Irigaray emphasizes: “Self-affection needs to be two” (IBSW.158), which entails a return to oneself while maintaining a relationship with the other. The implication is that “[...] self-affections are different and required as such” (IBSW.159). Self-affection is in constant interplay with others, through language, rooted in our natural desire to approach the other as the other, coming closer while keeping distance. For the new human being, it is a matter of “connecting to” and of expressing oneself that includes affect in thinking rather than remaining within mere linguistic representation — a telling that does not divide intellect from the sensitiveness of our being but seeks the origin of the word in the depths of the intimacy of the flesh, in us and between us (TBB.53-55).

Self-affection is capable of disturbing and debunking the neuter economy and given discourses of the same — reducing the hegemony of the one — and is the key to the becoming of a new human being that includes the other. With affect in thinking, it is possible to reinterpret everything, the subject, the word, and the world and carry forward the meaning — allowing our factual experience to exceed stable categories in a new way and to connect to what emerges in and through the body (IBSW; Gendlin 2004). The lived order is another logic than the absolute knowledge

claimed by the logic of the same (STF.1-5). It is an order that includes affect in thinking based on the irreducible other, which is also the condition that allows multiple identities to unfold and become.

At all times touch is a movement and thus played out or enacted between two affective/affected subjects (IBSW.160). In line with recent research on affectivity, Irigaray demonstrates that affect is neither a private phenomenon nor separated from the body or the world; it plays a vital role in our cognitive activity — in our embodied responsiveness and decision-making — whereby we become and develop (Fuchs 2013; Gendlin 1997). The phenomenology of affectivity or of felt sensing regards affect not as mental states in our heads but as encompassing phenomena that *connect the body, self, and the world*. Affect is a kind of belief or intuition linked to wonder (ESD.12-13), an intricate subtle meaning — something we may feel in the air or sense as an interpersonal climate that emerges from situations (IBSW; Fuchs 2013). As a kind of responsive order of the body, affect is lived and pre-conceptually experienced and functions with our logical order (Gendlin 1997).

In an affective turn and with the phenomenology of the body and of the in-between, Irigaray rejects the logic of the same and re-writes a possible relation between the sexes towards lateral transcendence, a transformation that has ethical implications. Through touch and affect we can radically change outdated binaries that define us and open a more livable future based on the amorous in us that connects us and makes sense of our experience (STF). As will be argued, affect functions as a political action of resistance, care and transformation, given that we *incorporate affect* in thinking in relation to the other. Thus, affect in Irigaray's philosophy becomes the political force to replace hierarchical dualisms with a dialectical dynamism of sexual difference.

A major theme of this dissertation concerns the claim that the elaboration of the interval, touch, and self-affection involves a radical rethinking of cognition and of epistemology, of our relationships and of the ontology of our sexual being that requires a revolutionary change in perception. Irigaray's concepts of the interval and sexual difference, which are intrinsically linked with her concept of self-affection, pose a challenge to dualistic hierarchical discourses and the disembodied thinking in mainstream philosophy that has dominated our culture since ancient times.

Thus, Irigaray moves away from the traditional distinction between sex and gender and goes beyond the language that constitutes meaning and identity, resorting

to a lived logic which has its source in the morphology of the female body and the material maternal touch where life begins (the two lips) that have been repressed in the history of philosophy in favor of male logocentrism. She expounds on the male-female paradigm as it refers to the origin of our existence and the mystery of our being two, representing all relations we are involved in. By anchoring her philosophy in touch and affect, she moves away from neutrality, essentialism, dualist discourses and the gender-denoted meaning that has shaped us, attempting to transform the binary of the sexes into a lateral intersubjectivity and a more fertile world. Her interest is to reveal a foundation of perception that includes a *fluid lateral exchange between two subjects that is heartfelt, multi-dimensional and non-possessive*. All this is rooted in an amorous desire that has no oppositions — but seeks *connection with the other* to be whole.

1.3 Motivation and relevance

The aim of elaborating on touch and affect as the most elemental feature in life is to demonstrate that touch precedes perception and individuality and that we are mediated by each other. Exposing sexual difference sets me in an *infinite relation* to the other that undermines the subjugation, repressions and violence in our culture of the same, urging me to re-evaluate myself and be a responsible thinker. Gradually and through the other, I realize that touch and inter-affectivity bring forth the knowable world — a world that I partake in by acting whereby I shape myself, my relationship and the world. This calls for inquiry into how felt meaning works with my conceptual thinking and reasoning, and how my spirit is derived from the twoness of our being (the interval) and not entirely from myself (the one). Thus, thinking sexual difference invites me to open up new ways of understanding and expressing things.

My point of departure is that the richness of touch and affect have not been sufficiently recognized as part of epistemology and ethics in mainstream philosophy — which Irigaray radically brings to light in her philosophy. It means we have forgotten to cultivate affect, care and the vital interplay between us — realizing that we need each other to become and blossom — which is indeed so much needed in a

world of hostility and anger. This has caused the detriment of desire, prejudices, confusion, and dominating attitudes that still prevail.

The title of my dissertation, “The invisible world between us. Touch and self-affection in Luce Irigaray’s philosophy,” refers to the *interval* — to unknown forces of affect, to experience itself, to our life forces that are marked by endless touching and to a dialectical dynamism that depends on our relationships and is still forming towards the infinite. Thus, the invisible refers (also) to the “not yet known,” the unexpected and unpredictable — a future touch, a new horizon where everything can happen, and implies a rich hope for a more livable future.

With her concept of self-affection, Irigaray contributes richly to the grand discovery within Western philosophy of the body and of the phenomenology of touch, which is a study of how things appear to us in the realm of qualitative sensations. Irigaray shows great courage in dealing with topics such as feelings, affect, and the subtle touch that is strongly devalued in the history of Western philosophy. With sexual difference and self-affection, she offers rich possibilities for dealing with the masculine tradition that has shaped us. She opens the possibility of a replacement of the metaphysics of presence with a metaphysics of sexual difference that is *embodied, embedded, enactive, extensive* and continuously *emerging* from touch and inter-affectivity in the interval.

The enactive signifies endless movement between two, an action in perception (Noë 2006) or enactive perception (Varela, Thompson and Rosch 1991) and means that the interaction comes first, before reasoning (TBB). As exemplified with the infant interacting with its (m)other in *To Be Born*, the body is doing in perception. Without being able to speak, the infant moves and projects itself towards the world/its (m)other, enacting the meaning whereby a (pre-conceptual) knowledge is created. Hence, the infant uses its power of movement, desire and sensory perception to come in touch with the world to get a grip on it (TBB.2-20). The relevance of the enactive account of perception is to underline that we are implicated in the formation of meaning.

1.4 Methodological premises

My methodological approach is primarily based on *embodied cognition and the affective turn* within philosophy and phenomenology of the body as laid out in Irigaray's philosophy of touch and self-affectation, which is always intertwined with sexual difference. Embodied cognition is an approach to cognition that involves an acting body in perception and the way we are touched by each other and the world. The affective turn is a turn to oneself, felt experience and nature in a broad sense, and means to think with the richness that comes with the embodiment of situated and relational knowledge (Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir 2019). Based on Irigaray's philosophy on the interval and sexual difference, my methodological approach involves a critique of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of touch, showing the necessity of incorporating affect in thinking and the importance of the notion of sensitive life as the most radical means to overcome the power of dualist discourses in our culture. Eugene T. Gendlin's phenomenology of felt sense is helpful as it unfolds the importance of embodied interaction and the emergence of meaning, demonstrating how process thinking exceeds analytical thinking, which is also in line with recent research on affectivity (Fuchs 2013).

With her emphasis on sexual difference and the interval, Irigaray's philosophy of touch and affect differs radically from other philosophers and researchers. Her philosophy marks the foundation of a new thinking of a new human being who is faithful to our nature (of being two) rooted in an essential desire to approach the other as the other. Along with phenomenological and experiential-based thinking, the *enactive account of perception* — as presented by Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch (1991), as well as Alva Noë's enactive approach to phenomenology of perception or action in perception (2006) — will provide a fruitful contribution to the analysis. The enactive account of perception reveals that perception is neither an imitation nor a copied image from the outer world but is rather the result of the skillful activity of the whole body. Irigaray aims to show how one is continuously attracted to the different other, thus entering into a relationship through which one is emerging and extending towards the physical world in which we build a collective dwelling. Enactive approaches to understanding cognition stress the *role of the body* in cognition and the *intertwinement of perception*

and action – and contribute to critique of representationalism based on dualism that upholds the hegemony of the one.

“Thinking in an embodied way and for oneself” is further a relevant source and refers to a the experiential dimension of meaning practiced by the international research group *Embodied Critical Thinking* (ECT; [www.https://ect.hi.is](https://ect.hi.is)).¹ ECT challenges one to think in an embodied way and for oneself with the richness and intricacy which come along with embodied situated knowers, as an inquiry of how felt meaning works with our conceptual thinking, and how we can on the basis of embodied thinking birth fresh meaning. (Schoeller and Þorgeirsdóttir 2019). The practice of ECT is mainly based on Gendlin’s philosophy of the implicit and the responsive order, and on his philosophy of processual thinking of body-environment interaction (Gendlin 2007; 1992; 1997).

It is relevant to underline that the philosophy of the body and of enactive perception, research into affectivity and into “thinking in an embodied way and for oneself” (ECT) are not sufficient to debunk body-mind and gender dualisms in Western culture. Nor is it sufficient to show how our factual experiences exceed analytical thinking and the stable categories that define us. What is needed is to *think with Irigaray* and with sexual differences in the interval and which is described in this dissertation as the invisible space between us (Jones 2011; Grosz 2011; Rawlinson 2021; Rawlinson and Sares 2023; Schwab 2020). This implies a fundamental shift in perception and in our understanding of subjectivity and which challenges us to think with differences and our relationships here and now, to re-evaluate the past that opens to oneself and that is new and surprising in the future. Irigaray’s phenomenology of the affectionate and in-between deserves a place in philosophy, and it changes the way we think in a shared human world.

Throughout her philosophy, the key is the irreducible other which requires that we recognize how knowledge and spiritual growth are derived from two — and not from a neuter. Our relationship is neither mine nor yours, it is in-between, fluid, and shared, whereby we shape ourselves and the world. *Thinking with Irigaray* means respecting the interval and the irreducible other and recognizing our vital

¹ ECT was founded in 2017 by a research group in Iceland, initiated by my doctoral committee (Donata Schoeller, Björn Þorsteinsson) and Sigríður Þorgeirsdóttir and of which I have been a member from the beginning.

dynamic relationship as the criterium of cognition. This is because we can never finish the way we appeal to the different other.

2. Touch in perception

2.1 Touch and enaction in perception

Touch has a vital role in perception, but it is also crucial in *relationships* with other living beings, in the way we are touched by one another. When we are physically touched by another body, we feel this subtle feeling emerge inside — that is difficult to explain — that stirs, evokes, and provokes a thought, that has unlimited implications of others. To quote Karen Barad: “Even when two hands touch, there is a sensuality of the flesh, an exchange of warmth, a feeling of pressure, of presence, a proximity of other-ness that brings the other nearly as close as oneself. Perhaps closer” (Barad 2012, 206). Touch is the first sense to develop in life, and it is the sense that is vital for our contact with the world and others (Hermans 2022, 211). Further, as Carolien Hermans argues, research shows that touch is the most intimate and spatial relationship between people, as well as a vital and subtle communicative practice. As Irigaray illustrates in her philosophy, through touch we come into contact with each other, such that touch creates an affective dynamic between two embodied agents who are reaching out to each other and the world. The fundamental role of touch has no proper name, no proper meaning (TS.134). It is rather unforeseen in its happening, forming and developing that includes the other(ness) that is never final (TS.205-219; ESD.8; EP).

In Irigaray’s philosophy, touch is always something more than haptic engagement and something more than we usually understand by touch. Touch refers to the sensible and sensitive energy between at least two, based on *desire to be in relation with the different other* (whom we can never know) and so to experience fulfillment to be whole. Irigaray claims: “Desire aspires after connecting, in us and between us, nature with the most sublime fulfillment” (STF.3). Hence, touch has a mediative function and implies that we are always touched back when coming in touch with the world. In a broad sense, touch belongs to the invisible world between us based on dialectical interaction and inter-affection, an infinite process of coming in contact with the other and the world. Cultivating touch is a radical tool that leads to a more caring and fertile world in a chaotic time, and which holds open the space between us, in which we approach each other and that enables us to transcend our

limited self. For Irigaray, the touch is always inter-relational, fluid, and dialectical (TS.112).

Irigaray's elaboration of touch in her philosophy is a continuation of the grand discovery of the lived body within phenomenology, which is a study of how things appear to us in lived experience, rather than to an objectifying gaze. When experiencing, the body is pre-verbally touched by the world and responds in constant interaction; touch presupposes bodily position, embeddedness, and bodily movement (kinesthesia). For Irigaray, the body "[...] supplies us with a setting—a *Gestell*, Heidegger perhaps would say—for the organization of the living [...]" (TBB.3). Thus, the body is a frame of perception in the way it is touched by the world and "[...] from which it perceives, moves forward, apprehends" (TBB.29). Irigaray's notion of touch and body interaction can be traced back to Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. To quote Husserl: "The Body [Leib] is, in the first place, the medium of perception; it is the organ of perception and is necessarily involved in all perception" (1989, 61). The idea of the lived body (*Leib*) is first voiced by Husserl (1936) and then further developed by Merleau-Ponty (1945; 1962). As noted by Sara Heinämaa, the latter points out that "[...] the relations between the body and its environment are not external, casual relations, but internal relations of expression" (Heinämaa 1997, 26). The body participates in the universality of the "body" of the world (flesh) which means that the subject is not transparent to itself, but forever ambiguous and intertwined with what it encounters.

For Irigaray, Merleau-Ponty, and Husserl, the relationship between the body and the world is presupposed in our sensory perception, consisting as it does of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching phenomena. For Irigaray, however, touching takes a certain precedence; or, as she puts it: "[...] I cannot hear without touching; nor see, moreover" (ESD.168). This means that seeing, for instance, presupposes that our eye in its intentionality touches the world or chooses to touch a particular object, as well as hearing presupposes that our ear is touched by sound waves with particular properties, etc. Hence, interaction comes first, prior to verbalizing perception or to the distinction between subject and object (TBB). The claim of "interaction coming first" means that embodied sensibility and the quality

of touching-being-touched comes before verbalizing perception in language.² Irigaray's emphasis on touch is a continuation of Marcel Proust, who makes a crucial distinction between *sensation*, which is of qualities, and *perception*, which is of objects. This is also underlined in Eugene Gendlin's philosophy of the felt sensing body: the felt meaning is the pre-conceptual quality in a situation, prior to perception of objects, and always implicit in cognition (Gendlin 1992). However, in Irigaray's philosophy, touch is always more than a background knowledge; it includes sexual interrelation rooted in desire to be in relation with the different other and the world. The being is thus permeated of relation to persons or things.

Merleau-Ponty has been a pioneer in clarifying the relation between the mind and the body, the objective world and the experienced (or lived) world.³ He has demonstrated how the experience of "objects" is a bodily activity of making the world available. Current philosophers and cognitive scientists confirm and elaborate these findings. Alva Noë, for instance argues that perceiving is not something that happens in our brains, nor is it an internal representation of the world; rather, it consists of an interactional process between a living being and the world, the way we touch and are touched by the world (Noë 2006, 1-2). That means that perception is nothing that primarily happens to us or something in us; it is something we do by interacting.

An important point that Irigaray takes from Merleau-Ponty is that in touching, unlike in seeing, I am always also being touched. This is why she embraces the quality of touch and rejects seeing as a metaphor for knowing. As Filip Mattens argues, "[...] when we are touched, our body appears to us; it appears as our lived body in a way that it cannot appear in vision" (Mattens 2009, 101). Knowledge is thus not only about coming into touch with the things "out there", seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and tactually touching the world; it is also a *mode of relating*, in which the meaning is forming and developing, as clearly shown in loving relationships (Mattens 2009, 101). Thus, experience is something we undergo by interacting, something that happens in us (Noë 2006, 32).

² The importance of touch is a recurrent theme in the phenomenological tradition, first mentioned by Husserl in *Ideas* (1989) and further developed by Merleau-Ponty (1962, 1964, 1968), who ascribes to touch the important phenomenological and interactional role of a fundamental premise in perception.

³ In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945; 1962), Merleau-Ponty argued that consciousness of the world is always involved with the moving body; further, "there must be something to be conscious of, an intentional object, and consciousness can move towards this object only to the extent that it 'der[e]alizes' itself and throws itself into it [...]" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 140).

Characterizing knowledge not only in terms of perception, but in terms of a relationship, as Irigaray does by her concept of sexual difference, is a nuanced way to deal with the process of knowing-and-being-known, touching-and-being-touched.⁴ With this important point, and with source in desire, Irigaray widens the classical epistemological perspectives. Knowing and loving are existential phenomena and implicitly involved in a complex process of the cognitive, as De Jaegher argues, in which concrete and particular beings engage with each other (De Jaegher 2019). For Irigaray, as will be argued, knowing and loving arises from a desire to “*be with*” and a desire to *know* the alterity of the other, and that cannot be separated, as best illustrated with the interaction between the infant and the loving mother (TBB; STW). Usually, the positive field of meaning of mother’s love is not only gentle, caring and tender, but it is also wise and loyal in its authenticity. However, science and past metaphysics⁵ do not involve loving in thinking. Re-including this dimension as a vital part of the cognitive process goes hand in hand with critique in Irigaray’s work, which demonstrates how loving care is devaluated or undermined and classified as a thoughtless activity.

Her emphasis on touch is an elaboration of this novel epistemological project that includes the other/otherness. Touch obviously is part of our everyday life. Tactile sensations are spread out over the entire body’s surface (Hermans 2022). Everything touches us: the embrace of our dearest ones, the skin of others, the texture of things, a spider, a cat, a movie, as well as the stormy wind and the warmth of the sun. Simply being alone in the forest touches us (TVB). We constantly touch the texture of the environment around us, as if being in water, when breathing, and, when being in a particular situation, meeting persons. Touch is more than haptic engagement; it is implicitly and pre-discursively everywhere, coming from all directions, as when one is touched by the smile of a friend, by the taste of a raspberry or the scent of a rose, or by an earthquake. Simply by looking at another person, we are touched when they look back, and when I for instance meet a person for the first time I simply feel the atmosphere in the situation. The implication is that the most fundamental aspect of touch is the qualitative touch here and now in a particular

⁴ De Jaegher, „Loving and knowing: reflections for an engaged epistemology.“ 2019.

⁵ Past metaphysics refers to an epoch of philosophy, roughly stretching from Plato to Hegel and that is characterized by a commitment to the hegemony of the one and the logic of the same where everyone thinks more or less along the same lines and speaks in the same way (STF; Rawlinson 2023, 55).

situation that is always underlying and involved in the way we perceive things. We are also touched by words that warm us, enlighten us, or hurt us, and when some thought resonates within something in us (Thorgeirsdottir, 2022). Touch is everywhere, in us and between us; we cannot move or imagine living without touch.

The Covid-19 outbreak has also been a powerful example of how the whole world is implicitly and universally touched by some incident that happened on a market in China: the pandemic has demonstrated how living creatures and organisms are inter-relationally involved, moving with the earth, being part of a whole (Hermans 2022, 211). Consequently, as Hermans argues, this pandemic has led to a crisis of touch among humans, a collective fear, causing ruptures in our daily touch rituals, which means that “[...] our relationship to our skin and the skin of others has become troubled” (Hermans 2022, 211). It has forced us to travel less, stay home, and reduce our space. At the same time, this has increased awareness about the manifold meanings of being together with another person, and what it means to be in a close relationship: the desire to be with, feel and sense with another person, sharing the world (STF). The implication is that we must reawaken the sense of touch so that we can bring ourselves closer to ourselves again. Besides, the phenomenological touch is critical towards theories of perception that are vision-centric (as noted, visual experience presupposes our interaction with the world).

Yet, this has further important critical implications concerning language, to which it is relevant to turn now. Based on a phenomenology of touch, it does not make sense to reduce the lived body to a “textual figure” or signs that are merely analyzed and structured on the basis of a difference between signifiers as laid out in structuralism — in Saussure’s view of language. Even with Jacques Derrida’s concept of deconstruction⁶, which marks a beginning to poststructuralism (as a critique of structuralism), the focus on differences between signs in language is dominant. His well-known term deconstruction names the fundamental structure of reality — “structure-in-movement”, constantly deferring from itself (Porsteinsson 2014, 254). However, the aim of deconstruction is to show that the meaning of a text is unstable and could have multiple and alternative themes or perspectives so the

⁶ Deconstruction refers to the unstructured *process* of signifiers that is forever ambiguous and never finite and is a critique of metaphysical presuppositions in Western culture. An underlying thought is that the signs can endlessly be disarranged, thus disturbing, unregularly and in an uncalculated way, the diverse “centres” of meaning (chains of signifiers) such as patriarchy, essence, God, on the basis of our living. (Derrida 1978; 1985).

meaning could just as easily be the center as it could be marginal (Derrida 1982). Irigaray departs from Derrida's philosophy of difference — from the notion of differences between signs — by stressing that language is rooted in the *lived sexual body* and our ongoing interactions. We are more than abstract subjects, signs, categories, and ideas (STF.85). The words come *from* the body; hence we are desiring, feeling, thinking, and linguistic bodies, *using* the words to express ourselves and the world (Di Paolo, Cuffari and De Jaeger 2018). Irigaray says:

In reality speech is produced by our body, but we do not use it to develop shapes from our physical belonging, to enable our body to speak. We reduce it to a machine reproducing a learned code instead of learning how our body could take place as the origin of word(s). As a living being it has energy for that purpose, and speech ought to be a way of expressing and cultivating this energy, notably through passing from its opening up to the world to its gathering with itself, in itself. (TBB.47-48)

This strong quote develops a language to demonstrate how words are a kind of continuation of life, part of a process of opening up to a world and coming back, an endless touching and being touched, a bodily process always intertwined with culture. This process needs to be lived, felt, experienced, and constantly reflected on, which means that we need to pay attention to how we relate to words so as not to become congealed in them. Irigaray reminds us that we are socially constructed, formed and shaped by language. However, we must learn to *use* the word instead of letting the word tell our being (TBB.43-49). Irigaray asks: "Is the function of speech to appropriate the world or to contribute to a becoming that is appropriate to us?" (TBB.44). The meaning of speech should support our becoming and growth. This implies cultivating the *touch* of our living and existing and transforming it into becoming and growing.

Here we see the universal meaning of embodied touch in Irigaray's philosophy. Touch is first and foremost phenomenological and experientially felt, inseparable from the experiencing body that moves, feels, and thinks, and that through its sensorimotor skills gains access to the world and to the presence of objects. Language cannot be grasped as representation understood in a pure discursive-linguistic manner; concepts are neither pre-given nor what things

essentially are (according to the Kantian approach) (Schoeller 2020). Rather, mutually changing processes of intricate interaction between the embodied mind, others, and the world is presupposed in our use of concepts through which we shape ourselves and the world. Irigaray's main point is that within the representational, often "presented" in language, there is a lived body, always involved with the coming of the words and the coming of oneself (TBB.47). Thus, the lived body and the linguistic body (language) form a representational whole.

As mentioned above, the bodily touch in interaction comes before perception (TBB). Interaction is what makes perception possible, and it enables the body to project itself into the world in which one comes into being. It is with the *body* that the child goes in search of the world, and its body functions as "[...] the mediator between itself and the world [...]" (TBB.29), in which the body creates itself, the world, concepts, and ideas. As will be illustrated, the newborn, who cannot yet speak, as well as the female body, as Irigaray argues in "When Our Lips Speak Together" (TBB; TS), has a "relationship to *the reality of bodies in process*" (TS.109).

Irigaray's understanding of perception as embodied and enactive goes hand in hand with a constant and creative critique of dualistic tradition of splitting perception into binaries that are often structured in a hierarchy between mind and body. She refuses to give the mind priority over the body, stressing the meaningfulness or the quality of the relationships we create in our becoming human. Her philosophy of the child in *To Be Born* is yet another example of her critique of the disembodied philosophy of Western culture (Thorgeirsdottir, 2022). For Irigaray, touch is part of embodied and embedded interaction and inter-relationality that includes the irreducible other (TTB; EP; TS; TBT).

Irigaray draws on the phenomenology of the *enactive* approach to perception that accounts for embodiment and embeddedness as laid out in Francisco Varela and Evan Thompson. The term "enactivism" is derived from *enaction*, defined as "the manner in which a subject of perception creatively matches its actions to the requirements of its situation" (Wilson and Foglia 2021), and by which the subject extends towards its environment. To illustrate: "[...] in order to get a bowl from the top of the kitchen cupboard, I have to stretch my arms, make myself as tall as possible, and stand on tiptoe. My body adapts to the situation by stretching out and reaching forwards, only then I can grab the bowl" (Hermans 2022, 213). In the same manner, we stretch our bodies in our longings and doings, striving forward to come

into contact with each other and the world. We extend as embodied embedded beings towards the physical world, which is in accordance with the understanding of the so-called four E's approach to cognition (referring to embodied, embedded, enactive and extended meaning).⁷

Building on the enactive account of perception and based on her concept of sexual difference, Irigaray's aim is to show how one is continuously attracted to the different other in endless searching for relation by which one is extending towards the physical world in which we build a collective dwelling. There are several versions of enactivism. Nevertheless, they all share an emphasis on the role of the body in cognition and the intertwining of perception and action; they all contribute to a critique of classic cognitivism, representationalism, and internalist or neurocentric theories.

The enactive account of perception reveals that perception is not a process in the brain solely; a perception is not a copied image from the outer world, but the result of a *skillful activity* of the whole body.⁸ Hence, meaning is not external to the body, and the meaning is not something that happens to us or in us but is something that we accomplish, making the world available in which we shape ourselves. As shown with the example from *To Be Born*, the infant uses its power of movement, desire, and sensory perception to come into touch with the world so as to get a grip on the world which it inhabits itself (TBB.2-20).

In continuation of the issue of "coming into touch" with the world — interacting with the world and the body being the medium of perception — Irigaray elaborates the touch in the touching: the *embodied somatic* meaning that is pre-verbally felt or critically sensed in an embodied way. Affect is what touches and

⁷ The theory of the extended mind says that the mind does not exclusively reside inside the brain or even the body, but extends into the physical world. The original meaning of the extended mind is that external objects within the environment function as part of the mind (David J. Chalmers, Andy Clark 1998). Simple examples are the carpenter's hammer and the blind person's stick; the hammer and the stick functioning as an extension of their embodied mind and their capacity of doing, interacting. This implies that tools no longer function as an object, perceived for themselves, but as a part of our body. (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991). Enactivist ideas are already operative in phenomenology, as explicated in the introduction to the book just mentioned: "We like to consider our journey in this book as a modern continuation of a program of research founded over a generation ago by the French philosopher, Maurice Merleau-Ponty" (p. xv).

⁸ This view is followed up by Noë's enactive approach of phenomenology of perception in *Action in Perception* (2006), as well as in Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch's *The Embodied Mind* (1991).

moves the embodied subject physically (even to tears) and is a source of thought before any representation (TBB). She prioritizes the intimate process of interaction in the realm of intersubjectivity that is immediate and heartfelt between two sexual beings, showing how it brings forth a more fertile knowledge (outside calculated or given principles).

The infant, for instance, responds immediately and pre-reflectively in an impulsive economy of affect that is without a structure (TBB.7-25). The vital affect is in the foreground. “Its energy seems inexhaustible, and nothing can stop it in its discovery of the world” (TBB.19). Its curiosity is first and foremost sensorial, bodily and not theoretical (TBB.19-20). When the child grows up, this impulsive economy of affect disappears in favor of rational thinking. And when becoming adults, we are neither cultivated to pay attention to affect nor to speak of our affectivity. Thus, affect is not always responded to, but rather averted or ignored. We are more accustomed to reducing sensitivity to habitual language and its conventional forms (truth) without putting either of these to the test of everyday perception. Because of this flaw, we fall back into the realm of conventional or simple feeling of something already formed and imagined to be universal (TBT.22-23).

For this reason, Irigaray’s enactivism, *self-organization*, *self-expressivity*, and *sense-making* are central, which is linked to liberating forces of thinking for oneself and with others, and being embodied-engaged (TNHB). Sense-making is the ability or attempt to make sense of the ambiguous situation (including affect in thinking) so we can act in it (Schoeller 2021). Furthermore, it includes the freedom to “take up” our situation and change it in a way that makes sense for us (Gendlin 1962). Annemie Halsema says: “At all times, the body is not strictly a biological being, [...]. Rather the body signifies its environment [...].” (Halsema 2008, 65). The body gives meaning to the world by acting out in self-organization and self-expression. Thus, the body is active in perception. This is underlined by Heinämaa who argues that “[...] the body should not be understood as the organism described in biosciences” (Heinämaa 1997, 26). Rather, it should be investigated as a starting point of our actions.

More generally, sexual difference, the most basic concept in Irigaray’s philosophy, accounts for a *relational and dynamic ontology*: nothing exists or comes to be without the other. The enactive body refers to a living system that is self-expressive, self-producing, and transformative, albeit in relation to the different other

(TS; TBB; EP; STF). Accordingly, she proposes an enactive phenomenology of loving care that is intersubjective and participating in sense-making, and this has implications for her ethics of sexual difference and of the goodness in us, that needs to be brought to light and cultivated.

As indicated above, Irigaray's enactivism has a genuinely pragmatic aspect, as she is interested in the immediate and affectionate aspect of knowing that is meaningful and carefully acted out. Pragmatist thinking is a critical thinking that prioritizes *useful* knowledge over certain knowledge/statements (of what is merely true or false) (James 1970).⁹ Thus, pragmatists accept a word (or a concept) as most true or real if it appears to be useful in explaining and communicating how we understand the world. For instance, if humans commonly perceive the ocean as blue and beautiful, the ocean is blue and beautiful. To refer to the infant, it uses touch implicitly and pragmatically to go further so as to participate in or create the space between itself and its mother. The relevance of the pragmatic aspect of the enacted embodied touch is to elaborate on the importance of affect in knowledge, showing how the affective being can go against solid walls of principles and against a dualism that is reductive and discriminating. For Irigaray, affect needs to be elaborated in all phases of life, as well in the cognitive sciences, as fundamental for our blossoming and well-being.

2.2 Summary of the critical implications of Irigaray's phenomenology of touch

With her relational and dynamic ontology, based on the irreducible other, Irigaray goes against traditional ontology that splits nature from culture and body from mind in the form of an ontological dualism that postulates that the real world exists ultimately beyond the enactive being (Kasulis 2002). It is relevant to mention that within feminist phenomenology, enactivism is used to bridge the gap between body and mind and shows how the creation of subjectivity and the cognitive world is

⁹ Ideas are meaningful when they have practical consequences in human life. Pragmatism is also friendly to intuition and felt meaning, because it is what we use in our creation of meaning and identity.

enacted by the embodied mind.¹⁰ The aim of such a project is to liberate ourselves from binary thinking that is patriarchal and repressive.

Irigaray elaborates the important role of the living body as the prime organizing force and mover of experience.¹¹ The living body is the moving energy that orients itself in a space of interaction, and, at the same time, it structures space, in which it comes to be. The bodily engagement implies that thinking is not neutral but *individual and relational*, enacted, embodied, and felt in the space of interaction, which is partly constructed by the culture we are born into. This is well formulated by Virpi Lehtinen:

The moving body is also directed by its intentional surroundings, by the diverse structurization of its surroundings such as paths, gateways, or steps, the cultural codes of availability and unavailability. These surroundings which correspond to the layer of operative intentionality already include affective meanings which are inherent in them. Moreover, these affective meanings are responded to, averted, or ignored. Thus, in phenomenology, the lived body is both a source of meaning and a receiver of meanings. These meanings can arise at all levels of embodied subjectivity—sensibility, mobility, affectivity, and sexuality. (Lehtinen 2014, 58)

Even though the role of embodied touch has been recognized both within pragmatism and phenomenology, it has not been taken sufficiently into account and has not yet been accepted into the cognitive sciences. This is partly due to our implicit *belief* in the existence of an objective world independent of experience (Petitmengin 2007). The difficulty is that a large part of our lived experience eludes us as we strain towards objective knowledge or a concept, with the consequence that

¹⁰ More recently within feminism and in an attempt to bridge the gap between the sensing body and constructionism, Anya Daly moves in the direction of phenomenology and enactivism by highlighting the problems of dualism, the problem of the atomistic, individualist subject, acknowledging the important work of feminists whose work is informed by European traditions such as phenomenology—de Beauvoir, Irigaray, Young, Butler, etc. (Daly 2021, 43-64).

¹¹ Merleau-Ponty pointed out that the body is a phenomenon of expression that projects itself towards the world; the language is used to establish a living relation with oneself and others (1945; 1962, 221-28).

a representation of our experience is superimposed on our actual experience (Petitmengin 2021).

By elaborating touch in thinking, Irigaray's effort is to change our belief system and call the binaries of nature-culture and body-mind into question, stressing that actual experience (the way we are touched here and now) is always involved with our production of meaning in language. Irigaray's point of departure is that our tradition keeps alive "[...] a culture of uprooting from our natural origin and belonging. Western culture corresponds to a culture of the outside, not the inside" (IBSW.139). When gazing at the objective world, we reduce the relation we have to the other and our capacity to respond as embodied beings and for ourselves.

In the *open space* of interaction and inter-affection, and not least in intimate intersubjectivity, Irigaray demonstrates how we give birth to each other and preserve differences from each other (STF.7). However, this is not always the case. Across and throughout time, violent conflict is commonly located in the hierarchical process of "othering," based on binary narratives of myself-other, us-them, male-female, white-black, etc. The other is thus determined in an empty space in an act of dominance and power that implies a reduction of the two to one (Grosz 2011; Hill 2012). This means that there is *no* space for differences to move and develop — and no real meetings with the other. Instead, the cognitive is trapped in an order of logocentrism and confined to sameness that represses desire and the natural growth, which only fosters fear and hate that threatens life.

Irigaray's main thesis concerning touch is that touch is not only a fruitful addition to analytical and logical praxis in philosophy, but it also functions as an act of resistance to given principles and dualistic thinking that defines us. It breaks with the old definition of what it means, for instance, to be a man and a woman, and it is a powerful counteract to oppression and hate in chaotic times (Petitmengin 2021). The underlying question in Irigaray's work is: How can we as embodied knowers speak differently than expected of given norms? Should we let the word speak (for) us or should *we* use the word to speak our living? The situation in which we are today must incite us to care about life and combine living and thinking, which means taking charge of life in which we become, both individually, culturally, and spiritually (TNHB.xiv).

Touch is intrinsically linked to sexual difference and the way we relate to each other. The most interesting implication is that touch is so rich in meaning: it is

open, subtle, implied, felt, surprising, dynamic, transformational, and never the same — it increases insight and makes us grow spiritually and ethically. Above all, touch mediates between two persons. Besides, we use touch in many ways — to come closer and connect to the other, interrogate, and explore life, the world, and ourselves. When we reflect and wonder about life we are calling out for others to care (Þorsteinsson, 2023). Wonder is a topic in Irigaray’s work based on sexual difference that marks care and curiosity for the other as the other (ESD).

The most valuable term in Irigaray’s notion of the phenomenology of touch is the elaboration on the irreducible other that enables dynamic interaction between two based on desire and requires recognition of the invisible space between us, the in-between. The most profound idea is the way in which Irigaray seeks in the silent matter, the forgotten body, and that has its source in the forgotten material maternal touch, as the root of our being that is non-hierarchical (unfolded in 2.9). With the morphology of the female body (the two lips), she brings to life *affect, touch, and the sensitive life*, and she also elaborates on the *woman* who has been devaluated in the history of science.

As we will see, Irigaray is critical of the understanding of touch as displayed in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology — especially illustrated by his example of “the touching hands” in his chapter “The Intertwining – The Chiasm” (Merleau-Ponty 1968). Irigaray rejects his understanding of touch, turning the focus from the meeting between the knower and the known to the vital dynamic meeting between *two living bodies*, showing how they *emerge as two*. The body does not only become through perception; it becomes through subtle signification of the affectionate and the sensitive world.

Touch is always situated or embedded and includes the sexuate other. Even though Irigaray at the beginning of her philosophy uses “sexual” and not “sexuate,” she is referring to the sex as *situated*.¹² In her later works, Irigaray claims: “From the beginning my work is devoted to sexuate difference” (CON.76).¹³ The term

¹² Sexuate difference is explained further and unfolded in the third chapter of this dissertation.

¹³ In her later work Irigaray continues to elaborate thinking and living which are embodied, embedded and attentive to sexual differences. “Among the keys to this project is Irigaray’s notion of the ‘sexuate’, a neologism used in English translations of her work (for the French *sexué*) as well as by Irigaray herself when writing and speaking in English. Although it already appears in the English translation of *Speculum*, this term becomes increasingly prominent in Irigaray’s later texts where she writes of the need for sexuate rights, sexuate identity, and a sexuate culture characterized by two (sexuate) subjects” (Jones 2011, 4). It is relevant to note and as will be unfolded that the sexuate is

“sexuate,” which will now be used from this point on in this dissertation, means two sex-situated beings and refers to a real and concrete difference between two subjectivities and their different mode of relating to the world (CON.75).

2.3 Irigaray’s critique of “the touching hands” in Merleau-Ponty’s “The Intertwining — The Chiasm”

With her concept of self-affection, Irigaray draws critically on the phenomenology of touch as laid out in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, especially with respect to his idea of the touching hands, being both subject and object of experience that is moreover seen (Merleau-Ponty 1968). The main problem with this idea is the lack of a sexuate dialectic and relationality, like the way the human being desires to approach the other as the other. The missing point is that the *alterity of the other* is not taken radically into account, which has implications for our (inter)subjectivity, blossoming, and the way we transcend our being. The aim of this sub-chapter is to demonstrate how Irigaray works out an alternative phenomenology of sexuate difference in which an ethical relationship to the other is a central concern. Her interest is to move from the neuter meaning that is vision-centric to our nature of being two.

With her *phenomenology of the in-between*, Irigaray *rejects* Merleau-Ponty’s model, in which one hand is the object of the other, in favor of *reciprocal touching*, *the emergence of affectivity*, and *the “touch in the touching”*. Her approach allows sensitivity and embodied dynamism between two subjects and within oneself that is much wider and more intricate than our sensory perception of tactile experience.

In her text, “The visible of the Flesh: A Reading of Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, “The Intertwining—the Chiasm”” (TS.151-185), she criticizes Merleau-Ponty for ignoring the perception of sexuate difference, which is the nature of our being and which consists of approaching the other in a constant process of interaction. The point being that in Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the tangible, the two hands are the same and that doesn’t allow for the dynamic between two and the sensible transcendence of the other. As will be argued, his idea is

not restricted to a biological sex or a cultural sex or the erotic only but is rather a different mode of relating to the world, a differently enacted relation of being and becoming.

primarily based on analytical thinking of the neuter subject and is ultimately reduced to vision (TS.151-85; TBB.25-26).

Irigaray's effort is to resort to another logic that is sensual and sensitive whereby an ethical aspect of intersubjective attunement is elaborated. Besides, there is a crucial difference between sensation, which is of quality, and perception, which is of quantity (STF). The quality of our being is linked to a constant dialectic between two based on the irreducible other and the sensitive life, which again is linked to Irigaray's most elusive philosophical concept, *sexuate difference*.

My interest in scrutinizing Merleau-Ponty's example of the touching hands and shedding light on Irigaray's critique arises from a willingness to emphasize (1) that touch is not neuter but lived and in process, (2) that the emergence of affect is the prime sense/touch (between two) and a prime mover of experience. Thus, we *are* what we experience in relationships with others/the world that includes inter-affectivity. My point is also (3) that it is not (only) our experiences that shape us, but what we make of them as thinking and responsible beings — *how we respond* to touch and how we pragmatically *use touch* to maintain a relation to ourselves, others, and the world that makes sense. It is up to us to deal with the touch here and now and *carry it forward*¹⁴ into a future touch, through which we can shape a more livable world, a kind democracy, outside the darkness of debating oppositions and hostility in chaotic times.

Let's look at Merleau-Ponty's thesis. The example of the touching hands is well known in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and is seen as an example of the overcoming of the dualism of the subjective and the objective world, demonstrating that the body is a mediation between the self and the world. Instead of understanding the subject and worldly things as two separated phenomena, the subject is shown to be actively participating in the world, being both the sensing, perceiving subject and the sensed, perceived object. The touching hands imply a double touch and, thereby, are a model for relationality or for the intertwining of the touching and the touched. The idea, thus, is to illustrate that the subject interacts and experiences worldly

¹⁴ Carrying forward is a term from Eugene T. Gendlin and means that our living process is involved with intricate implicit meaning. As thinking bodies, and when touched, we take the implied touch in a situation, that is lived, felt and pre-conceptual, forward into new occurring, new implying, new situation, etc. (Gendlin 2018, VIII).

things, being not only a subject but also an object of intentionality and experience.¹⁵ The living body experiences subjectively from the inside, invisibly to others, as well as objectively from the outside that is visible; I am a subject (for me) and an object (for others). When the right hand touches an object, it is experienced as a subject that performs an active movement, and when the same right hand is touched by the left hand, it is experienced as an object, i.e., as a system of bones and muscles in a particular location that can be seen or touched. In this double sensation, the aim is to show that the body (the flesh) is both sensing and sensed, actively participating in the world. Hence, there is a double reference: the body is experiencing as a subject, while being at the same time the material body and the perceived object. In this double reference, Merleau-Ponty recognizes a distinction between the perception of self and the perception of non-self, the knower and the known, and the perceiver and the perceived.

With the analysis of the touching hands, Merleau-Ponty attempts to show that the perception of the body and the perception of things outside of it, through which we touch upon the world and through which we also develop a sense of self and a sense of reality, are tied together and always intertwined (Ratcliffe 2013). Merleau-Ponty already concluded in his analysis that sense perception is living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life. In his view, there is a dynamic relationship between the self and the world. The implication is also that we develop a sense of self through an active engagement with the world (touching upon the world) and through a passive registration (being touched by the world). However, passivity is never entirely passive: any passive registration requires some form of active engagement (Merleau-Ponty 1045; 1962).

Merleau-Ponty's philosophical oeuvre aims to solve the problem of dualism through the uncovering of the structure of interrelation that spans all subject-object relations. His word "flesh" concerns a deeper element of reality. It is not a sum of "material" or "spiritual" facts, and it lies beneath any kind of dualism; it is the "formative medium" of object and subject relations, or what can be called the felt dimension of experience (Petitmengin, 2021, 174). Vasseleu claims: "Flesh is

¹⁵ The lived body (*Leib*) experiences worldly things in its interaction with it, and the material body (*Körper*) is experienced as an object. Hence, the body is both a subject, *being* a body, and an object having a body. (Husserl, 1989; Merleau-Ponty 1945; 1993, 90, 467; Wehrle 2020).

Merleau-Ponty's term for the prototypical structure of all subject-object relations" (Vasseleu 1998, 26). In every instance of this relation, a subjectivity is simultaneously internally divergent with itself. Thus, there is a difference within the body.

The metaphor of the touching hands in Merleau-Ponty is first and foremost an illustration of *relatedness* between the body and the world, of the way one interacts and gets access to the world and oneself. As an example, he shows that the skin is touched from the inside and the outside as a fundamental mode of accessing worldly experience, that is, in a meeting between the knower and the known. With his thesis of reversibility, Merleau-Ponty sought in his early and later work to undercut dualist oppositions of mind-body, self-other, interior-exterior and subject-object, showing how they are all interlinked and tied together.

Irigaray continues from here in importantly new ways and introduces sexuate difference as fresh phenomena that critically exceed Merleau-Ponty's approach. She is referring to vital living process and dynamic interaction and inter-affection between two sexuate subjects that are not only felt but *heartfelt*. Irigaray elaborates the crucial *ethical dimension of touch* for living process with the purpose of *overcoming dualism*. Touch between two living bodies means that we are always touched back, thus there is "touch" in the touching, a quality of touch and inter-affectivity between us that we need to look into, which are important for our becoming, transcendence and change.

The question of whether Merleau-Ponty succeeds in overcoming this dualism or not will not be further discussed in this dissertation; rather, let it suffice to elaborate on how Irigaray critically rejects and deepens his notion of touch towards a sensible dialectic and transcendence between two based on sexuate difference. As will be argued, there is a need for more revolutionary ideas to overcome dualism than thinking of the relation between the knower and the known. Merleau-Ponty's ideas are incomplete without Irigaray's concept of sexuate difference. As Irigaray argues, it seems that Merleau-Ponty "[...] is forgetting the function of sexuality as a relationship-to and that he is overlooking the role of perception as a means of acceding to the other as other" (TBT.22). Irigaray's account of touch implies more than a meeting between the knower and the known and concerns being *in relation with another subject* — the way we are touched and touched back.

For Irigaray, as for many phenomenologists, the body being both active and passive, subject and object is quite obvious. However, it can be difficult to determine whether and when some parts of the body reverse into passivity.¹⁶ At least such a notion requires focused attention. Also, it is obvious, at least within the phenomenology of touch, that the body is capable of feeling from the inside as well as from the outside. Thus, the body is *already* in the world (as subject and object), giving meaning to itself and its environment, hence the body is mediating between itself and the world.

According to Irigaray the body is *doing* in perception, and, as such, it cannot remain passive:

The body itself represents an agent of knowledge, but of a knowledge that we too often neglect, even forget, though this phase ought to be considered an important stage in the constitution of our being. Yet this phase does not obey the subject-object logic according to which we interpret the phenomena. (TBB.10)

Here, Irigaray refers to an important phase of sense perception that is sensitive, pre-reflective and comes before reasoning — before our ability to distinguish between subject and object, active and passive, which is the ability to affect/to be affected that cannot alternate between active and passive (IBSW.160). Affect is not a simple feeling, such as finding food good or bad, hot or cold (TBT.23), but a bodily feeling that arises in a situation; it is the quality of a situation, initially and intuitively experienced and before logical and conceptual formulation. Affect belongs to the lived logic of immediate interaction between two — as demonstrated with the infant’s intense and immediate embodied response in its interrogation of itself and the world, as described in *To Be Born* (TBB.14).

The main point of the topic of the child is to illustrate that interaction comes first, before perception, which demonstrates its need to integrate into its surroundings without losing its potential to transcend itself towards achieving its development and

¹⁶ One can further conclude that it is debatable (in *The Visible and the Invisible*) whether the subjective bodily organ necessarily is becoming an objective thing, and whether the objectivation-subjectivation processes are inherent in the passive-active bodily experience. To be fair to Merleau-Ponty, he radically claims the “unity” of one unique originary flesh, at once touched and touching.

growth (TBB.15). Its movements and growth refer to embodied thinking and the freedom to take up the situation and transform it based on lived experience. In a similar way, adults, or “[...] those capable of dominating natural growth through categories and principles imposed on them from the outside [...]” (TBB.15), must deal with certain aspects, such as realizing the dynamism between “I” and the other and the dialectic within oneself when thinking embodied.

In short, Irigaray illustrates that inter-affectivity brings forth the subtle meaning that is always underlying the knowledgeable world in which we shape ourselves and the quality of a situation (Heidegger would call it “*Stimmung*” or “*Befindlichkeit*”).¹⁷ To understand affect, we don’t need to think rationally, separating self from non-self or active from passive; rather, the focus is on *attentiveness* to the other and oneself — the space between us. And we don’t need to separate what is felt inside the skin and outside the skin. A child moves almost tirelessly around, and it has not (yet) a consciousness capable of identifying the content of its perception and integrating it into a whole. To affect/to be affected is inherent in its bodily movement that is intimate, un-rational, open, and driven by desire and curiosity.

Sexuate being is an ontological structure of our becoming that connects us to one another, the way we approach each other, coming closer to each other; this structure is invisible and pre-discursively felt (STF.18). The ontological status of the sexuate refers to our origin, which already exists as a lifeforce that binds us together and opens up to new experience and understanding (STF.9). This means to recognize the specificity of the other and oneself that has transformational dimensions. To perceive our sexuation, we need to resort to another logic than that of the subject-object split. We need to come back to the lived order based on self-affection, which is an open space of interaction that includes the other and exists prior to the subject-object distinction (STF.24). Instead of putting the focus on the subject-object relation in perception (as Merleau-Ponty does), where the self and the world become

¹⁷ Heidegger says that *Befindlichkeit* refers to what is ordinarily called “being in a mood,” and also what is called “feeling” and “affect.” As Gendlin argues, his “[...]” concept denotes how *we sense ourselves in situations*. Whereas feeling is usually thought of as something inward, Heidegger’s concept refers to something both inward and outward, but before a split between inside and outside has been made”. (https://previous.focusing.org/gendlin_befindlichkeit).

available, Irigaray's focuses on the *relation between two different bodies* that are of a sexuate nature.

Even though the idea of the two hands touching, being subject and object, are metaphorical and paradigmatic, the hands belong to the same person or to the economy of the self-same, performing auto-affection, which means that there is no room for touch between two subjects and thus no space for intersubjectivity to develop based on the irreducible other. As opposed to the touching hands being visually observed, Irigaray stresses that the touch is the invisible felt; hence, we cannot see the *alterity of the other*, nor the *somatic quality* of the situation or the meaningfulness that *emerges* in it, like the way we implicitly reach out for and extend towards the other.

Irigaray's main argument is that the two sexes are meeting in a process of inter-affectivity and in sexuate differences that cannot be divided into poles of subject-object or active-passive, which are moreover seen and reversible. Thus, the touch is enactive and dynamic and *energizes* our thinking. The subject-object and active-passive divide is a paradigm that Irigaray seeks to avoid in her philosophy, as they have caused a split in the understanding of subjectivity in Western culture regarding what it means to be male and female (the male being the active one and the female the passive one, and that has kept woman trapped as an object in a masculine discourse of hierarchy).

Vision and tactile touch are different maps of perception that work together. Irigaray states: "[...] the two maps are incomplete and do not overlap: *the tangible is, and remains, primacy in its opening*" (ESD.162). Hence, touch opens up to and initiates fresh meaning regarding oneself *and* the way we relate to each other in a qualitative way (TS. 205-219; ESD.59-72). Our body in relation appears to us as our lived body in a way that it cannot appear in vision. Irigaray emphasizes that the body cannot be "[...] reduced to its eyes or its hands" (TBB.29). "The visible and the tactile do not obey the same laws or rhythms of the flesh" (ESD.162); thus, their powers can be entangled but not reduced the one to the other. The point is that you "see" the world from your own embodied perspective, either by "touching yourself" or "things". Merleau-Ponty's reversal is mechanical and does not allow differences to unfold and form. Irigaray asserts that, with the emphasis on vision in touch, Merleau-Ponty neglects the sensible medium between two subjects (ESD.162):

The look cannot take up the tangible. Thus I never see that *in which* I touch or am touched, What is at play in the caress does not see itself. The in-between, the middle, the *medium* of the caress does not see itself. In the same way and differently, I do not see that which allows me to see, that which touches me with light and air so that I see some “thing.” (ESD. 161-62)

To sum up, Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the touching hands, being both subject and object of experience, is compromised by an emphasis upon vision (TS.151-85). The touch has, according to Matthew Ratcliffe, been marred “[...] by a tendency to take touch with the hands as the paradigmatic example of touch, from which generalizations are then made about all tactual experience” (Ratcliffe 2013, 132). Merleau-Ponty is over-generalizing the logic of two hands being reversible as subject-object and active-passive. The missing link in his model of the touching hands is the emergence of felt sensing as the medium between two at the level of intersubjectivity. Hence, touch is irreducible to vision.

It is debatable whether touch can be reduced to an idea or an *abstract model* of perception that is moreover seen. At least for Irigaray, the “look” of the touching hands is organized and static (ESD.152-53). She states:

In a certain way, this subject never enters the world. He never emerges from an osmosis that allows him to say to the other, “Who art thou?” But also, “Who am I?” What sort of event do we represent for each other when together? Irreversible events except where death is concerned. The phenomenology of the flesh that Merleau-Ponty attempts is without question(s). It has no spacing or interval for the freedom of questioning between two. No other or Other to keep the world open. No genesis. No grace. (ESD.183)

The idea of reversibility as a principle risks the disappearance of the one, the other, or the interval, and this has been the case in past metaphysics of neutrality and sameness, where everything is ordered in a hierarchy. Switching between poles of subject and object means going back and forth in reversibility, which does *not* seem to lead us forward, cognitively, ethically, or spiritually, but makes us stuck at a crossroad between the knower-and-being-known.

To avoid solipsism and emptiness, according to Irigaray, we need to turn our attention to the other. Thus, “[...] we must ask the question of the other as touched and touching. And of an other whose body’s ontological status would differ from my own” (ESD.157). Sjöholm adds to this:

That is, we cannot only concern ourselves with the doings and dealings of the single-sexed subject with two hands. We must add another aspect to the chiasm. The sex operates as the *écart* of differentiation at work in the intertwining of vision and touch. We cannot think the chiasm if we do not think two bodies—at least (Sjöholm 2000, 99-100).

This means restoring the *power of touch* that includes sexuate difference that can signify fresh meaning and sensations, to open up to meaning that touches and which has not yet been heard (ESD.184).

Irigaray keeps company with Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the necessity to interrogate the pre-discursive meaning of our being that contributes to our becoming that can bring us closer as relational beings. However, we do not only participate in a world of objects but also with each other in participatory sense-making that is pre-conceptual, felt and invisible to us. Thus, to debunk dualism, we need to think more than logically and work intensively with the *quality of affect* at the level of intersubjectivity and sexuate difference.

2.4 Self-affection is a felt quality — and not restricted to the quantitative, to one part of the body, or sight.

The importance of self-touch or self-affection is not restricted to one part of the body being able to touch another part (as illustrated with the example of the touching hands), but to the felt touch, intersubjective attunement and embodied dynamism between two and within oneself, based on desire inherent in us.¹⁸ Sexuate difference is inherently linked to affect and implies a structuring of subjectivity that can only take place in relation to the other and is necessary for our becoming and growing (IBSW.158).

¹⁸ Intersubjective attunement is the subtle gestural dimension where thought is played out that encounters between humans also seems to unfold (Petitmengin 2021).

The aim of this subchapter is to argue that not all self-touching has the reversible nature between the subject and object, which is moreover *seen*, and that we are intersubjectively related as sexuate beings. Irigaray criticizes the idea of reversibility for being quantitative (the numeral of the two distinct parts) by pointing out that the positions of the subject and the unborn child are qualitative and *not* reversible. Their relation is *qualitatively sensed* and always more than a quantity; the pregnant woman is already double and relational, with the other in herself, and this fluid subtle relation is felt. Further, the mother is not able to see the child nor the child its mother. Vision in perception cannot be reduced to touch and is not the same as (felt) touch. The touch is always more intricate and more subtle than the visual (and more than a male gaze).

This specific case of the pregnant mother and an unborn child — as a case of self-other relations — has not been considered in the phenomenological investigation of intersubjectivity (Heinämaa, 2007, 243-256; Lehtinen, 2014, 67). A proper phenomenology of birth must consider our *first relation* with the human with whom we shared life without a clear separation between two worlds (IBSW.144); in other words, the phenomenology should take into account the universal fact that each of us is born of another human being.¹⁹ “Western man has not taken into account such a sharing with and lack of differentiation from the mother” (IBSW.144).

It is relevant to further emphasize that the cognition is not only about world-relating but also *situational-qualitative-relating* that is vital for our being and becoming. When only relating to worldly things, we easily forget the relation we have to ourselves through others. This, in Irigaray’s words, “[...] prevents us from being able to stay in ourselves through recognizing the otherness of the other and the fecundity of meeting with all sorts of others that constitute the world” (TBB.25). Instead of favoring the emergence of intersubjectivity (the way we relate to the sexuate other) sexuality in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology “[...] maintains a duplicity in subjectivity itself in such a way that all of its actions, its sentiments, its sensations are ambiguous, murky, and incapable of being turned towards an other as other” (TBT.21).

Merleau-Ponty is quite aware that the two touching hands belong to the same space of consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 1968, 141) and that there is a fundamental

¹⁹ See further Heinämaa, 2014.

narcissism in every sight; the one who sees is situated in what is seen, and it is still oneself that one sees (TBB.26; Merleau-Ponty 1968, 139). “However such narcissism paradoxically ends up in ‘an innate anonymity of myself’ that Merleau-Ponty sometimes calls the ‘flesh’, a flesh which participates in the universality of the world” (TBB.26). From that point of view “the hands” result in solipsism, melancholy and weariness (TBB.26-27), which means that we run the risk of not being able to connect to our embodied thinking self or to others. This kind of subject is self-enclosed, different from Irigaray’s understanding of the subject as relational and dependent.

However, it must be put into perspective that there is not necessarily narcissism in every sight. Our eyes are part of our materiality, and we often turn our eyes inward, reflecting and resonating how we are touched, hurt or moved. Vision can evoke a beautiful thought, as when seeing an old friend we haven’t seen for a long time. Thus, a danger is involved when focusing on a static model of touch.

The reversibility of tactile perception, found to be operative in the relation between touching and touched, is, according to Merleau-Ponty, “[...] after all only a reversibility *in principle*, always imminent, always just around the corner, an indefinitely deferred future, never realized in fact” (Halberg 2011, 110).²⁰ Reversibility is merely paradigmatic of perception: I can see and be seen, I can hear and be heard, I can touch and be touched. Irigaray would say that there is no sensibility *in general*; hence it is sex-situated, in process, and not the same for the male and the female. Their “[...] self-affections are different and required as such. (IBSW 159). She insists throughout her philosophy that there is *no neuter* experience; no one has experience in general. Experience is always enacted from a sex-situated and first-person perspective that involves the other. Furthermore, experience in general refers to logic and means for Irigaray a masculine neutral way of speaking.

Thus, Irigaray criticizes Merleau-Ponty’s sexless notion of the body towards a sexuate differentiated one (Halsema 2008, 82). She develops a phenomenology of the body and the *in-between* that includes the irreducible other with source in desire. She elaborates on desire, the invisible felt quality of touch, a knowledge that is inter-human. Merleau-Ponty is operating with a logic that neutralizes the sexes from the

²⁰ This is especially noticeable in the situation of one hand touching the other hand of the same body occupied in touching some external object.

singularity of their source (TBB.26). The missing point in Merleau-Ponty's model (as already indicated) is the *dynamic relational energy* that *emerges* in the dialectic between two sexuate subjects.

Touch is lived and unpredictable and includes the other whom we can never fully know. Hence, we are not only perceiving quantitative things "out there"; we are connected to other beings in care for life, oneself and the other based on affects (IBSW) — belonging to the qualitative in an event or situation that is meaningful to us, as when discovering the value of the other and life. Affectivity aims at connecting and bridging the world between two *different bodies* and not merely between subject and object, the knower and the known.

The problem is that the general understanding of phenomenology of touch does not fully respect the difference between affect (bodily feeling) and world experience (Ratcliffe 2008, 77-102). The commonplace assumption is that bodily feeling is distinct from world experience, which stems in part from a tendency to characterize the latter primarily in terms of visual perception (Ratcliffe 2013). When focusing on vision in perception, as Merleau-Ponty partly does with his example of the touching hands, bodily feelings, the way we are attracted to one another, and the quality in a situation easily gets lost.

2.5 Thinking about what arises and stirs between us outside the subject-object, active-passive divide

Irigaray goes so far in her critique of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of touch as to claim that in his approach to the domain of sensuous relationships he confines himself "[...] to a subject-object logical structure, without considering what occurs between two subjects. And when such a relationship is envisioned, it is more often than not according to a master-slave, dominant-dominated scheme which aims at nullifying at least one of the two subjectivities" (STF.56). We must keep in mind that oppositions of subject-object, active-passive, and reason-body are what has formed the hierarchy of master-slave that has dominated Western metaphysics for decades; it is a system in which women have been defined as passive materiality and unthinking matter while the male is associated with the active speaking subject and

reasoning. When displaced outside discourse and reduced to a passive object, you can neither speak nor make sense as a full subject.

Thus, we need to think about what emerges and arises in us and between us, outside the subject-object divide.²¹ The danger involved when focusing on the logic of subject-object, as in the case of the one hand touching the other hand, we tend to reduce the other to the quantitative other — to an *object*. Also, we annul the space between us, which implies that embodied differences cannot be unfolded. Irigaray states:

In perceiving the other, if I annul the gap and the difference between us, I become the other and make him mine. We are no longer two. Perception is abolished in sensation or in a representational scheme which forgets the real presence between us. I perceive myself beginning from my sense of the other and I perceive him within the horizon of my history, of my affections, including those which are intellectual. The becoming of each finds itself paralyzed as a result of the abolition of perception between the two, a perception which is always different and always new. (TBT.49)

The reality of bodies in process allows vitality and fresh thinking that is liberating and blooming outside the scheme of oppositions that characterizes our culture. The open space of inter-affection or the interim space between two allows the two sexes, male and female, to approach each other in differences based on desire, which allows the autonomy of their being. Hence, we are compelled to take sexuate differences into account, assisting one another in the formation of subjectivity (TBB.81; STF.23).

As part of our nature, desire functions as a relational energy in us that contributes to our individuation and growth and which helps us to *enter into relation* with the other(s) and the world (STF). The point is that the relationship between touching and being touched might indicate “[...] the secret of this still ‘obscure’ alliance between looking and being looking at” (ESD.159). The unclear alliance is sexuate perception, embodied and critically (heart)felt, and very close to that of

²¹ It is relevant to mention that the “other” is not only the other of sexuate difference, but can also refer to the alterity of otherness: “a companion, a friend, a child, a foreigner” (STW.23), as well as “animal, vegetable or mineral” (IBSW), which will not be a subject of discussion in this dissertation. Irigaray takes into consideration an agency of nature and matter, and the sensitive matter of humans, and develops a relational ontology that is felt.

interrogating and being interrogated in the process of approaching the other as the other (ESD.159). Irigaray argues:

It is not only through sight that we can perceive the world and the other(s), by means of images or representations, it is also through the trace in ourselves of their way of touching us. Such a perception is less momentary, fragmentary and external than the visual perception, and it is more easily integrated into an organic living totality than into a totally mentally constructed. (STF.96)

When listening to our body, what *arises and stirs* inside, we might discover the *source of our longings*, which is “[...] no longer a desire of a subject in relation to an object, but the dynamic opening up to a risky encounter between two” (STF.40; 80). Thus, we must ask ourselves: What is it that mobilizes our whole being? What energizes our thoughts? It is not only the intellectual or analytical dimensions of meaning but also the immediate inter-affective dimensions belonging to the preverbal source of meaning (Petitmengin 1999; 2007). Irigaray elaborates in *Sharing the Fire* that insofar as love and desire are the primordial forms of the subject being in the world, no engagement with the world is possible without another person.

In fairness to Merleau-Ponty, it is relevant to mention that his last use of the touching hands example, where again the duality of subject-object, active-passive characterizes the double reference of self-touch, is taken to be a source of philosophical insight that *calls out for the other*.²² Irigaray adheres to the revolutionary notion of the other as irreducible to the perception of subjectivity and intersubjectivity and links it to the alterity of the sexuate other.

Throughout her philosophy, Irigaray elaborates on the irreducible other as a source of understanding ourselves; the other is what makes affect possible. She claims: “The philosopher must henceforth put the accent on the subject as a being in relation. Philosophy has to consider the cultivation of our relational identity to be a decisive stage of our becoming humans” (IBSW.19), and that can account for and signify a possibility for ethical accounts of the body. Our relationship with the

²² Merleau-Ponty’s last use of the touching hands example is in his unfinished work *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968). See further Ratcliffe 2013.

other(s) requires constant thinking and reflecting on a human position and the irreducible other that ensures that we are *not* substituted for one another.

2.6 Replacing reversibility with differences towards reciprocal touching

Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis suggests that thought in relation to self-touching is reversible. The focus is kept on the two hands as poles of self-other, interior-exterior, and subject-object, showing how these dualistic pairs are all interlinked and tied together, as well as how they can alternate, being the perceiving subject and/or the perceived object.

The aim of this subchapter is to demonstrate how Irigaray replaces Merleau-Ponty's idea of reversibility with *reciprocity in touch* between two subjects who are sexuate different and not the same. Reciprocity means that an action is felt by each party towards the other — as a kind of meeting in the “midst” in *qualitative attunement* of intersubjectivity. In such a particular meeting, we might become aware of how we energize and stimulate each other. This “meeting in midst” undercuts dualist oppositions in thinking and reduces the subject-object distinction.

Whereas Merleau-Ponty focuses on the reversible touching hands, Irigaray emphasizes the self-and inter-affecting touch that emerges and the ethical and spiritual bliss between two subjects. Furthermore, the two hands do not, as Ratcliffe succinctly puts it, “[...] incorporate clearly defined subject-object positions” (Ratcliffe 2013, 142).²³

Ratcliffe's point deserves further investigation. When I put my palms together and hold them still with the fingers outstretched, it is hard to distinguish the perceiving hand from the perceived hand; rather, the attention is on the *unified touch* in the middle, what can be called sharing the touching. When I rub my hands repeatedly and long enough, a feeling of heat gradually emerges between my palms. Hence the touch is mutually and qualitatively felt — and cannot be reversed into two poles of subject-object, active-passive. The affectivity of the rubbing process comes into the foreground, such as to keep warm, encourage oneself, etc., something that has further implications, such as feeling better, getting ready.

²³ See further Ratcliffe 2008, 106-108.

The reciprocal intertwining/attunement of the sentient and the sensible becomes most evident when we hold our hands in a prayer position. Ratcliffe explains: “Put you palms together and hold them still, as if to pray. However hard you try to distinguish the perceiving from the perceived hand, you experience only the unified touch” (Ratcliffe 2013, 142). The focus is on the *reciprocal intentionality* of the hands and not whether the hands can alternate between being a subject and an object. The point is that we always need to consider the background knowledge of our interaction, the felt quality of touch, or what Ratcliffe calls a “background touch” (Ratcliffe 2013, 144). “The perceiving body is a unified whole, rather than a system of parts each of which perceives in isolation from the others” (Ratcliffe 2013, 143).

Touch, for Irigaray, is not reducible to the visible unless it opens up for something envisioned as the sensing of God, which is first and foremost imagined tactile bliss (ESD. 162). The touch is primarily sensed by the lived body in relation to another living being, and not to God, which also means that the other (not God) is always touched back.

Irigaray further argues that the hand and the world are not to be understood as the two halves of an orange (ESD.160-61). My hand and the world have different roots and atmospheres (ESD.160); the roots of my hands belong to the same space of consciousness, my own flesh, whereas the world consists of complex interactions of differences and a diversity of living organisms (the massive flesh). Consequently, Merleau-Ponty is overstating the significance of the reversibility between the perceiver and the perceived, subject and object in touch. Moreover, he is overgeneralizing the double touch and the way the two hands can switch between the two poles of being, the perceiver and the perceived.²⁴

Irigaray’s idea of touch is connected to the affected/affective being, to be a self-touch (that presupposes dynamism in oneself), affected in a process of *coming into contact, coming closer, feeling more in the sensitive flow of being “here,”* that allows the thought to play out and expand, even in reciprocity. In this view, the touching hands are predominantly *self-affecting*.

This is further argued by Michel Henry, who states that “[...] the subtle sensitivity of my hand is in no way ‘object’-directed, be it in a pragmatic context of using a tool, even in a prosthetic way, or be it in an intersubjective context of

²⁴ See further Ratcliffe 2008.

touching the other, whatever touch it may be, freeing or alienating” (Depraz 2013, 198). The subtle sensitiveness is thus directed to the self-affecting individual subject, contributing to individuation.

On a more ethical level, Paul Ricoeur argues that the hands are helping tools, standing for the caring handling self. “Helping, caring for the other is originally associated with mutual hand activities: I hold out my hand(s) and the other equally holds out her hand(s)” (cf. Depraz 2013, 200). In that sense the hands are giving-and-receiving, helping each other in mutual and caring intentionality. His statement is pragmatic-ethical in the way we use touch to come closer (Depraz, 2013, 200-202; Paul Ricoeur 1990), which corresponds to Irigaray’s notion of the reciprocal touch.

It might help to understand “reciprocity in touch” by unfolding examples what it means to be *attuned in reciprocity* and moved in a presence. Reciprocity is integral in affectivity and applies in a situation where you simply stay calm in yourself, attuned with the situation, such as being with a good friend. You simply feel the thick quality of being-with, a bliss, or a feel of nearness that gradually emerges. This feeling of reciprocity can be cultivated when dwelling in outer nature: Thinking *with* the trees, for instance, is philosophically revolutionary: you might discover the shared breath that also applies between human and non-human (TVB). In such a situation, you don’t need a saying; you simply sense how everything interacts — the gentle blow of the wind touching the leaves of the trees and yourself following the warmth, the subtle sounds, the smell, etc.

As sight is the most decisive sense in our tradition, we must learn how to look at a tree, to be touched by the sight of it, “[...] not to perceive its present form in order to re-present it mentally and fix it by naming it. Rather, we must gaze at its being as living and changing” (TVB.49). The implication is that we must cultivate our skill of listening to the relationship we have with living things and each other, outside the already coded, and reawaken the sense of touch in all sensory perceptions to cultivate our energy (TVB.46-52).

But why talk about trees at all? Irigaray discusses trees because our body is a little like a tree that wants to bloom and blossom, and because the body is a potential of “language” that we still need to discover. “Language ought to help us to succeed in carrying out what a tree can do without resorting to any word: achieving what it is by the transformation of its roots into flowers and fruits” (TBB.47).

Irigaray explains in *Vegetal Being* that during her stay in the forest, she discovered that she longed for reciprocity — initially in touch: “What I desired was above all gesture(s), reciprocal gesture(s): to touch and being touched, to embrace as being embraced with someone whose skin was warm, testifying that we were living and could and wanted to share life” (TVB.56).

Reciprocity in touch can be compared to the middle voice in the early stage of Greek culture.²⁵ The middle voice is neither active nor passive because the subject of the verb cannot be categorized as either agent or patient, having elements of both. Also, the middle voice requires an involvement that is not merely mental. Irigaray says: “It can thus express a process of self-affection, and even of reciprocity, that neither simple active nor passive forms could convey.” (IBSW.147). The middle voice expresses both activity and passivity, the ontology of being two such as “to love (each other),” “to marry,” and “to meet” (IBSW.147).²⁶ The point is that we cannot distinguish between active and passive, subject and object. Desire is the living energy that aims for reciprocity between two, and especially between two people (IBSW.149). “At least it should be so” (IBSW.159).

On the other hand, the middle voice has almost disappeared in our culture that favors mind in thinking and partitioning subjectivity, splitting “man” into poles of oppositions, arranged in dualism. According to Irigaray:

Listening to the uniqueness of another existence, and considering its irreducibility with respect to my own, is a way to overcome the dependence on a truth, a discourse, or a master presumed to know the whole. It is to recognize another life as transcendent to my own and to my world, forever unknowable to myself. Thus, I listen to this life, letting it be and grow, as something that I cannot fabricate or master. (TVB.50)

²⁵ The Greek verb has three voices, the active, middle, and passive. The active voice is used when the subject of the sentence is the agent of the action described in the verb. The middle voice denotes that the subject is both an agent of an action and somehow concerned with the action. Also, it means to draw energy, *inspiration, and wisdom* in a process of affect/affective state of being, outside the economy of the pair of opposites of active-passive (IBSW.147).

²⁶ The middle voice is for instance used in Icelandic. For example, instead of saying in Icelandic “ég hitti þig og þú hittir mig” (I meet you and you meet me), the middle verb is “að hittast” (to meet), where you cannot distinguish between active and passive, I and the other. The middle voice is not found in English, as you need to say “to meet *each other*”.

Irigaray's notion of touch has its source in the silent body that seeks to attune with oneself, the other, and the world (not separate) that allows for the transcendence of one's own limited horizon. Touch is a feeling that comes from within and from the life we share. For her, felt touch is always unstructured and dialectical and even surprises us and leaves us in wonder (ESD.80). Wonder is how other possibilities open up and is related to the feeling of seeing the world for the first time or asking profound questions.

Influenced by Descartes, Irigaray takes up his notion of wonder as the first passion: "This passion has no opposite or contradiction and exists always as though for the first time" (ESD.12). Thus, the two are meeting as though for the first time, which means that the focus is put on the subtle feeling that moves, surprises, and retouches (at the level of reciprocity) in a continuous process of inter-affection (ESD.12-14), and that enables us to suspend any judgmental attitude. Wonder is imbued with the un-articulated meaning that evokes a thought and filled with a blurred feeling of astonishment, curiosity, love, joy, and above all, a desire for more. Wonder is the felt sensing of the not-yet knowing and an experience of attraction or frustration. It is (also) through wonder that pain and anger come to life, as wonder allows us to realize that what hurts. Moreover, wonder energizes the hope of transformation and change and has been richly used as a key to feminist pedagogy (Ahmed 2004, 180-83).

The feeling of wonder includes the otherness or strangeness we might otherwise overlook, and, at the same time, it makes you relevant and involved in the world and in the becoming of everything (Walker 2017, 94-101). Wonder is the surprise of the new, the curiosity and even the anxiety that keep us from missing the other. Hence, it touches and mediates; it is what bridges between the inner and outer.

2.7 Thinking with the body — not about the body

The aim of this subchapter is to demonstrate that self-affection is the immediate felt meaning that differs from analytical thinking, which is part of Irigaray's effort to find a non-dualistic approach to the phenomenology of touch that can bring the sexes together. Thinking with affect is part of perception and the skillful bodily activity that connects to oneself and the other.

Dividing touch in perception into two poles belongs to analytical thinking. Thinking analytically is thinking *about the body* and not *with the body*, which implies that the body is not responsible for the double touch and suggests the body does not experience it directly. Thinking *with* the body, on the other hand, means to think with lived experiential touch here and now — the way the body is sex-situationally moved and always touched back — and it is what seems to characterize the difference between Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of touch and Irigaray’s emphasis on felt sense phenomenology.

In an affective turn, Irigaray goes behind the analytical framework of the touching hands and Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis, demonstrating how we speak *with* the body and into the body. By that, she makes a shift from analytical thinking to transformational reflective practice. As Donata Schoeller explains: “This means that one not only thinks *about* the body but is *with* the body” (Schoeller 2018, 153) and requires that one stays with the felt sense and listens to how one is touched — the way the body responds. Schoeller adds: “This can only happen if we do not analytically hand all agency over to language and culture” (Schoeller 2018, 164).

Irigaray’s effort of searching for another system of representation that does not privilege sight caused her to take each figure back to its source (TS.79), to the sense of touch. This means including lived experience in our thinking, which means acknowledging the agency of the felt body, the touch, which we usually are not cultivated to think about. Schoeller says: “This means becoming aware of how we experience something, being attentive to oneself, instead of holding to a philosophical concept of what experience is supposed to mean, forcing us to lose track of what actually happens and has happened” (Schoeller 2018, 157). For Irigaray, it means to involve sexuate difference, “[l]etting the flesh appear between the sign and the sign” (ESD.167), and to say what we really feel and mean. In the process of acting out, we are doing with the body and self-affection, zig-zagging between the inside and the outside, allowing fresh meaning to form and pattern. Thus, critical analyses are not the only way forward.²⁷

²⁷ According to Schoeller, the difference between analysis and transformational reflective praxis is crucially relevant for the feminine critical project. It is not enough to analyze discursive matters. Overcoming repression and subordination as presented in theories in Western culture must start from within the lived body and from a first person’s perspective (Schoeller 2018).

Irigaray (as well as Merleau-Ponty) emphasizes that the philosopher is never a neutral, detached spectator but is inherently engaged with his or her body in relation to the world, its objects, and other persons (SNN; MP. PP, viii). This means including the actual *process of the perceived* and *how* it is perceived. Irigaray stresses throughout her philosophy that there is no objective third person's perspective; the observer is always involved in his investigations and cannot situate himself outside it (TS). Thus, speech is never neutral but particular and sex-situational in a living relation with the other (SNN).

The problem is that within an analytical setting we have no access to the body and embodied experience, i.e. what is emerging inside. When holding on to an idea about the body as explicated by “the two hands touching” and their reversibility, the agency of the body seems to disappear in the very well-organized economy of Merleau-Ponty's idea about what perception is in *general*, that is, in the meeting between the knower and the known. Thus, he fails to recognize matter's dynamism and the reflective praxis that needs another focus than thinking analytically. We need to be attentive to ourselves, to our embodied thinking self, and a kind of courage and encouragement are needed (TBB.42; IBSW.142-48).

For Irigaray, it is crucial (and here, a certain braveness is needed) to make space for a non-metaphysical, non-dualistic, and dynamic approach of phenomenology of touch in favor of a horizontal intersubjectivity that can bring the sexes together. This project means finding ways to speak that can bring affect into culture towards transformation outside the analytical framework, as displayed in the model of the touching hands. This implies allowing one to respond more freely, for oneself and differently than in correct logical formulas — to think attentively and with affect in an embodied-critical way based on our living here and now.

According to Irigaray, the Western tradition produces an exile from humanity and from our relation of being two, an exile from material and maternal origin, and an exile from the different other, which represses the natural doubleness of our being. “Humanity is still two: man and woman, and this duality, already existent in the natural order, must be respected, as a sort of frame, before the fulfillment of sexual attraction or desire” (IBSW.119). Instead of cultivating the twoness of our being, the human being grew away from life and created a fabricated world. Irigaray explains:

About ourselves, we know nothing. And even when we imagine ourselves as constructing the world, it is as much this world which constructs us. Our projects with regard to the world are mostly a projection, and an evasion of ourselves, an escape from our ourselves, without a possible turning back to ourselves, in ourselves. (IBSW.140)

The problem with our thinking when not including affect in thinking is that the representational in language can take over, depriving us of our living energy (TBB.47). The estrangement from our living, in which we are subjected to a logic of language and external laws, demands a *return to another logic* that consists of *inward thinking* in a return to oneself — a thinking that is more immediate and authentic and has a reference to lived experience or to what is implied here and now. But the returning to oneself is lacking in our tradition because the human has sacrificed nature and searched for mental reduplication in the form of mastery (IBSW; TBB).

The task of the return is linked to how affect serves to *connect to nature* and self-affection, to not become subjected to objects, to binary concepts and ideas others have imposed upon us, or to public rules of the economy of sameness in an anonymous world. In such an economy we “[...] are moving away from nature, from the body, from the economy of affects, and are becoming subjected to external laws.” (IBSW.141). Pretending to have life under control weakens the potential of our sensitivity and our natural ability to stay with the touch and the quality of the other. We risk falling into solitude, loneliness, or a narcissistic state of being. We are formed in a culture of sameness that does not allow affect to be a part of human knowledge; we rather assume that it belongs to the private and the sensitive. Irigaray says:

Self-affection has nothing to do either with auto-eroticism or narcissism, which are more familiar to us. [...] The matter consists of calmly staying in oneself, being silent, preferably with one’s eyes closed, trying to perceive and concentrate in this way one’s own inner energy. To succeed in this, I suggest focusing, at least in the first instance, one’s attention on the perception of one’s lips, one’s hands and one’s eyelids touching on another. Such a gesture—that I recall ‘re-touch’—contributes to realizing what our limits are and the threshold between the inside and the outside

of the space that is ours, something which favours a repose in ourselves.
(TBB.17)

These morphological forms of a double touch (the lips, the hands, the eyelids) are manifestations of embodied reflection, our inner felt sense that includes the other. The re-touch is a kind of mediating state where we allow thought to arise, as something that is part of oneself, yet different, subtle, and new. It consists of assessing a thought with a non-judgmental attitude that allows it to form and show itself. More generally, the retouching symbolizes inter-affectivity and transcendence at the level of embodied experience.

The gesture of re-touch implies connecting to the lived body, as well as to what stirs and lives within, that aims at collecting oneself, gathering oneself together, and recognizing that we are a living energy in a shared world with others. Recognition of our living interaction is a matter of reflecting on what one feels in the body and what one really thinks. It means to stay with what is implied in a situation here and now and to hold on to the implying to find out how one *relates to things* and the different other, which is the subtle and often unclear quality of our being.

2.8 The affective turn is a radical means to oppose disembodied neutral thinking

The affective turn is a return to oneself or the *embodied thinking self*. It is a critical and creative way to oppose the disembodied neutral thinking of the fixed essence of the sexes in Western culture. At the same time, the embodied touch becomes a radical means to foreground the woman who has been silenced and repressed in Western culture. To achieve this, Irigaray makes a transition from the lips of the mouth (which Merleau-Ponty also speaks about) to the female lips — the labial lips of affect and pleasure, showing that touch has its source in the female body. As demonstrated in her text “When Our Lips Speak Together,” the body is dynamic and discursive (TS.205-219), and our words are derived from the body (Barad, 2017; Þorsteinsson, 2023). Irigaray elaborates further on the invisible dynamism in oneself and between two, showing how the affective/affected body is continuously moved, in motion and always involved in the production of meaning.

In the text “When Our Lips Speak Together,” Irigaray illustrates how to think from the body and *with* the (female) body that has direct reference to lived experience and felt sensing (Gendlin 2018 VIII; 1962). The embodied speaking lips touch each other and themselves in expressive and intimate closeness, constantly referring to matter’s dynamism and the complex relationality the lips have to themselves, others, and the concepts that define them. Instead of thinking analytically, they “think” attentively and for themselves in an embodied engagement that is participatory and critical. Irigaray explains:

How can I touch you if you’re not there? Your blood has become their meaning. They can speak to each other, and about us. But what about us? Come out of their language. Try to go back through the names they’ve given you, I’ll wait for you. I’m waiting for myself. Come back. It’s not so hard. You stay here, and you won’t be absorbed into familiar scenes, worn-out phrases, routine gestures. Into bodies already encoded within a system. Try to pay attention to yourself. To me. Without letting convention, or habit, distract you. (TS.205-6)

Instead of being voiceless, mirroring dominant discourses, Irigaray enjoins us to be embodied and situationally engaged, which means feeling into the experiential dynamism here and now. Schoeller agrees, adding: “Thinking not about the body, but in an embodied way requires us to ‘come back’ again and again, to the freshness of what happens now, always a little different” (Schoeller 2018, 162). Questions and implications then arise: how could we otherwise and a bit differently respond as an affective/affected body? How can we use touch and reciprocal nearness as an act of *resistance* to dualist discourses and given principles?

With a focus on dynamic sex-situated responsiveness, which characterizes the self-expressive and self-producing body, Irigaray takes philosophy from the skies of idealism and given principles, realizing that all knowledge/ideas begin with lived experience. Her effort is to renew our understanding of what *thinking and speaking are*, which is *not* a conceptual affair but a felt matter of lived experience.²⁸

²⁸ Even Derrida recognized that his differential theory of ‘play with signs’ must start with lived experience. His philosophy of difference with its focus on the endless play of signifiers is an attempt to go against violence of logocentrism, showing how absent signs in a text uphold the present ones. In reality, the living present is infinitely deferred (Derrida 1978, 278-295; Thorsteinsson 2011).

In expressive closeness and engaged attentiveness, the embodied speaking lips re-formulate their relation to themselves, others, and life; they allow affecting and responding features to unfold and expand. As Irigaray writes, lending voice to the lips: “Stretching out, never ceasing to unfold ourselves, we have so many voices to invent in order to express all of us everywhere, even in our gaps, that all the time there is will not be enough” (TS.213).

As Irigaray illustrates, and as will be unfolded thoroughly in chapter five, the lips manage step by step to peel off the dead skin of words that don’t fit their experience. In expressive closeness and reflective processes, they gradually speak themselves, finding themselves thinking *as* a woman. She warns:

Don’t cry. One day we will manage to say ourselves. And what we say will even be lovelier than tears. Wholly fluent. Already, I carry you with me everywhere. Not like a child, a burden, a weight, however beloved and precious. You are not *in me*. I do not contain you or retain you in my stomach, my arms, my head. You are there like my skin. With you I am certain of existing beyond all appearance, all disguises, all designations I am assured of living because you are duplicating my life. Which doesn’t mean that you give me yours, or subordinate it to mine. The fact that you live lets me know I am alive, so long as you are neither my counterpart nor my copy. (TS.216)

The lips touch themselves and each other in intimacy and mutual care, through which they realize their *conditional relationality*. Thus, one cannot exist without the other. At this point, it is relevant to ask: Where does this intimate twoness — the felt-and-caring reciprocal touch — *come from*? And how is it connected to the “beloved and precious” in the quote above? Irigaray is anticipating something fundamental in our existence and prior to all touch that has been forgotten and repressed in the history of philosophy and psychoanalysis: the material maternal touch.

2.9 Touch has its source in the material maternal touch

Irigaray puts forth an alternative account to Merleau-Ponty's depiction of two hands touching, which is further signified with his template of the lips (standing for the relation between the perceiver and the perceived.)²⁹ In Irigaray's view, he misplaces the figure. The lips, for her, belong to the morphology of the female body: "Two lips that do not touch each other in the same realm, that rigorously speaking, do not touch at all, unlike the lips of our 'body'" (EDS.166). Different from the touch of the lips, the lips of the female body

brings about something very particular in the relation feeling-felt. With no object or subject. With no passive or active, or even middle voice. A sort of fourth mode? Neither active, nor passive. Always more passive than the passive. And nevertheless active. [...] A gesture often reserved for woman (at least in the West) and which evokes, doubles, the touching of the lips silently applied upon one another. (ESD.161)

The female lips differ fundamentally from the touching hands, as the touch in-between them is caring and more sensitive and cannot take hold on of the other, grasping the other (ESD.170). "The mucous membrane evades my mastery [...]" (ESD.170); the focus is on the fluid and open space between us. The touching of the lips precedes the "intertwining chiasm" of the touching hands and cannot be analyzed, measured, or mastered in dualism, nor reduced to vision. Yet, the "fourth mode" of touch, mentioned in the quote above, is *given to us* before all kinds of fixed essence and measurements and before any grammatical level, even the middle voice. The "fourth mode" belongs to the non-language and more precisely to the *material maternal touch* that has been forgotten in the history of philosophy. The touching of the lips is *natural* for them and is the source of our existence, developed in the womb, the forgotten enveloping place where beings grow.

What is at play in the touching of the lips is that the caress of the intimate touch, the subtle "bliss" or the middle of the caress, belongs to the lateral space or the phenomenology of the in-between that is fluid and pre-reflectively sensed. (I

²⁹ In Irigaray's view however, Merleau-Ponty has recognized a relation between the masculine subject and the maternal feminine (ESD.152).

cannot see the mucous, “[...] the most intimate interior of my flesh [...]” (EDS.170). It is the space where life and thought begins, forms, and develops, and where all meaning derives from. More concretely, the space between the female lips is the silent softness of desire. Irigaray suggests that the mucous of the carnal is the sensible medium of touch (ESD.162).

Claus Halberg argues: “Above all,” she suggests, “[...] what is recalled by the non-hierarchical, non-specular touching of joined hand/lips is the “*mucous* of the carnal,” the touching that unfolds at all bodily thresholds between the inside and the outside and where internal surfaces contact each other – which, besides the lips (oral and vaginal), include digestive system, respiratory system, nostrils, mouth, ears, eyelids, uterus, clitoral glans, glans penis, foreskin, anus. All such bodily surfaces depend on the lining of mucous membranes for their maintenance and renewal” (Halberg 2011, 118).

The point is that “[...] the ‘mucous’ cannot master the touch nor is mastered by it [...]” (Halberg 2011, 118). It does not know oppositions of any kind. Continuing with the theme of maternal touch and the flesh of the female, the singularity of the body and the flesh of the feminine comes

both from the fact that the lips are doubled there, those above and those below;

and from the fact that the sensible which is the feminine touches the sensible from which he or she emerges. The woman being woman and potentially mother, the two lips of which Merleau-Ponty speaks can touch themselves in her, between women, without having resource to seeing. These two dimensions of which Merleau-Ponty speaks are *in* her body.

And hence, she experiences it as a volume in a different way? (ESD.166)

Irigaray states: “And this would be one of the differences between men and women, that these lips do not re-join each other according to the same economy” (ESD.167). This implies that the sensible embracing lips belong to the *potential mother* as a possibility of her body. Thus, the woman is already the *other in herself*. Irigaray reminds us that we spring from two sources, from a father and a mother, and not just from a father. The elaboration on the material maternal underlines the roots of our being, that we are *relational from the very beginning*, which reminds us not

only of the caring and the intersubjective aspect of being but also that we originate from sensible and sensitive matter.

With its source in the maternal touch, Irigaray's effort is to elaborate a culture of immediate touch that is lived and that binds us together as two and not as a culture of logic and oneness (STF). Differing from the metaphysics of language, she replaces the closure of language with the nearness of the body (or bodies) as containing the felt sense that precedes meanings. With her texts, especially written in a lyric style as in the lips-text "When Our Lips Speak Together (TS)," Irigaray manages to unfold what is really perceived and richly felt, and which always contains more than signified with language, that is meaningful to us.

However, this dimension of our sensible and sensitive life with its source in the maternal touch has been forgotten in the history of philosophy. As formulated by Mary C. Rawlinson: "Philosophy has, until Irigaray, failed to think about the philosophical implications of the fact that each one has come forth from the body of another" (Rawlinson 2023a, 50). It is the mother who has given birth and being to the child. Irigaray says: "Man's self-affect depends on the woman who has given him being and birth, who has born/e him, enveloped him, warmed him, fed him" (ESD.60). The womb is the first place to receive oxygen, warmth, and food, as well as the first place to move and develop (TBB.39). The phenomenology of the nursing mother, as briefly shown in *Sharing the World*, is an illustration of the existential inter-affection of mother and child. Rawlinson states: "The child literarily imbibes the mother, breathes her air, absorbs her warmth, is lulled by her heartbeat, and first begins to have the sense of a world-horizon by listening to her voice" (Rawlinson 2023a, 51).

What is also forgotten in the history of philosophy is that everyone's self-affection originally takes place in the body of a woman. The material-feminine, according to Halsema, "[...] stands for the material origin, sensible matter, the source of all being, the womb" (Halsema 2010, 54-55). The maternal touch is the first living dwelling place, prior to any perception and to the development of touch and self-affection between two living beings (ESD.97; IBSW;154-162). Irigaray explains:

It is the mother who first brings us into the world. The world she gives to us, and to which she gives us, is necessarily present in our way of experiencing the world and of living in the world. But the philosopher has

not yet considered this. He pays no attention and even forgets this original determination of our way of being in the world. (STW.123)

That we are all born of a woman is according to Nicholas Smith “[...] probably as close to a universal truth as we will ever come. At the same time this fact goes unnoticed in mainstream philosophical discourse: for philosophy it is as pregnancy has never happened” (Smith 2016, 15). Instead, natural or organic pregnancy has turned into spiritual pregnancy and a metaphor for birthing ideas, whether it is writing poems or philosophy, which is moreover considered to be a very painful process.

Western ideas of “giving birth,” linked to fantasies of giving life and new meaning, are not uncommon in philosophy and have been used among writers since ancient times. Plato claims for instance that all human beings are pregnant.³⁰ And Socrates famously used the metaphor of philosopher as *midwife* to help explain his particularly unique approach to philosophy: birthing thoughts. He considered it his primary goal to function as a midwife of the soul.

Real pregnancy and maternal touch have been suppressed in history in favor of male-centered mindedness, logos, and neutrality in Western disembodied philosophy. The woman has been the dark continent and a blind spot in the phenomenology of the body. Instead of cultivating touch in its origin as the meaningfulness of warmth, nourishment and care, man has emerged from the maternal origin and elaborated a discourse of mastery, presented in the paternal economy of binary categories. Irigaray states: “Western man has remained in some way confused with the maternal world, stuck to it, and no strategy of Western culture has been able to cultivate this first situation or experience” (IBSW.145). Consequently, man has forgotten to cultivate this natural touch and reflexive care that includes the irreducible other, necessary for our becoming and blossoming.

Western culture is founded on the absence of the mother, on matricide,³¹ and on the absence of maternal genealogy at the level of the symbolic (TS.209; Huffer 2013). Due to this absence, women are always derivative and can only appear as defective copies of man seen from a male perspective. In psychoanalysis, Sigmund

³⁰ “All human beings, Socrates, are pregnant both in body and in soul, and when we come to be of the right age, we naturally desire to give birth.” *Symposium*, 206c1–2In.

³¹ See further Green 2012.

Freud's theory based on the myth of Oedipus entails a total disregard of the woman and a continuation of matricide in Western philosophy.³² The denial of the mother is in fact the erasure of Mother Earth which can be traced back to Plato's metaphysics of the true forms, as illustrated in his allegory of the cave, which will be further unfolded in chapter 4.6. In her reading of the allegory, Irigaray associates the cave with the womb. According to her, Plato slyly devalues the uterus by recasting it as a dead cave and a dark hole (S.355; Jones 2011, 38-94).

Irigaray argues that Plato's system forms the beginning of Western metaphysics in philosophy and psychoanalysis, based on dualism and hierarchical thinking that consists of *the forgotten materiality*, *the forgotten touch*, which includes repression of the female body and the origin of embodied touch and of self-affection. The maternal-feminine never offers itself as presence, nor is it representational but deferred and silenced.

2.10 Merleau-Ponty is not able to ask questions about the roots of our existence and the in-between

With the maternal touch, Irigaray calls into question the roots of our existence, our living, and the way we give meaning to life. More fundamentally, she calls into question intersubjectivity and, she elaborates on the necessity of cultivating sexual difference as an *unlimited attraction to the other* towards the infinite. In all of these regards, and on the basis of the material maternal touch, Irigaray "[...] calls into question the priority in the history of metaphysics of sight over touch [...], whether it is a phenomenology of perception or an "insight" into essence [...]" (Rawlinson 2023a, 51). In our living interactions, we can always envision things freshly.

Even Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological subject is not able to ask questions about the roots of touch and belonging. As portrayed in "When Our Lips Speak Together" (TS), representing the maternal touch, Irigaray illuminates a *non-hierarchical logic/phenomenology of the in-between* that gets lost in Merleau-Ponty's idea of the touching hands, that is, in his attempt to enmesh the tangible in

³² Freud's theory is a total disregard of the female subject that rejects the mother and all women through her. His use of the Oedipus complex (which is according to Irigaray arguably his biggest mistake), the little girl *denies her mother* when she discovers that she is (also) lacking the bodily organ of privilege, the phallus, and thus not considered a full subject, which leads to castration, matricide (TS.36-37).

the visible domain, as illustrated with the grasping of the one hand by the other (Halberg 2011). The invisible touch belongs to the in-between, the place of our relationships and attractions, and not merely our sensory perception.

If we look at the experience of organic pregnancy, it includes a double touch, a double sensation, and a lived interior within the contours of the body.³³ Pregnancy is not a split in subjectivity but is a specific mode of *phenomenological “in-between”* (Heinämaa 2014), which is the space of mutual touch and intimacy between two. Irigaray says: “The woman knows that she is the other in herself” (TS.28). Furthermore, as Irigaray points out, one of the distinctive features of the female body is its tolerance of the other’s growth within itself. (JTN.45). However, culture has given no interpretation to the model of tolerance of the other within and with a self that this relationship manifests. She claims: “Whereas the female body engenders with respect for differences, the patriarchal social body contracts itself hierarchically, excluding difference” (JTN.45). Rachel Jones explains:

The placental economy is regulated by a space between one and another that belongs to both and to neither, and that is characterized by intimate relations of contiguity and contact, rather than substitution or negation. It thus allows differences to remain palpable between two beings who are nonetheless not straightforwardly separable. (Jones 2011, 161)

In this fluid darkness of the pregnant body, as well in the gap between the lips, Irigaray finds another economy that does not belong to the logic of the unified subject. Instead, the relational sexuate body is continuously moving, touching, caressing, approaching, and forming; the body cannot be reduced to what “is” but rather belongs to the fluid interaction itself (with its source in desire) (Jones 2011, 161-63).

In light of Husserl’s phenomenology, it has been problematized, as Lehtinen argues, whether this specific experience of touch, “[...] denoted by the two lips, can

³³ As Sara Heinämaa argues: “[...] the fetal other that freely moves inside the mother’s body reacts to touch. When the mother feels the fetus “accidentally” pressing its body on the inner contours of her womb and when she sees the effects of these inner movements on the surface of her belly, she can freely touch her own belly with her hands, press her fingers on the skin, and feel the movements of the fetus also in her fingers. These sensations of touching are mediated by the mother’s flesh. Moreover, she can respond to the sensed and perceived movements by moving her hands on the skin of her belly. The fetus may react to such motivation – “stimulus” or “address” – in different ways, e.g. by changing place or by twisting.” (Heinämaa 2014, 31).

be accounted for in terms of intentionality of conscious acts nor in terms of the operating intentionality of governing movement (the ‘I can’)” (Lehtinen 2014, 80). This problem, as Lehtinen then goes on to argue, is irrelevant and is founded on unjustified omissions and prejudice (Lehtinen 2014). The lips are affective/affected and are active in perception, feeling their body and their sex from the inside to the outside in a vital dialectic *as a woman*, and they are capable of nourishing the other and giving birth and existence to another being. Bringing forth new life from one’s own body is a unique, fundamental, and phenomenological experience we cannot put aside.

The tradition of phenomenology cannot prevent women from connecting to their embodied thinking self, to be concrete experiential subjects in their own right, or to feel and do in self-touch and self-affection. Hence, the body is the means of all perception. Moreover, the lips retrieve through their embodied touching the loss of contact with themselves that has been silenced and forbidden within an order of hierarchy and dominance. Falling into old assumptions of our philosophical tradition and its concepts of subjectivity rely solely on male bodily experience and mindedness. Besides, there is no set of rules that makes experience possible for all human beings — in general or in principle (Jones 2011, 117).

With the lips text, Irigaray makes a great effort to create another system of representation that is non-hierarchical, open, fluid, sensible, sensitive, and dialectical, and in which women can relate to each other without being complementary. Even if the fluid movement and openness of the lips are not the kind of movement traditionally studied and presented as the paradigm of moving, the lips are in themselves enough to constitute feminine identity or subjectivity, and they offer us a fresh model in an *economy of the fluid and “in-between”* for this kind of subjectivity as dynamic, relational, and open. With the embodied speaking lips, Irigaray disturbs norms and ideas about subjectivity.

Giving voice to oneself and speaking up from heartfelt desire that is unstructured (not solid) and subtly felt, deserves a place in philosophy of subjectivity and phenomenology of touch. Feeling with their body and into their body, the female lips overcome outdated oppositions such as subject-object, active-passive, and master-slave that belong to past metaphysics and the hegemony of the one.

By recognizing our beginning in birth, we can affirm the duality and relationality of each human being who begins in a unique relationship with another

body. Jones states: “This relation reminds us that birth never begins with one, but always (at least) two, embodied in relations between the mother and child as well as in the generative encounter between the sexes” (Jones 2011, 92). With this new understanding of human roots of relationality, the new human being could also realize how she/he moves with the other and with the Earth in constant interaction. We create our “in-between” space of loving (or hating); thus, interaction brings forth the knowledgeable world. The question is how we make sense of the world so we can act and live in it in a fertile way.

Irigaray agrees with Merleau-Ponty that it is necessary to “[...] go back to a moment of pre-discursive experience, recommence everything, all the categories by which we understand things, the world, subject-object division, recommence everything and pause at the mystery, as familiar as it is unexplained, of a light which, illuminating the rest, remains at its source for obscurity” (ESD.151). The material touch longs for light, not reason (SF.68).³⁴ Thus, *before* perception, there is something deeper, something more natural, and subtler — a bodily touch, capable of signifying fresh sensations, based on desire for the other and life.

Bringing the forgotten material touch to light, realizing the roots of our caring self-other relationship and being, are powerful antidotes to oppression, exclusion and hate that could save philosophy and do justice to all people. For Irigaray, “[...] the function of philosophy is to restore a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning” (ESD.184), which means that every being must have the freedom to express herself and represent herself with words in a fresh economy that could affirm: “I live, I exist, I grow, I become, and even I will, I desire, I love” (TBB.48).

Hence, Irigaray and her concept of sexuante difference is offering us a new perception that is not subjected to representational rules only. She demonstrates that our mode of exchange is not based on categories and logic that is presumed to be real, leaping over the potential of the embodied sensibility between us (TVB.46). She claims:

³⁴ Since Plato, light has played a controversial role within philosophy, as a metaphor for objectivity and truth in Western thought, and as a privileging of the masculine. The male is seen as being familiar with God, the truth, *the light* and the Platonic Forms, whereas the female stands for the devalued earthly nature.

The flow of life, the growth of life, its perceptual change towards development or decline has been brought under control through a logic of representation that institutes an artificial and permanent reality that is separated from the present and an embodied presence. Instead of cultivating life and coexistence among living beings, our culture has substituted an organization and structuring of names, images and representations for a real living existence. In this dead world, life is simulated through oppositions and conflicts, which also act as regulators of energy. (PCTS.133)

Merleau-Ponty is not able to think the living being to the fullest; he fails to recognize sexual difference and the roots of our relationality that has its source in the material maternal touch as the *condition* of human existence. Irigaray calls for recognition of sexual difference, which is the *relation* to the other that allows no other determination beyond otherness, as a concept of our age.

Recognition of sexual differences is necessary and fundamental if we want to break down dualism and prejudices in our culture that are based on rigid oppositions of mind-body, self-other, subject-object, and active-passive. When realizing our relatedness and our roots of being, we might search for a language capable of expressing living energy and transforming it into sharable longings; we might realize what it means to be a living self-signifying body in a community with others (TBB; STW; STF).

3. Sexuate difference is a term of becoming and the riddle of life

3.1 The ontological irreducibility and desire of the two

In the beginning of *Ethics of Sexual Difference* (ESD), Irigaray claims that cultural epochs have great issues which require examination, and sexuate difference was an essential issue of the 20th century (ESD.5). Sexuate difference is the most basic and fundamental concept in her philosophy, which is necessary to life and culture: it is the precondition for human generativity and for becoming of the human. Irigaray states: “According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which would be our “salvation” if we thought it through” (ESD.5). This raises questions of our nature and our being, who we are and how we become, and how affect is involved. However, this aspect of our living is devaluated in the history of philosophy in favor of logic and reason in thinking.

The problem of our time is that the human is detached from life and self, which calls out for rethinking the human, rethinking the thinking that can bring us closer to ourselves again, which also means finding oneself. This means that ideas and concepts need to be reinterpreted and reevaluated: (1) The hegemony of the one needs to be deconstructed; (2) the static essence of the sexes, male and female, based on hierarchical and dualistic discourses, needs to be replaced with relationality that is sexuate by its nature; (3) the interval needs to be highlighted as the place that can save us from deadly culture, emptiness, and disconnectedness based on economy of the same, where everybody thinks and speaks the same.

Above all, what is needed is to elaborate a knowledge that includes the ethics of sexuate difference that make us transcend individually and collectively rooted in our nature of *being two*. With the phenomenology of the body and the enactive approach to perception, we will see that understanding sexuate difference is a real embodied engagement that founds identity and is what bridges the gap between nature and culture through being more than one. Irigaray says:

The natural, aside from the diversity of its incarnations or ways of appearing, is at least *two*: male and female. This division is not secondary nor unique to human kind. It cuts across all realms of the living which,

without it, would not exist. Without sexual difference, there would be no life on earth. It is the manifestation of and the condition for the production and reproduction of life. (ILTY.37)³⁵

The sexes are morphologically two as *two forms* of incarnation; they are from the beginning differently embodied, biologically, and morphologically: “Our genus is the first particular dwelling, the architecture or morphology of which opens up to meeting the other, others, and building a collective dwelling, a community of living beings” (TBB.4). Irigaray recalls the possibility that human existence begins with an encounter between *at least two* as the necessary condition of life and meaning based on the irreducible other. She reminds us “[...] that being begins with two: with the generative, copulative relation between the sexes” (Jones 2011, 84). These two are not two halves of the same but irreducibly different (Jones 2011, 84). With her concept of *sexuate difference*, Irigaray exposes an essential human nature based on desire that includes an irreducible alterity, a difference, a diversity that must be enacted and experienced with the other(s).

Sexuate difference, a term of embodied sensibility, primarily pre-conceptual and prior to verbalization, is grounded on felt sense that emerges in us and between us that we even do not yet have a name for. *Sexuate difference* is rooted in the *sensible matter* itself with its source in the desire — our natural longing to assess and embrace the other and the world. The difference means that there are differences in body and thought; thus, there is a diversity that we need to deal with; thus, our jobs as humans is to take up our sex-situation and transform it into being and becoming.

Sexuate difference is inter-human and refers to the process of aspiring after the different other before the constitution of identity or possible entities. This implies that there is no fixed transparent identity; the subject is not self-constituted, and there is no one fixed appearance of the two. The notion of *sexuate difference* goes against the idea of the generic subject that is absolute. Being a body, a *sexuate subject*, is (experientially and phenomenologically) played out in interaction with the other in a meeting between at least two, such as in the way we are touched and moved and the way we touch back or respond. Thus, there is no separated essential self; the self is constituted through relation/interaction and inter-affection based on *sexuate desire*

³⁵ Irigaray claims that our nature is at least two which has room for intersex, transmen and other differences, further unpacked in chapter 3.2 .

and the responsive order (Gendlin 1997). Thanks to desire and our ongoing exchanging experience, each relationship is not determined in advance; it is a differently enacted relation in which we find ourselves.

Our longing for the irreducible other is a *sexuate structure* (the living itself) that applies to all human beings and refers to how we connect to the other and how we are touched in an infinite process of interaction.³⁶ Our longings are based on desire for the absolute inherent in us, which is a desire to be a *whole* subject that can never be fulfilled (STF.58). Thus, it is desire that aspires after the absolute in us and that includes the affectionate or the amorous in us (STF.55-58). Desire is part of our “to be” and functions as a medium between two natural and spiritual beings (SFT.58).

Irigaray’s argument is that the difference is inscribed in nature itself, desire. Sexuate difference is, in her words, “[...] a natural datum” (STF.58); it is the most fundamental aspect of life, and it is what makes us reach out to each other. The absolute, as the inherent in us, differs from absolute knowledge in language; it refers to desire, to a state of being that is in motion, in process, and still at work but forever unknowable and unreachable. Irigaray says:

Who or what the other is, I never know. But the other who is forever unknowable is the one who differs from me sexually. This feeling of surprise, astonishment, and wonder in the face of the unknowable ought to be returned to its locus, that of sexual difference. (ESD.13)

The way I am touched by the sexuate other leaves me in wonder about the other and presupposes curiosity and a caring attitude because I want to approach the other in order to know the other and the world. The process of approaching and aspiring after the other implies a distance and closeness between us. Being different from the other means that our longings are differently structured in our interaction

³⁶ Irigaray often uses the word “sex” for the sexed identity which does not designate the erotic per se, and neither does it designate a socially constructed entity only (JLI). Rather, the sexuate is the structure of our particular way of approaching, the process of aspiring, moving, forming and relating, thinking with the body and in which we become, both individually and socially. This kind of proceeding from nature to “forming” a culture of being two is in constant interplay with what one really feels and thinks. Her main interest is to transform the binary thinking of the sexes, cultivating touch and sensibility that express both nature and culture and that can make a change in perception (see 2.6).

with one another: we extend and stretch towards the world and come to be (whether this is an occasion of fertility or frustration).

Rooted in desire, sexuate difference is the impetus of life, the condition of life itself, and the generator of life that aims at the blossoming and becoming of oneself. In that sense, sexuate difference is not merely an empirical term but an *ontological* one. A relation is never simply empirical but always first natural and thus prior to identity. Our longing to be in (reciprocal) relation with the different other is a natural energy that surges forth (STF.73). The implication is that desire aspires after connecting, both in us and between us (STF.3). And what we want the most is to stay in a relation and to dwell in a relationship to participate in a world with others.

The main point is that our nature consists of being *at least two*, and the human is generated by two, the male and the female. Grosz claims: “Nature itself takes on the form of the two [...]” (Grosz, 2011, 105). Irigaray agrees: “There is no nature as a singular entity” (ILTY.35). Neither is there a singular essence; our nature is essentially relational. Irigaray continues:

As for the opening up of this field, the relation between man and woman is paradigmatic; it is the groundless ground of communication, the creative and generative locus, which is natural and spiritual, passive and active at the same time. [...] Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal. (ILTY.46-47)

Let us look at the necessity of the two concerning the regeneration of life. According to Irigaray, at least four fundamental differences between male and female mark human beings, that refers to nature:

One is born of the same sex and the other is born of a different sex.
One can conceive a living being in her own body and the other cannot.
One procreates within herself and the other outside himself.
One can nourish another from her own body and the other only with his labor. (DBBT.151)

The most significant difference between a male and a female, naturally, is that the female is capable of giving birth to a child while the male cannot. Thus, a

woman's specificity consists in her ability to conceive, embrace, and nourish another living being within her own body. This means that the two sexes correspond to two fundamentally different positions in life. The sexes extend differently towards the world as a *possibility* with respect to what the body is ready to do (TBB.5). Henceforth, there is a *significant* difference that we cannot overcome or erase in thinking. Caroline Godart states: "Further, women's and men's respective sexual organs, and the particular ways in which desire channels its force through their bodies, make for profoundly different experiences of sex" (Godart 2016, 11; ESD.18; IBSW).

Between men and women, there really is otherness, a divergence, a biological and morphological difference which implies that men and women are differently and genuinely distinct. Irigaray claims: "Every reduction of their difference(s) to equality brings with it a reduction of their specific subjectivity and the possibility of fruitful, living relationships between them" (DBBT.151).

3.2 Our nature of being "at least two" is fluid and open

Even though procreation is an essential part of our nature and regeneration of life, sexuate difference is not primarily about reproduction, birthing life, or heteronormativity. Reproduction is only *one* version of our mode of approaching the other, one structure of the form of being two.

Fundamentally, sexuate difference as male/female difference is about *relationality* between two irreducibly different subjects that generate life (JLI.342, 359). Thanks to desire, sexuate difference permits the cultivation of the irreducible difference *between* two, that we cannot overcome (IBSW; Jones 2011, 214). *Approaching and embracing* is the root of our natural being and not language or ideas. Certainly, we need language to express ourselves in a community with others, and we need reason to structure and organize our life. We also need science to get insight into the complexity of the body, such as anatomy and biology.

The sexuate body is not only relational to the different other; it is biologically, genetically, and morphologically *in process* — a topic that must be added to the discussion of sexuate difference. With respect to embodiment, biology, and genetical ambiguity, the sex is *not* binary but *divergent, variable, fluid*, in constant becoming,

and thus rather “mixed”, bewildering, and multi-dimensional (Fausto-Stirling 2000). Today, science confirms that thousands of (intersex) infants are born each year with mixed genitalia or genital ambiguity which means that they have “[...] a mixture of both male and female anatomy, or genitals that appear to differ from their chromosomal sex” (Fausto-Stirling 2000, 19; 2005, 13). Intersexuality³⁷ is a manifestation of a person in which two opposite qualities are *combined* — intertwined or mixed (Fausto-Stirling 2000). Having both male and female sexual characteristics and genital tissues, an intersex person is an example of embodied ambiguity and of the fact that very few persons are pure male or pure female (Fausto-Stirling 2005). As Fausto-Stirling puts it: “The concept of intersexuality is rooted in the very ideas of male and female” (Fausto-Stirling 2000, 19). Intersexuality tells us that interactive forces of matter are at work; thus, there are exchanges in matter that we cannot overlook or ignore. The most striking of these exchanges is that the “[...] *intersexuals have materialized before our very eyes*” (Fausto-Stirling 2000, 19), which is a manifestation of matter and bodies in process, which are always forming anew and which impacts our belief system and social norms. This confirms Irigaray’s notion of sex as fluid and unforeseen, and not fixed; hence, no two bodies are the same.

Fluidity in Irigaray’s philosophy is a term with many meanings and breaks down rigid binary thinking — the idea of the same (Canters and Jantzen 2005, 4-5). For instance, fluidity refers to the body-dynamic situation, the experiential felt here and now, and to the sensible and the sensitive touch or the vital dialectic (in all its variations, good or bad) between two. It refers to the feminine who is two in herself, to the original material maternal touch that is embracing, and to the source of life. Further, the fluidity is the glue between us, the process of aspiring after the other in an ongoing changing process that is (hopefully) a process of giving-receiving, listening-being listened to, holding-being held, recognizing-being recognized. The process of aspiring after the other, refers to the softness of our being and the

³⁷ In “The Five Sexes Revisited” Anne Fausto-Stirling argues “that the two-sex system embedded in our society is not adequate to encompass the full spectrum of human sexuality. In its place, I suggested a five-sex system. (Fausto-Stirling 2005, 14). The emerging recognition of intersex is a manifestation of sexual varieties and multiplicity in nature that should be recognized. Thus, “[...] one should acknowledge that people come in an even wider assortment of sexual identities and characteristics than mere genitals can distinguish” (Fausto-Stirling 2005, 17).

becoming of oneself in which we open and close as demonstrated with the touch of the lips and the eyelids: It is the membrane that holds “the two” together and makes them *move* and *act further* (physically and experientially). Different from sameness and the dryness of the solid and calculated, it is not difficult for us to move, talk and see.

Fluidity is a term for a vital process outside the rational and solid that is still emerging, and that is difficult to describe and idealize (TS.79). According to Irigaray, the fluid belongs to “[...] real fluids, internal frictions, pressures, movements, and so on [...]” (TS.109).³⁸ The fluid is the *vital energy* and the movement between and serves to disturb given principles of the neuter, the economy of the same, where everybody thinks the same. It is a mode of affectivity, contiguity, and relation we have with another person based on desire. With the notion of the fluid Irigaray aims to restore the power of desire — the most natural sap in us and between us that connects, touches, and moves us. Desire bridges between me and the other(s) in the way we connect, mediate, and energize each other. The sexuate body remains relational, fluid in its searching, and in process. Grosz points out:

Sexual difference is the very machinery, the engine, of living difference, the mechanism of variation, the generator of the new. Sexual difference ensures that each generation and each individual is unique, irreplaceable, new, historically specific, different from all others, and able to be marked in relation to others” (Grosz 2011, 101).

As a moving force, sexuate difference ensures uniqueness and development, given that we cultivate a culture of the irreducible otherness and open our eyes for ongoing changes in the living matter and ourselves. This implies the recognition of the exchanging and moving interactions in the body, its environment, and in our relations.

Irigaray has often been accused of upholding heterosexuality as a privileged form of living based on her concept of sexuate difference. Even though heterosexuality today is the most common orientation in life, sexuate difference is

³⁸ The economy of fluidity refers also to the female body and the maternal touch. As illustrated in the text „When Our Lips Speak Together“ (TS.205-219) the woman is aware of her own fluidity, being two in herself.

not about heterosexuality. There is no basic relationship; we form our relationships by interacting with others.

While Irigaray focuses on the two, she regularly asserts that our nature (and its way of appearing) is “*at least two*” (ILTY.35; 37).³⁹ This does not mean that she ignores intersex, trans people and other differences such as race — a charge which is so often leveled at her philosophy. As many of her critics have pointed out, the difference is an open fluid term that includes trans, gender-fluid, gender questioning, and non-hetero-normative love and other unforeseen differences to come (Grosz 2011, 99-115; Candiotta and De Jaegher 2021, 504). The difference between two means *different modes of modalities of relating*. Hence, our sexuation is not enclosed in one privileged structure of a separated self (STF). We are not to overcome differences and cannot overcome our relationality (STF.103); the difference is ontological and makes our relationship and our becoming possible.

When realizing our nature of being two, new differences are discovered and acknowledged that have room for intersex, non-binary individuals, and trans-experience, allowing new meaning to emerge. Sexuate difference remains open, infinite, and always at work. Excluding possible appearances of “the two” from the culture of sexuate difference would mean excluding desire, our appetite for life.

3.3 The critical feminist motive in sexuate difference

Sexuate difference is the powerful philosophical acknowledgment of the “non-sex” or the absence of the woman from the philosophical discourse and means that we can no longer exclude or ignore the existence of her being. Explicating that one is born of a woman is to elaborate the *necessity* of the female sex for generativity and fertility in life. Within history and based on the economy of the Same, woman has no nature of her own; she is a diminished occurrence of the male and reduced to a non-sex or to a substitute for the male subject in a neuter economy (TS; ESD; IBSW; STF). The woman is not derived from the male, nor is she oppositional to him; rather, she is different from him, and that enables her to be in relation to him.

³⁹ Irigaray has been accused of heteronormativity, especially in the beginning of her career, because of her insistence on the necessity of rethinking the relations between men and women, and she has also been accused of discounting or even suppressing other differences, whether of sexuality, race, or class. This “at least,” however, cannot be ignored and makes such charges unfair.

With *sexuate difference*, Irigaray reminds us that one comes from a man *and* a woman, and these two are necessary for generativity. The point is that we cannot go further with the concept of *sexuate difference* if we continue to ignore women as a full sex. Erasing women means erasing the duality of our nature and being, and that means forbidding her to express herself on her own terms. Furthermore, the erasure of the woman means reduction of two to one, which means erasure of the possibility for real intersubjectivity. The female cannot be erased in the male without at the same time erasing the very possibility of generation (Rawlinson 2023b). Irigaray argues:

The union between the man and the woman differs from a synthesis. It is not a question of opposite elements, which become reconciled with one another in order to compose a unity, but of two human beings, which appeal to one another in order to become more than one—to generate an additional ‘to be’ in comparison with what or whom they already are. (STF.77)

The relational subject is always unique and seeks to create something valuable with another person. Thus, the two are not to be united as “one” based on the romantic idea about happiness forever or a fusion model of love. Rather, their relationship consists of two desiring beings that long for nearness, reciprocity, and a qualitative relation in difference that is life-affirming — a process that is constantly at work. Irigaray says: “The one, the other, and their union represents three potential absolutes which engender another.” (STF.77). Thus, these potentials ensure the vital dialectic between two that is never finished, which could lead to fresh meaning and spiritual growth when overcoming the idea of a generic subject.

Irigaray’s philosophy goes against the *sexless* notion of the neuter discourse in Western thinking and against the generic subject that is self-enclosed and self-constituting (TS). But the history of philosophy has always treated woman either as a special case, whose embodied existence and experience have no implications for thinking the human, or as an example of the human that is already fully thought and articulated in the narrative of man in an economy of mono-sexism. (Rawlinson 2023b; 2016b)

According to Irigaray, the word *hetero* has lost its original meaning: it means *being two* who are different and cannot merge into one (IBSW.146). Merging would be a total ignorance of the other, the other in oneself, and the way we are touched

and affected by the other and the twoness of our being. “To be” is the linguistic form of our existence that takes on any possible form of two and that has space for vital inter-affectivity between two. In the early stage of Greek culture, the word hetero (ἕτερος) expresses a *relation* between two; the word, according to Irigaray, “[...] means the *other* of two; for example, the other hand, the other eye and also the other sex or gender” (IBS.146). Like the *other* eye or the *other* hand or the *other* lip, I am the *other* of two, always touching and being touched — and always relational to them, who is part of me or part of my relating.

Hetero is thus not restricted to an essence of what it means to be a man, a woman, an intersex, a transman, etc., and neither is it restricted to heterosexuality. Hetero is the forever changeable relation to the irreducible other, in which we create ourselves and come to be. This means further that we create the *quality* of our relation (of being two) and the world between us. It is a concept that bridges between body and mind, nature and culture. The irreducibility of otherness allows for new thought, as well as new identity and sexuality of an unforeseen kind; it allows for movement in the matter itself and between two in a culture that enables us to become the one who we are.

In summary, sexuante difference is based on the irreducibility of the two, the hetero, and it is a radical counteract to the sexless notion of cognition in Western culture; hence the sex is *not one* but genuine, mixed, fluid, different, and in process. The concept of sexuante difference is a fight against subordination, and a fight against gender-based violence and against exclusion of all kinds. As a concept of our time, it is a radical means to challenge the system of binary logic, presented in a neuter economy in a culture that has forgotten our natural roots. Besides, there is no pure “I” and no universal neuter perspective, which means that there is no one universal consciousness at hand that fits all human beings.

The implication is that we can no longer operate with a neutral ontology of the same that holds bodies and thinking in place. We need more than logic and arguments; we need to feel into things and with the other, connecting to ourselves, so as to make sense in a complex world. A real heartfelt ontology based on the irreducible two is *so much needed* in our times of wars, errors, and hate, which means, as will be unfolded in this chapter, that we must change the relation we have to ourselves and the way we give meaning to one another and the world.

3.4 Sexuate difference founds identity and means taking on the negative

Irigaray's effort is to undo the logic of the same and reveal a double subjectivity as a foundation of subjectivity: by *saving the difference* from the other, while *respecting the differences* of the other, we continually create ourselves and thereby carry ourselves forward and develop ourselves (IBSW.158; STF). This implies that the other is implicitly in me, whether we are aware of it or not. Irigaray insists that a relation is never only of one's own. It emerges and exists between the one and the other, produced and saved by the two (IBSW.8, 21). Unfolding the doubleness of our being and the meaning of the negative in this sub-chapter can help us to understand the value of the other and our relationships regarding the formation of subjectivity.

Our nature of being two founds identity, and this implies that the irreducible other should be recognized and respected as part of our being and becoming. This means that we should recognize our own limited self and that we are dependent and relational. The implication is that the other is always an element of my experience and thus part of my self-structuring, self-organizing, and self-signification. Cultivation of relationship, that is of sexuate nature based on desire to connect to the other, requires faithfulness to oneself and the other. As an ideal, this means that the other cannot be or should not be subsumed or dominated by the one but rather regarded as a supporter of one's being and becoming.

Certainly, this is not always the case. Being sexuate does not guarantee a caring relationship and participating engagement because the in-between space is often erased or ignored. Indeed, we only have to look at history to know that desire can be repressing and manipulating and filled with hierarchy, hate and anger. In such cases, one's lifeforce is turned against itself and humanity. Instead of approaching the other as the other, longing for relation in difference, we seek to master life and others and put them under control. We do not know how to cultivate the potential of the other. Thus, we are unaware of the amorous desire and its search of "[...] becoming incarnate in us, between us, and in the world" (STF.v).

Desire is an unstructured force, seeking new and unforeseen directions, and instead of seeking to maintain connection with the other, respecting differences, it risks domination and subjugation of the other, which is a total ignorance of the other. Instead of using our natural energy to connect to the other in care for one another or

cultivate sexual difference, desire is converted to opposition and hierarchy. Thus, desire goes against itself, and we lose our living energy. Instead of approaching each other in reciprocal relation and intersubjective engagement, we reduce the unpredictability between us and the possibility of creativity and growth. Detriment of desire means that we go against nature. Consequently, we grow distant, thereby failing ourselves, that nullifies the space between us and immobilizes our becoming (STF).

Irigaray uses sexual difference to direct our attention to the open space of vitality between two and to the *responsibility* one has for oneself and the other that could reduce a dominating attitude towards the other(s). It is only a *real meeting* with the otherness that is surprising and new that can release us from absence, isolation, and loneliness. Thus, I can only *recognize* the difference of the other so as to preserve my own difference. Irigaray states:

I cannot become the other, and taking on this negative supports my desire.

The body of the other is irreducible to mine, at least as a living being. It is at such a price that desire exists, remains sensitive and can ensure an effective mediation between the other and myself. (STF.58)

Irigaray's point is that by agreeing to take on this unknowable difference or this "negative" — which seems to be difficult in a world of conflict and hate — a *space* is created which implies "[...] acknowledging that we are not the other, that we are not, and will never be, the whole of the human being" (STF.11). The irreducible other is an unavoidable part of our subjectivity and of the way we structure life and ourselves, which means that the other invites my becoming and gives assistance to my autonomy (STF.23). The negative gives positive access to myself and the other in the way I incorporate the other in thinking (ILTO.13) and is a confirmation of a quality that opens my temporality and the becoming of a culture. Thus, the other helps me to overcome my limited self and is the precondition of knowing oneself, finding oneself. In short, otherness is the condition for becoming a subject on an individual and cultural level. Irigaray states:

The negative must procure to the living beings that we are a space-time in which to dwell, to open out, to experience ourselves as a flesh and to fulfill the ones who we are. The function of such a negative is not to perpetuate

a logic of opposites, of contraries, of exclusion and so on; rather it must ensure a unity in which qualitative properties can be experienced, combined with one another, evolve in order to be able to with a different unity, that of the other. (STF.47)

We form our subjectivity in an open space between at least two and not as two separated entities or substances. Searching for reciprocity is a search for a space and a place that is grounded on a relational ontology that is sexuante. Irigaray explains: “However, our aspiration after the absolute must remain undetermined and is dependent on each assuming two negatives” (STF.58). The implication is that we must recognize the qualitative potential of the other and admit that we cannot be the other or a substitute for the other. With two negatives or two differences, we connect to each other and construct our relation and our culture, wherever it might take us.

With the notion of the negative, Irigaray directs our attention to the quality of the irreducible other — a quality that has a *positive function* that supports my desire in the constitution of my subjectivity (STF.45, 47, 58). The other helps me to move beyond the boundaries of myself and is thus an element of a new horizon that contributes to my becoming and blossoming. This means that the other *transcends* my being — my immanence, my limited self — and introduces a fundamental novelty, providing me with a new experience that is fulfilling here and now.

Without oppositions in mind, sexuante difference means opening a place for us to meet, develop and transcend ourselves experientially, ethically and spiritually. The place does not belong to the quantitative, the numeral, or the one; it belongs to *someone*, an individual experience in a time-space that cannot be seen from a view from nowhere (SNN). As Irigaray explicitly points out: “The negative in sexual difference means an acceptance of the limits of my gender and recognition of the irreducibility of the other” (ILTY.13). And the recognition of the other requires us to pay attention to it and to the way we give birth to one another (Halsema 2008, 81; 2010, 48).

Being different means that we *need* the other. What is *between us* is something that will never be mine or yours (TBT.3). The relation is ours, and we share our dependency. Irigaray claims that whatever identifications are possible, one can never occupy the place of the other sex: “I recognize you signifies that you are different from me, that I cannot identify myself (with) nor master your becoming. I

will never be your master. And it's this negative that enables me to go towards you" (ILTY.104).

My endless search for establishing a relation with the other is based on the fact that I can never fully know the other nor myself — nor can I know my relation; thus, we are part of the infinite living being that cannot be fully known. Throughout her philosophy, Irigaray warns us not to be caught in old sceneries of the same that rob us of our living experience. She insists that the relation of touching-being touched must be kept open, "[...] constantly evolving, ever proper to the one or the other, fruit of present in continual creation, generation" (IBSW.9). Thus, the time-space between us, the interval, is our place and should not be erased.

The notion of negativity in Irigaray's philosophy is part of relational ontology that is *sexuate*. (Sares 2023, 17-39).⁴⁰ Thus, her understanding of subjectivity seen through the lens of negativity or limits seems to be the main thread in her thinking the concept of *sexuate difference* (Sares 2023, 18). Beings are something in themselves and for themselves but only through the relation to others and in the way they are negated by otherness. We can never be united as two; there is a distance between the two and a nearness in the way we continuously approach each other. Discussing the ontological difference in terms of the negative is helpful to understand our relationality and dependency and the importance of the irreducible otherness. For example, the negative is not outside me or opposite to me but a movement within me on an intersubjective level.

For Irigaray, the negative is the qualitative relation that binds us together and makes a *sexuate structure possible* (STF). We are emerging as subjects out of the relational limits we are. The fact that I am not whole and will never be makes my desire to approach the other unavoidable and necessary, and this manifests my longing for relation. The negation — the other being different and relational to me — exists within everyone and includes both limitation and potential regarding my subjectivity and becoming. We are different and qualitatively irreducible to one another, assisting each other in our becoming.

⁴⁰ It is relevant to mention, as James Sares notes in "The ontological negativity of sexual difference," that "[...] Irigaray doesn't directly describe *sexuate difference* using the term *negative self-reference*. The term is in fact Hegelian, referring to the idea that a limit not only marks the negation of being but also determines that being through its negation." (2023, 18.)

With the irreducible other, Irigaray puts forth a double subjectivity that goes against the logic of the self-reliant subject and the neuter that characterizes our culture. The irreducible difference is a quality that cannot be reduced to the same; we can only *recognize* this otherness by meeting it in an ongoing changing experience. The other, therefore, is not an object we can take hold of or master. Thus, I cannot master the becoming of the other, and neither can I master mine.

The doubleness of our being founds identity which means that I can never exist or become without the other. Moreover, there is a space that can never be mine or yours. This implies that we cannot be substituted for one another or abused in any form. Irigaray agrees, saying: “I will never be you, either in body or in thought” (ILTO.103-104). This is because we cannot be the whole — or emerge into one.

In Irigaray’s book, *I Love To You*, and very well elaborated by Laura Candiotta and Hanne De Jaeger based on their enactive approach to love, the lover and the beloved keep their autonomy in their relatedness:

By saying “I love to you” instead of “I love you” we keep open the distance and the difference between the partners, and this is how the two are distinct but also in relationship, since love is in-between. [...] In the center, there is neither the lover nor the beloved, but their relationship— what makes the difference for both. This means that being in relationships is a *meeting* with otherness. (Candiotta and De Jaegher 2021, 504)

The articulation of “I love to you” suggests that I can never consume you, subjugate or introject you; I can only recognize you and notice you, respecting the space we share. Irigaray explains further: “I cannot completely identify you, even less identify with you” (ILTO.103). You will never be entirely visible to me, and we are neither whole nor the same; thus, we are different (ILTO.105). The notion “to” (in “I love to you”) is a sign that elaborates the *mediation* between us and guarantees recognition of the dialectic of two in self-affection, of two intentionalities and of two thoughts, mine and yours, that are different but shared forces (ILTY.109-110). It is, according to Candiotta and De Jaegher, the place for our self-affection to meet another self-affection: “When loving you, I hope, I wish, want, that loving also goes out from you to me. I desire you. But not only you, I also desire mutuality. Mutuality

would mean that we hold this relation in common” (Candiotto and De Jaegher 2021, 515).

The interval is to ensure self-affection between two and openness in which we give birth to desire and one another that cannot be caught up in dualism and reasoning alone. With the emphasis on self-affection and inter-affection, Irigaray is not opposing feelings to reasoning. Rather, she is enjoining us to think with patterns and the unarticulated affective dimension of meaning. Cultivating our mutuality and the space between us gives rise to empathy and recognition of each body as different.

Irigaray’s understanding of love in the in-between is an effort to free humans from domination of the neuter economy that has formed the dualism between the mind and the body, man and woman, that can be traced from the ancient Greeks to Hegel (STF). For Irigaray, the dialectic between two sexuate beings differs from the Hegelian one and his idea of the “absolute spirit” that is primarily based on the reflection of mind.⁴¹ There is no absolute spirit as a universal one that can be determined as unisex. However, the aim here is not to compare the notion of spirituality in the philosophy of Hegel and Irigaray but to emphasize that for Irigaray, the *spirit is linked to the sensitive world* and rooted in self-affection as part of our spiritual growth and blossoming. In short, the spirit cannot be cut from the living body we are, the transcendental or the hetero — the way the in-between mediates and bridges between two.

3.5 Desire aspires after the absolute inherent in us – not objects

The aim of this sub-chapter is to underline that our double subjectivity is intrinsically linked to desire for relationship and reciprocity. Based on the essential desire as the groundless ground of interaction, I shed light on how the intersubjective precedes knowledge of objects/reality. Desire aspires after the absolute inherent in us and implies that we long for intersubjectivity rather than objects. Thus, real intersubjectivity is based on a lateral relation between two outside hierarchies and domination. Desire does not want separation, exclusion or opposites, “[...] it does

⁴¹ For Irigaray, the missing link in the philosophy of Hegel is that he does not consider sufficiently what happens in a relation between two naturally different humans in which both matter and spirit, nature and mind, take part (STF.87).

not know them” (STF.3). Rather, it wants mutuality that is fulfilling, nearness or proximity, and not a logic of opposites. Irigaray states: “Desire arises from the void opened in us by taking our differences from the other into account” (STF.3).

Irigaray explains that the intersubjective is always part of our desire before any sensed perspective, that cannot be discovered by shared objects only. We do not need a shared perspective of an *object* that is moreover *seen* to be intersubjective. In Irigaray’s philosophy the intersubjective involves an intimate and reciprocal aspect of our being and *not* necessarily shared perception of reality/objects. As we are different, we represent different worlds or at least different visions of the world and different perspectives. We want to share the desire of being together, of being two, and sharing objects is part of that aim (STW). Different from Merleau-Ponty’s example of a shared object that connects us, the intersubjectivity is *already there* as the invisible inherent in us. Thus, from the very beginning the intersubjective precedes human knowing of possible shared objects.

In the very well-known example found in Merleau-Ponty’s *The Primacy of Perception* (1964:17/8), the author demonstrates intersubjective perception with the example of two men standing on a hill, gazing at a shared object that mediates the relation between them (Rawlinson 2023a, 51-52). He imagines himself standing on a hill with a friend:

He points to a something in the distance, which his friend does not yet see. His companion follows his line of sight, and their gazes converge at the same point on the same object. For Merleau-Ponty, the ‘third’ mediates the relation to the other and establishes intersubjectivity. There is intersubjectivity because all share the same objective world. (Rawlinson 2023a, 51)

With this example, Merleau-Ponty fails to consider the transcendence toward the other and the felt sensitivity that emerges between the two. As we are different, nobody thinks the same or feels the same or has exactly the same perspective. Certainly, an object connects us in thought which enables us to communicate and understand each other. Nevertheless, there is no neuter affect — no common effect of self-affection; it is particular and individually experienced. Moreover, the shared

perspective is *not* a manifestation of a real intersubjectivity and may be hierarchical and not lateral.

Furthermore, Irigaray is skeptical of the priority of sight over touch because it reduces the subtle meaning that emerges in the space between two. Her argument is that we are already connected as two (when standing on the hill). We are touched and affected by the other before we eventually share the same perspective. Thus, touch precedes vision. Rawlinson claims: “Against the valorization of sight and the one world of perception, Irigaray argues that touch is the ‘necessary medium’ of intersubjectivity [...]” (Rawlinson 2023a, 52). Irigaray’s elaboration of touch is to avoid a logic of objectification and of the violence of the gaze that is controlling, subjugating, and that takes hold on the other. At all times, her effort is to draw our attention from vision-centrism to the open space between us.

The medium of intersubjectivity in Irigaray’s philosophy means embracing the other intuitively in a lateral relationship, which has a deeper meaning before a shared perspective linked to an object. Hence, the task of our being together in a shared world is to *recover* the source of our natural energy in a world that can bring us back together as humans. It means returning to an original pathos instead of suspending or repressing it (STF.53).

For Irigaray, the intersubjective corresponds to the amorous desire of sexuate difference that needs to be elaborated and brought to light based on the ontological status of our being as the most fundamental in life. Irigaray never loses track of the two: the single being does not only participate in the world of objects. Being two (at least), as well as enactive and responsible, we shape intersubjectivity and the invisible world between us in which we shape the atmosphere of our collective dwelling.

When establishing a truly intersubjective relationship, a “third” comes into existence; it can be a child, a friendship, a democracy, or a culture of an unforeseen kind (STW.23; DBBT). The third dimension, created between us, is not the one, the other, or the neuter, but rather a kind of a result of a meeting between two bodies and two perspectives that is surprising and that still awakens our appetite. It is also what helps us to come closer, and it gives rise to empathy — “[...] which allows us to connect desire with pathos, sexuate difference with soma” (STF.20). And through this, a caring relationship is established, as a state of novelty derived from the

meeting between at least two that could lead to new insight and transformation when cultivating differences and the sensitive life.

While Merleau-Ponty focuses on the inclusion of objects, the two having a shared, common agreement about what they sense and perceive (based on sight), Irigaray focuses on the inclusion of the *sensible touch* that is heartfelt and experienced in a continuous movement through which we shape the world and ourselves. Irigaray always prioritizes touch in perception over the metaphysics of sight, and her ontology of sexuate difference includes a logic that is lived rather than one that favors sight over touch or insight into the essence of things (Rawlinson 2023a, 51). Moving from subject-object adequacy to *subject-subject relation*, engaging with the alterity of the different other in a thinking-with, feeling-with, we can cultivate our sensitive life (STF.77-81). Such a practice is a mode of embracing oneself through the other, allowing the otherness to come to us unexpectedly and creatively. This implies that one must return to oneself, to the lived body, and to affect — and not to knowledge or objects (IBSW.139-58).

However, as we will see, there is a shared felt outpouring in the felt space between us, that is different from sharing objects, in which we dynamically and intersubjectively emerge from each other and towards others. This phase of emergence belongs to *the transcendental* — and not merely to objects — the way we are moved in a body-situation and that makes the spirit grow.

3.6 The transcendental is lateral — an unwritten law rooted in the amorous desire

The sensible transcendental is a rather complicated concept in Irigaray's philosophy and cannot be described in a clear-cut way; it is a mode of *becoming that includes the infinite in us* and that makes us *spiritual* (STF.72). The sensible transcendental has sources in the amorous desire that has implications for Irigaray's ethics, the way we seek intimate relations with the other and fulfillment. This is because desire aspires after proximity, reciprocity, and the amorous feeling of being "whole," which is the *beautiful blossoming* in us (STF). Rebecca Hill states: The "[...] affective intuition is the fundamental ground of her thought and ethics" (Hill 2023, 313). Desire constantly seeks the birth of novelty into reciprocity and nearness with the other and things, which is a birth of *lateral* transcendence in which we become and

grow spiritually (ESD.82). The sensible transcendental can be both lateral and vertical, physical and metaphysical — the way we relate to another living person and to God in heaven. Let us briefly look at the difference between lateral transcendence and the vertical one.

The lateral transcendental differs from the vertical one because it is not built on hierarchy. The vertical transcendence, as for instance displayed in Plato's allegory of the cave, is the idea that one reaches sublime science, the absolute truth as the supernatural beauty alone, or the One. Vertical transcendence is based on the belief that absolute truth is to be found (revealed from) outside the human condition through insight and reason, and beyond relationships with each other. Thus, the absolute is regarded to be the origin, which is a devaluation of human bodily senses, of our body interaction, and of the material maternal touch (Halsema 2010, 54-55), There is no intermediary, no interval; one must grab the truth by insight (Jones 2011, 80-88). Thus, Irigaray rethinks the vertical relation between man and the absolute, in which the singular being, as a pure I, transcends towards heaven, the truth, the sun, and the light, based on reason alone and positioned outside the experience of earthly things (Rawlinson 2023a, 48-49). Her effort is to show that the affect (the blossoming) takes place between two subjects, and that goes against the hierarchical mind-body dualism in Western culture.

The vertical transcendence is built on a hierarchy. Instead of thinking with and relating to the other, the attention is turned to the highest origin, the One, and the truth, which reduces all humans to anonymous subjects and discourages people from thinking in an embodied way, for themselves, or with others. This can only lead to ignorance of sensory perception, of the sensible and the ethical life between two. The effect is that we get caught in repetition of the same that reduces the way we transcend with each other in reflexive care based on sexuate difference.

Irigaray asks: "Would a vertical transcendence not rob us of this third dimension beginning from which we approach each other as different others?" (TBT.3) Thus, the direct reference to the living being is cut off — a relation that *should* be open, present, sensible, and creative. She continues: "Human being itself in this way can contribute to the presence of the infinite in the finite, so opening a time of another relation between nature and the divine" (STF.68). Irigaray refers to our nature of approaching the amorous or the beauty inherent in ourselves through the other.

Irigaray replaces the vertical transcendental with the lateral transcendental based on sexuate nature and *inter-affection* that is the most universal and which connects us experientially, transcendentially, and ethically. She claims: “The universal cannot be reached outside the self [...]” (DBBT.28); hence, the blossoming, the process of “touching being touched,” takes place between us. Besides, the idea of heaven and of the One are not the source of things (IBSW.5-8). But the living process itself is. The sensible transcendental is a radical rethinking of the vertical hierarchy that includes the irreducible other and the *embodied touch that emerges between at least two* — and that moves me and makes me reflect, respond, and enjoy life.

With her concept of the lateral transcendental between two, Irigaray is not only debunking mind-body dualism, but also reducing the gap between me and the other that can bring us closer and that contributes to spiritual growth for both partners, as the transcendental always is in between. In short, the elaboration of the lateral transcendental in Irigaray’s philosophy is meant to make us aware of how we can discover the beauty of life *on earth* in care for the life that is so close to us — always more than words, and always more than can be enveloped in a system of ideas. (Words and ideas can be very powerful but always in a way that we relate to them).

Commenting on Diotima’s speech in an essay on Plato’s *Symposium* (ESD.20-34), Irigaray introduces the concept of sensible transcendence, which is rooted in desire for *love and beauty* that includes alterity. Sensible transcendence is the feeling of unity with the other, or with nature, as when we experience the beauty of a landscape or being fulfilled with another person. Everything is always in movement or in a state of becoming, and love is the mediator, never fulfilled, always in-between and in process (ESD.21). In Irigaray’s philosophy, the notion of unity is in tension with the emphasis on sexuate becoming as open-ended and incomplete, such that no one (and perhaps no combination of beings) is ever the whole.

Based on Diotima’s wisdom on love, the desire for beauty as the blossoming in us and between us is the path to spirit, which implies that knowing is derived from loving. It is the inherent desire for beauty and love that causes us to want it, searching for it, and nothing else, and that provokes a movement that is transcending. Irigaray states: “It is love that leads the way and is the path. A mediator per excellence. This mediating role is indicated as part of a theme, but is also perceptually at issue, on

stage, in the exposition of the theme” (EDS.21). The point is that the mediator is never abolished in a finite knowledge as sameness; it is above all a mediator, not a moral imperative or even any conscious decision (STF.3). The mediator is the intuitively felt that is never fulfilled but always becoming; thus, it remains an ongoing functioning in us, always there, as a state of endless aspiring, transcending, and becoming (ESD.21; Rawlinson 2023a, 48-50). In that way, desire *bridges between two*, between me and the alterity/otherness, between the sensible here and the transcendental there, and desire also ethically touches and moves concretely between nature and culture — the way we are inter-affected as two, and the way we appear as two.

Nonetheless, by reading Diotima, Irigaray discovers the ethics of sexuate difference and the goodness inherent in us and between us that we search for and that we want the most. Instead of claiming that Eros is the great God (beautiful or good, ugly, or bad) Diotima suggests “[...] that between knowledge and reality there is an intermediary that allows for the encounter and the transmutation or transvaluation between the two” (ESD.21). The intermediary is the desire of man for approaching and searching the good; it is the path, the process, and the goal. However, and as we are finite and not whole, our desire is, in a way, rhizomatic and never stable in its searching, which is why we fail ourselves in approaching this goal and why we must be extra careful. Let us now turn to some examples.

The transcendental is an event of blossoming or a happening that takes place when encountering the alterity in our everyday life, as when meeting a dear friend we have not seen for a long time, or when listening to a wonderful piece of music that fills our heart and emotionally moves us. It is music that connects to feelings — to the precious bliss — being one with the situation; as a kind of being in the midst of the whole, intertwined with the alterity in reciprocal relation that cannot be subjugating, domineering or exploitative but that is beautifully fulfilling and blossoming. It is like losing structuring bounds in our meeting with the infinite. The precious feeling arises intuitively and unexpectedly here and now as a shared outpouring that is dazzling and even surprising. This also implies that we lose hold on the situation, without fully knowing, an emergence of a feeling when you are about to fall in love with a person or with beauty itself without knowing it. Thus, the pre-reflective felt sense or the bliss itself is in the foreground, which means that the sense of a separated self is abandoned.

However, and as we are infinite beings and not whole, a real transcendence between two subjects is not absolute and never finally embraced or fulfilled; it comes and goes. But it is *there* for us to grasp. Thus, we are never fully reciprocal, but different and not the same. The lateral transcendental is derived from the dialectical sensitivity between two subjects, and from our meeting with the world in all its complexity — different from the vertical one outside of earthly experience.

Preserving a time-space of silence maintains the possibility to return to myself and within myself, and with “the other in myself,” which is also the place of my transcendental (TVB.50). Sitting on a park bench with a friend or even alone with a tree in silent reciprocity, watching the weather go by and listening to how everything touches here and now in reciprocity can be of great significance. These things are definitely experienced but not so easy to describe. And it is surprising how the otherness provides me with new experiences and fresh horizons that are in excess of symbolization linked to beauty itself. (Hill 2020, 89). It is a moment of being present while also silently exceeding myself towards the infinite, transcending with the otherness. As Hill states:

The sensible-transcendental is a mysterious and excessive “concept” that designates place as a relation between bodies that exceeds presence. This strange threshold, which cannot strictly be named, is fundamental to Irigaray’s ontology of sexuate difference; the sensible-transcendental is the groundless ground of the nonhierarchical relationship between woman and man and the basis of a relationship between women. (Hill 2020, 77)

Precisely this allows us to see the beauty between us that connects us in a kind of fulfillment without reasoning. Irigaray always makes clear that the transcendental is *not* beyond matter; it emerges in the matter itself and between two that unite in the blossoming that binds us in relation (STF; TS).

As demonstrated by Irigaray’s text on the female lips, “When Our Lips Speak Together” (TS.205-219), their reciprocal transcendence is deeply felt, liberating and blooming. In a continuous pre-reflection and reflection, they stay with the experiencing process that is without reasoning and in a way that can neither be calculated or determined in advance. Very bodily and thinking from within the body and a lived precision, they discover that their becoming is a fluid movement that allow them to happen. Irigaray says: “It is multiple, devoid of causes, meanings,

simple qualities. Yet, it cannot be decomposed. These movements cannot be described as the passage from a beginning to an end” (TS.215). The sensible transcendental is in-between and a manifestation of the experience itself, the experience of the experiencing that requires us to listen at the edge to what is really occurring in their reflection here and now (without analyzing or explaining). The lips are foremost captured by the rhythm of their touch, exploring affect that keeps them nurturing their relationship, their feminine specificity — keeping the gap, the space open.

The sensible transcendental is a place where we discover the vitality of otherness and our relationality. Thinking about alterity in life and wondering about how we are part of the whole without being the whole, gives rise to the transcendental. Thanks to desire and the other(ness), we are transcendental beings, and not absolute. Irigaray invites us to think the difference intersubjectively, transcendently, and creatively as the sap that connects us, and towards a future that is liberating and that can make a change in a deadly culture that has forgotten touch and affect. The liberating thought requires a rethinking of human experience as always already marked by the alterity of the other and in a way that cannot be anticipated or reduced to a universal constructed perspective because the appearance of the other is in principle “[...] each time new and unpredictable.” (STW. 87; Rawlinson 2023a, 49).

Again, we come back to the irreducibility of the other, and to the transcendental world that widens our horizon when recognizing otherness and what it is that really connects us in thinking. It is so near to us and so much wanted. Relationships are always particular and not so easy to explain, and they can never be fully understood/recognized or stable/secured. We are always in between, in the midst of an event, a happening, a trouble, sometimes bewildered, confused, disoriented and disappointed, but also impressed, happy, and fascinated. Yet, it has been ignored in the system that prioritizes reason over sensitive life and has not been sufficiently recognized in mainstream sciences. A strong implication is that we must learn to see the world with our hearts and not only with our eyes and brains.

We need the other to blossom, just as the child needs to be taken care of by its mother and the flower needs the water to bloom. Based on the desire to be whole, knowing always involves loving, which implies that we search for the relation itself, for intersubjectivity (STF.35). It is desire that demands relation in difference that is

embracing, and this aim can only be fulfilled “[...] through an amorous union with the other” (STF.66). When anchoring in lived experience and felt dimension of meaning, reawakening our sensitive life, we become ethically and spiritually more engaged. Irigaray says:

This transcendence is universal and can be shared by all people all over the world. It suffices to listen to unwritten laws inscribed in nature itself: the respect for life, for its generation, growth and blossoming and the respect for a sexuate transcendence between us – [...]. (IBSW.137)

The elaboration of the lateral transcendental is to stress the quality of experiential thinking that is necessary for the cultivation of humanity and the beauty in life. The transcendental is a place to move outside logical structures that are dominating and subjugating — a place to widen logical barriers and stay with the process of experience.

With her concept of the transcendental, Irigaray goes beyond the reductive framework of mainstream science of purified reason alone (philosophy of mind), questioning the *idea of man* we have and care in thinking (TNHB). She demonstrates that loving and knowing are intrinsically interlinked. This is confirmed by Laura Candiotta and Hanne De Jaeger and their enactive approach to phenomenology when they argue that there is no clear cut between knowledge and love (De Jaeger 2019, 847): “Loving and knowing go together, imply each other, are the same, in essence and to an extent” (Candiotta and De Jaeger 2021, 515). Loving care and knowing are existential aspects of our being, the way we engage with each other. Thus, we need not only to know the world but also the particular relation we have with the other, a relation that is driven by desire (STF.98).

3.7 In reality we are never separated from the world

As relational and transcendental beings, we are never totally cut off from our living. Rather, we emerge from the relational being we are, the way we are continuously affected and touched, and the way we respond and transcend one another. The aim of this sub-chapter is to demonstrate that we are inter-dependent, and to show, that we share the space of interaction itself, continuously permeated by the other(ness),

before any mind-dominated attitude. Being in continuous interplay with others, desire bridges body and spirit, immanence and transcendence, in which we form a culture, and that cannot be grasped by dualistic concepts.

Irigaray maintains that concepts do not have a meaning of their own, outside lived reality; they derive from our living interaction. In *Sharing the Fire*, Irigaray insists that we must think about our traditional discourse, what the logos is able to say and what it maintains outside saying, and we must thus find a way of perceiving and expressing this non-said (STF.105-6). The implication is that we must search for a new way of saying that includes affect in thinking in a return to ourselves and the in-between.

As best illustrated in intimate relationships and in our daily life, we are never totally alone. There is always something that touches and that has a direct relation to the other and that orders us to pay attention (STF.81). As very well demonstrated in “When Our Lips Speak Together”, being two indicates that the other is *already* in me or is part of my temporality, the way I am inter-affected (outside and subject-object dichotomies). The implication is that the other resonates and stirs in me when touched, moved, affected, and that takes place in the inner space of my body (TBT.25).

The body and the mind are intrinsically intertwined which means that felt meaning is always implied in or underlying our actions. Thus, we are embodied and linguistic beings which means that the affective/affected body is essentially never cut off from the mind. This resonates with Karen Barad who asserts that “matter and meaning are mutually articulated” (Barad 2007, 152; Þorsteinsson, 2023) and always interlinked when we orient ourselves and carry forward, transcending our being. According to the quote above, the inner space of my responsiveness is shared and permeated by the other. Thus, my knowledge is performed out of care for *the other in myself*. As Björn Þorsteinsson explains: “Our experiencing is not innocent—it calls for care. Why is that? For one thing, because when we perceive, we matter, through our responding—and [...] our responding is, by the very fact of its partaking of the making-(the)-sense-of-the-world [...]” (Þorsteinsson 2023, 21). We are in the world and of the world, condemned to sense and condemned to meaning-making (Þorsteinsson 2023, 21-22). He continues: “In this sense, then, the making of sense in which we are implicated is inevitably a matter of community—it has to do with

what we have in common, with common sense” (Þorsteinsson 2023, 21). By interacting we are implicated and leave traces or marks on one another.

We care for life and for others in the way we partake in it, and we care for how we think. To make sense of the world as responding beings, we incorporate the other/the world in our thinking. Thus, perceiving through our responding process implies that we are, in reality, never separated from the world. This is very well formulated by Claire Petitmengin:

An idea is first of all a movement, a rhythm, not pertaining to any particular sensory modality, but nevertheless subtly felt. This rhythm unfolds in a moving “landscape,” endowed with a texture, contrasts of densities and intensities, which are completely specific to it. Even when the idea has been expressed, this gestural and quivering dimension remains; beneath concepts, it constitutes the very dimension of *meaning*. It is anchoring in this felt dimension that makes a thought or spoken word embodied and alive. (Petitmengin. 2021, 173)

Based on this fluid dimension of meaning, the border between the mind and the body dissolves; in the process of interaction and inter-affection, the body and mind meet — and this meeting corresponds to the outside, so to speak — which means that we sense the quality of this subtle fluid interaction. As Karen Barad puts it, this meeting is “[...] an ongoing performance of the world in its differential dance of intelligibility and unintelligibility (Barad 2007, 149; Þorsteinsson 2023, 20). Petitmengin argues further that we ordinarily perceive ourselves as individuals, separated from the world out there, but there is *another way* of looking at the world: “By adopting an even more, diffuse, receptive mode of attention, I can also let the landscape come to me, let myself be ‘touched’ by it. [...] I let the atmosphere, the particular rhythms that emanate from the landscape permeate me, a little like a perfume, or music” (Petitmengin, 2021, 174). The task of looking at world in this way resonates with Irigaray’s elaboration of the other and consists in turning the attention to the permeating of the otherness whether we are aware of it or not. Practicing this kind of thinking can help us to gain awareness of what the other is giving to us, and it is also a way to cultivate affect and reciprocity.

Gaining awareness of myself as a relational and responding being invites me to correspond to each of my senses when seeing, smelling, touching, hearing, and

tasting, allowing everything that occurs (such as the grass, the birds, the waterfall, the raindrops, and the whole landscape) to come to me, stir inside, and touch me. In short, it is being attentive to what my body feels and letting life that always includes otherness happen in me and to me. Hearing the birds, smelling the grass, tasting the raindrops, or paying attention to anything around evokes new experiences and fresh aspects of life. Being attuned with the quality of the atmosphere and with the particular rhythms is thus a little like a piece of music and refers to something that is profoundly touching. This also opens for the relation between myself and the world, a proximity that is non-representational and differs from the metaphysics of presence in language. When experiencing and interacting, all this is *in* my inner-and-outer felt space, so close to me and part of me, just as described by the Icelandic writer, Einar Már Guðmundsson:

The raindrops are so big
that I hear the heartbeat of men as they fall on the pavement.

The meteorologists say
that it hasn't rained this much in 140 years.

Yet I stand and wait
with my heartbeat in the rain and rain in my heart. (Guðmundsson 1995;
2014)

The raindrops are the heartbeat of myself and others; thus, I incorporate them in my inner space, and they are a part of my sensing and observation. As demonstrated in the poem, the raindrops are not only visually observed or tactually felt but also, as stated by Petitmengin, part of a more profound understanding of perception that is more richly experienced as “[...] the inner space of the world [...]” (Petitmengin, 2021, 173). They are not “over there”, outside me — “[...] no longer an expanse that presents itself to me as a beautiful spectacle, a photograph [...]” (Petitmengin, 2021, 174). The raindrops are no longer looked at but deeply felt, and this feeling, as Petitmengin argues, dissolves the boundary between me and the world. In the same manner, the different other is not simply standing in front of me as an object (WOL.155); the other “fills” my body and gives rise to my affections, reflections, and actions.

By adopting this kind of open mode of attention towards the living process as described in the poem, we change the relation we have to the objective world and what it means to be an experiential (heartfelt) sensing being. Realizing in this way that we incorporate the other in our thinking could change our conventional thinking about the other in terms of dichotomies, such as active-passive or subject-object. We might discover the beauty of life — that we share the space of the interaction itself, which is always more than patterns and bodies. As Petitmengin puts it:

In summary, when loosening the tensions that cut us off from it, we come into contact with our experience, we do not find a “mind”, a “body”, and its “environment”. These words are abstractions, concepts that veil the reality of what we live. The song of the bird is not over there in the throat of a bird, it is not in me either, it resonates in a space where the boundary between here and there does not exist, where the world and I meet, which Rilke called “the inner space of the world” (der Weltinnenraum). (Petitmengin 2021. 174)

3.8 Being part of the mysterious whole is linked to Derrida’s avowal of the ghost

As affective/affected beings, we are sensually a life force with room for multiple connections and endless possibilities of sexuate structure and appearances. The aim of this sub-chapter is to argue that the diverse approaches and appearances of our being, taking place in the interval, imply a profound *hope* for novelty and change, which is linked to the riddle of life, and which resonates with Jacques Derrida’s avowal of the ghost. In Irigaray’s philosophy, hope is linked to the *creative forces of differences* and *responding features of bodies* in the *unstable movement* in the in-between.

As already mentioned, the doubleness of being and the way we found subjectivity (saving the difference from the other and respecting the difference of the other) invites and welcomes other differences and new sexuate structures that make the charges of heterosexuality (that exclude intersexuality) unfair or at least misdirected (Grosz 2011, 99-115). Sexuate difference refers to openness that

stretches and develops towards the infinite, and the notion of the sexuate being is consistent in all Irigaray's writings (Grosz, 2011, 105). Our different naming of sex is a manifestation of abstract names for our ongoing experience. Irigaray is interested in this "prior to" conceptualization — that is of embodied sensibility and sensitivity, which resonates with Derrida's *avowal of the ghost* in the interval and his account of the open space of moving forces of our living that is indefinitely deferred. Before unfolding the topic of the ghost in Derrida's philosophy, I wish to discuss the mysterious forces of our living as displayed in Irigaray's philosophy as unfolded by Grosz and Hill.

Irigaray invites us to think the difference further in a fresh direction based on the living energy we are that is emerging and structuring towards the infinite. As noted, sexuate structuration is the possible appearance of twoness. For Irigaray, as Grosz argues, sexuate difference is primarily about a reformulation of the real that brings with it transformation and change in which life is understood and lived: "Sexuate difference is, for her, not just one among many possible characteristics defining subjects; it is the universal, both natural and social condition (the natural and the social are undecidably indivisible), not only of subjects but of the human in general and of a living dynamic nature in its totality" (Grosz 2011, 102). Thus, we are living forces interacting with everything.

Sexuate difference is a metaphysical and not only an ontological and empirical one; the metaphysical difference is the generator of novelty that *emerges* forth as a life force or as the engine of our living. It is an unknown "[...] force of creativity, indeed the very measure of creativity itself" (Grosz 2011, 101). Sexuate difference is the immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal (ILTY. 35-38). Irigaray says: "The universal has been thought as *one*, thought as the basis of *one*. But this *one* does not exist" (ILTY.35). And this universal is yet to be (ILTY.48). Further, man and woman are creative and mysterious couples as well as *all relations* that are. Thus, they are paradigmatic for all kinds of multiplicity.

My interpretation of sexuate difference as a life force is in line with Grosz. Grosz does not only qualify the necessity of sexuate difference to the empirical life, in the way the difference is played out, notably from the relational lived order of touching and acting; she also stresses the energy of intra-active forces of embodiment and our living energy that is in constant interplay with culture (Grosz 2011, 101-

112). Sexuate difference remains ontological as a possibility and is thus a difference that constantly escapes its definition. The movement of differences “[...] marks the very energies of existence before and beyond any lived or imputed identity” (Grosz 2011, 91). The focus is on generativity, on interactive forces of matter based on desire, and not merely on the empirical appearances of twoness. The emergence cannot be arrested or finally repressed, and this is something that will emerge again and again in a new form that we do not know yet. Sexuate difference is the very emergence of living difference that connects, to gender, and prior to gender; it is the mechanism of variation, multiplicity and the *riddle of things* (Grosz, 2011, 101). Hence, the idea of a neuter subject is a fake or a fabrication that holds thinking and people in place.

Sexuate difference is, according to Halsema, “[...] the condition for the possibility of having a relationship with the other. For precisely the transcendence of the other makes him or her a mystery to me and enables an unending attraction between us” (Halsema 2008, 81). Thus, the different other(ness) is the mystery or the riddle of life that language has no word for or final definition. The implication is that reality cannot be (finally) conceived in a concept — and never fully formulated. Experience is thus much wider and more complex than words.

As Rebecca Hill argues, the place of the transcendental (the interval) is a *strange and mysterious concept* which is almost “[...] a synecdoche for something that remains essentially in excess of symbolization and cannot be said” (Hill 2020, 89). Beauty itself and the bliss are always more than can be verbalized. The transcendental, Hill argues,

[...] designates the relationship of a sexed subject to the nontotalizable becoming of “nature” (the Common Mother). The Common Mother is not a thing, nor something “we” get a grip on, for it is the whole of time-space (of infinite dimensions) that is beyond our understanding [...]. The sensible transcendental is a threshold to this mysterious “whole” of which we are tiny aspects. This threshold is embodied in my flesh, in the rhythm of my breath, in the myriad relationships I have with other bodies surrounding me (male, female or trans, human or inhuman, living or nonliving). (Hill 2020, 89)

This myriad of relationships that I can never fully get a grip on is linked to the infinite in the finite that allows us to transcend here and now. However, sensing our life process to the fullest (such as by reaching beauty itself) escapes continuously its (meaning's) definition.

This brings to mind the avowal of the ghost in Derrida's philosophy, a ghost that appears surprisingly to then disappear and move beyond our understanding, leaving *traces* in our bodies. (Derrida 1978; 1994). The ghost is a shade of death, referring to the fact that living is infinitely deferred. Because of this, meaning cannot be stabilized or enclosed.

As explained by Kas Saghafi, the ghost in Derrida's philosophy of difference is a kind of a force or "[...] energy anew—all the limit-terms between life and death, presence and absence, the real and the unreal [...]" (Saghafi 2006, 267). The ghost moves between what "is" and what "is not" (yet), between reality and concepts, between the living and the discursive, and between the signified and the signifiers — always there but constantly postponed, deferred.

In Irigaray's and Derrida's difference philosophies, one can say that the ghost is linked to the non-representational and the infinite, always in-between and implied. However, the ghost in Derrida's philosophy is related to his idea of justice that cannot be fully embraced but that which we constantly long for, whereas the deferral in Irigaray's philosophy refers to the absolute inherent in us — our longings for proximity in relation with the other — that is a never-ending search, never finally achieved. These never-fulfilled longings leave traces in our bodies that appear again and again in our living interactions. The ghost is the invisible force of our interactions, undecidable, and forever unreachable as the difference itself cannot be fully known. Hence, the experience of the other/life leaves traces in my body that are always there, implied, and never fully formulated.

The difference based on the irreducible other is the riddle of life — appearing like a ghost — always there, not fully reachable, and it cannot be overcome or finally stabilized. The differentiation process itself is wide open and will always leave traces. Yet, we never get to know the ghost; it only casts shadows for then to appear and disappear again. As finite beings, we never really meet the ghost or shake hands with it. If we did, we would lose our energy. Thus, there is always something that slips away, thanks to the difference and our desire to live because in reality, our living is inherently and infinitely deferred.

The implication is that we can *only* meet the alterity, allowing it to come to us and let us happen and invite ourselves to be surprised. However, it is always possible to think the deferral or what is implied in our living interaction, which means to think the sensible to the fullest, entering the shadows, the traces. That is the most exciting aspect of our being and becoming because it gives rise to interrogation of ourselves and given concepts, and it implies new approaches, new appearances, and fresh expressions in the very unstable movement in the in-between.

There is always something mystical or unexplained in our relation, that sometimes leaves us in wonder or astonishment. We all have the experience of being totally absorbed by the other — something that haunts us in our thoughts. As we say: “I can’t get her/him out of my mind”. Thus, I am doomed to an interaction and a relationship with the other; I am doomed to respond to the other and to the implied. Precisely this allows me to achieve identity and precede my limited self in an ongoing process of approaching while keeping a distance, whatever might come out of it.

The difference is the life-force that allows us to touch and move and act further, and it includes a *hope*. The hope is linked to the traces of the deferral of reality — left in our bodies and to which we can connect again and again. A hope that is linked to the *critical and creative forces of interacting and responding features* of something fresh to come. Thus, we are never finished. The point is that the subtle touch of the other is a constantly implied “here” in the manner of a ghost, awaiting, always around the corner, ready to be embraced and captured. All this includes a *hope for proximity and newness*, a hope for widening logical barriers that can contribute to a more livable world. Thus, we might need to pay more attention to the shadow of the ghost, the silent darkness, the traces left in our bodies, the hidden and non-representational, as a *way of entering things freshly*.

Our relationships remain ambivalent and multiple: our fluid movement with the other provides us with subjectivity and at the same time he/she/they introduce an uncertainty in my temporal body. Nonetheless, we search for a new saying in an ongoing, exchanging interaction that can make a rift in given structures and that can destabilize identity towards a future touch. The touch has no proper name (TS.134). In fact, reality has no proper meaning. Reality is constantly enacted, implied, verbalized, formed, and deferred in all its complexity of possibilities, enabling us (hopefully) to act further towards transformation and change.

3.9 The interval: A change in perception and a new understanding of human being

The interval is a term with a *wide spectrum* that expands the manifold meaning of sexuate difference as *the place* of our interactions and relationships. Thinking about the in-between helps us to understand the experiential, ontological, ethical, and transformational force of sexuate difference through the notion of a place (Jones 2015, 16) — and further, how all these implicit entanglements and intertwining give rise to exploration and interrogation of ourselves and how the meaning is put together.

The interval forces many questions. How are we part of this operational whole? And how can we disarrange things and carry forward based on our living so as to change the neuter economy? Yet, Irigaray uses the interval to dip into felt meaning of our intricacy and draw out more and more implications that touch the core of the meaning of her major concept of sexuate difference. The interval is mediative and allows repetition of the unfolding of the many layers of its implications and perspectives. This is partly because of the metaphysical aspect of her term; sexuate difference has *no* “*why*” and is a manifestation of the experience itself. Hence, it is not an easy task to combine and consolidate the many perspectives and aspects of sexuate difference.

The interval can be fleshed out in many ways. As a mediative force, it allows us to turn to the place of our complex interconnectivity in return to ourselves (TBB.17; IBSW; TVB). The interval is an open place of aspiration, of recovery and change, and a place of enactments and qualitative becoming, why nothing can be the same. As the creative place of our “to be”, the interval can save us from a possible detriment of desire, given that we cultivate it (SFT). It is a place that emerges from within as the very source of motion and possibilities (Jones 2015,16).

Desire occupies the place of the interval and demands a sense of attraction, which makes a change in the interval possible (ESD.8). Thus, the interval is an open space that allows us to meet, to be touched and moved by the other/otherness, and in which we find ourselves. Our “self” is thus not limited to self-consciousness that is self-reliant but remains qualitatively sensitive and relational (STF.34). More generally, the interval contributes to a *new idea of the human being* that thinks with

the body, with the other, and the world in a time-space that is self-structuring, and that makes a change in perception. Irigaray states:

The transition of a new age requires a change in our perception and conception of *space-time*, the *inhabiting of places*, and of *containers* or *envelopes of identity*. It assumes and entails an evolution or a transformation of forms, of the relations of *matter* and *form* and of the interval *between*; the trilogy of the constitution of place. (ESD.6)

Subjectivity is not enclosed in an envelope or in a container, obeying unified structures of oppositions or essential traits. Rather, subjectivity is fluid and unfixed, always open and changeable in a never-ending attraction and in a reflection with oneself and the other. The (new) time-space is the responsive order with room for the wisdom of love and care in thinking that arises immediately and without a structure. Paying attention to touch and what is implied in a situation, it is possible to re-evaluate images and to set meaning in motion. This requires furthermore that we pay attention to forms, bodies and relations, which is the trilogy in Irigaray's philosophy (ESD.6).

The trilogy constitutes the meaning and consists of the sex-situated body (the matter), the logos (the form), and the vital dialectic between two bodies (the interval) that are forming and never finished. To explain further, the trilogy requires a relation between two subjects, a relation between the subject(s) and the discourse, and the intermediary, which is the passage to the spirit — a path for our becoming and growth. Hence, there is a double intertwining in the interval, that is, the relation between me and the other(s) is entangled with the relation between me/us and the logos (ESD). If we want to create a more human-friendly culture, we must consider the trilogy, and especially the *interval*.

The interval is a kind of a metalevel for cognition and representations to take place, and for us to stretch, extend, form, and develop (in the way we relate to others, concepts, and the world). The interval is the place of re-evaluation of ourselves, habitual thinking, imposed meaning, ethics, our relationships, the way we relate to everything, ontology and philosophy. More importantly, the interval is a place for transformation and change (ILTO.62). Thus, the moving energy is there constantly at work and makes us move between the non-representational and the

representational, between the implicit and the explicit in an intricate unpredictable way that is never enclosed or finished.

The new understanding of perception as displayed in Irigaray's philosophy implies that *life comes first* before conceptual ideas and theories. The presupposition is that the living being cannot be locked inside a theory. The touch is forever fluid and is not to be understood in terms of the partitioning poles of subject and object but as a dialectical and dynamic relation we have with the other/the world/concepts — that is multi-dimensional and open. In that sense, the interval is an ontological framework for all kinds of differences (of being two), whether in form of bodies, gender, race, land, or cultures, based on the irreducibility of the other that allows for relation in difference.

The question of a new age based on sexuate difference is not only a question of ontology that includes embodied and relational engagement; it is also a question of “[...] agreeing to be affected and to venture to be touched, even to abandon ourselves to this affection, in order to allow our ‘to be’ to happen in a way that remains hidden from our sight” (STF.105). This can save us (our spirit) from becoming paralyzed in fixed values and habitual thinking based on a neuter economy. Desire to know and love is not dependent on values imposed upon us; desire derives from inter-affectivity and is what mediates between the two (STF.94).

Sexuate difference is a matter of reawakening the embodied potential in us, outside calculation, and requires that we cultivate the immediate touch with our reasoning. Thus, different from identification and assimilation, we need to nourish the interval and the heartfelt between us — in the way we live together and shape ourselves. The interval is the place where our inter-affection and our felt outpouring work with our reasoning and representations and requires us to *take charge* of life and ourselves, preserving difference without passively undergoing it (TNHB. introduction).

The new human being can no longer accept the idea of the one or that everything is derived from the same. Thus, they recognize affect as an important potential of our being and becoming. The new human being realizes that they are moving with the earth in which they shape themselves and that calls out for a new relation we have to ourselves as thinking and feeling beings. The world is not outside us but *inherently between us*. To make a change and to avoid an abstract culture, we must consider the trilogy of the constitution of place, or the interval, and devote

ourselves to it in faithfulness to nature, to self-affection, and inter-affection, along with the inclusion of the other.

As enactive beings, we are moving towards each other, with all living creatures, breathing with the earth, still aspiring after the different other. The difference itself presupposes that there is no wholeness, which implies that we keep searching for one another and for knowledge to become and blossom. The difference is the living energy that touches, connects, and is always implicitly functioning with the representational or implied in a situation.

Thanks to the interval, no neuter ontology can express our existence. Further, and according to classical phenomenology, we do not only sense and participate in the world in which we shape ourselves, but, as the living energy we are, we also partake in the sensible *and* the *sensitive world*, saving self-affection and differences in care for life in which we shape ourselves and the world. This is a manifestation of the fact that the world cannot be explained by language only or by the spirit of mind only; we need the other and the desiring living body.

3.10 The problem of our time

The problem of our time, as unfolded in Irigaray's philosophy, is that past metaphysics, stretching from Plato to Hegel, has failed to think sexuate difference and our nature of being two, and that is characterized by a commitment to the hegemony of the one and the logic of the same (Rawlinson 2023a, 55). The problem is that nature and our being are already organized into a significant whole, ordered in a logic where everyone speaks the same language and reproduces the same story, which means that there is no room for authentic dialogue between two subjects. Ethics, inter-subjectivity and cognition are *not* already there to be revealed in abstract principles but enacted and lived.

The failure of thinking sexuate difference in the philosophical valorization of the same is a repression of embodied thinking and of the woman, which is due to ignorance of the different other and the way we are permeated by each other. This forecloses intimacy and lateral interaction between two subjects from forming and developing, saving and respecting differences, and prevents the ethics of sexuate difference from taking place.

The closure of the same has in a way taken away the sensitivity of our being, the caring relation, the sensible (heart)felt touch, and the possibility of real transcendence between two, which has reduced our natural ability to think with the body and for oneself. Reflexive care in a complexity of loving-knowing has been devalued in history (Schoeller and Thorgeirsdóttir; 2019) but is richly brought to light with sexuate difference as a concept of our age that marks the irreducibility of the other as the other, and which goes against the neuter economy. Thinking with the body, and being engaged as sex-situated knowers, is a challenge to say what we mean, and implies that thinking always has an experiential base.

The main failure is thinking the sexes analytically and logically as oppositional, which is a thinking that categorizes people, race, and land as opposites that split us apart. The history of philosophy has regarded the sexes, male and female, not only as biologically and morphologically different (based on sight) but also as binaries, the female being a lesser sex, necessary for reproduction for the male person and his world. This led to thinking the body as substance, as an idea, in a neuter, and *not* as sexuate. All this serves the hierarchical order based on the same and the logos that upholds the dualism between sexes, man and woman, mind and body, and which devaluates embodied touch and living situational engagement. In the end, the power of discourse is, according to Irigaray, a power of systematicity and mastery, a power that serves to “[...] *eradicate the difference between the sexes* in systems that are self-representative of a ‘masculine subject’” (TS.74).

Binary thinking as an implication of the failure of thinking sexuate difference in embodied terms denigrates nature in a broad sense, as well as our ability to differentiate in an immediate affective way. In our daily life, and not least in philosophical education, the habitual belief is too often presented in form of a logic of argumentation which represses our ability to listen carefully to our affective, embodied, thinking self. How can we expect to transcend and bloom as a flower when constrained in the absolute knowledge of the same? Irigaray asks: “Does knowing necessarily mean an estrangement from oneself?” (IBSW.139).

Irigaray argues that the Western tradition represents an exile for humanity and for the nature of our being (IBSW.139). In the absence of affect and in favor of absolute knowing, man elaborated a discourse of mastery and constructed a world of his own. He grew away from home and from himself. The point is that our tradition has underestimated the importance of the quality of the alterity of the other, with

whom I enter into relations every day, which has led to a corrupt culture of oppositions and domination of the other. In such a culture of exclusive opposites, our energy is uncultivated and “not yet” prepared for a human sharing (Szopa, 2019, 51-52). Because of this flaw, we have *not* cultivated touch in thinking and humanity as the most natural energy of our living. As Irigaray puts it: “Our natural energy is not yet educated towards a communication with respect for our difference(s)” (PCTS.1).

Throughout her philosophy, Irigaray works towards an ethics of sexuate difference in respect for differences of all kinds, multiple sexes and races, thereby going against the neuter and the hegemony of the one. Irigaray situates the difference precisely between the two sexes, male and female, rather than elsewhere, as a parameter that one will never overcome or master (JLI.342). Because the difference is essentially fluid and in motion as the vital energy that is not yet known and surprising. Irigaray comments:

Of course, from the late nineteenth century onwards, attention turned increasingly to the question of the other. [...] Yet, the fundamental model of the human being remained unchanged: one, singular, solidary and historically masculine, that of the adult Western male, rational, competent. Diversity was therefore still conceived of and lived hierarchically, which the many always subordinate to the one. Others were nothing but copies of the idea of man, a potentially perfect idea which all the more or less imperfect copies had to try to be equal. (DBBT.121-22)

In this singular model of man, it is difficult to express oneself in one’s own terms and make a real connection to others. The main problem is that we have forgotten our nature — what energizes our actions, thoughts, and natural aspiration, which implies that we have become irresponsible and unfaithful to nature, almost like strangers. We have forgotten desire as the internal fire that opens up to the other and oneself, as the qualitative and blossoming energy that binds us together (STF). Repression of our nature has caused the detriment of desire, bringing separation, frustration, prejudices, abuse and a dominating attitude, and that has increased the fear among us. All this is a result of the failure of thinking sexuate difference.

The greatest danger for humanity is abolishing the space between the sexes and their vital relationship. To preserve humanity it is not enough to admit qualitative otherness and denounce the oppression of one by the other (DBBT.150). We must

act according to this commitment and cultivate the space between us, the interval, and turn to another logic that is qualitative, which also means changing the relation we have to ourselves. For Irigaray, language should be used to establish a living relation with oneself and the other that is life-affirming. She states: “Language is a necessary condition for our blossoming as humans, but it cannot accomplish this task if it does not correspond to a living word—a word which says us in the present, in faithfulness to the past and to prepare future, with the will to achieve our human destiny” (TBB.48).

The forgetting of sexuate difference and our ethical relationships is what makes sameness in thinking — the problem of our age — incredibly tenacious and hard to put down. The implication is that we must consider our oppression *where* it affects and *how* it touches each of us in our singularity and express it. To set meaning in motion calls for an interrogation of one’s embodied thinking self and investigation of the structuration of meaning. Instead of sacrificing life to mental mastery we must find a way to cultivate our relationships to regain our living energy and cultivate life. As Irigaray puts it:

We reinterpret everything concerning the relations between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. Everything, beginning with the way in which the subject has always been written in the masculine form, as *man*, even when it claimed to be the universal or neutral. (ESD.6)

We cannot overcome differences or our nature, nor can we neglect our relationality. We can only repress them as philosophy has done in decades. Changing our thinking of the sexes as binaries based on the generic subject means restoring affective and responding features in a return to ourselves and inward thinking. In an affective turn, we include touch and affect in thinking that mediates and bridges between us; hence, concepts do not have a role of their own.

Differences are arguably the greatest philosophical concept of the twentieth century’s production “[...] of a new ontology, a new metaphysics whose implications ripple through all other forms of philosophy and through other modes of thought.” (Szopa 2019, 103). Relational ontology requires a radical rethinking of philosophy that includes sexuate difference. Katarzyna Szopa says: “For Irigaray, nature itself is sexed, made up of (at least) two types of being, two forms of incarnation, two types

of sexuality and morphology, two types of activity and interpretation” (Szopa 2019, 104). Sexuate difference raises questions of our history and philosophy. It raises the question of our being and of *what kind of knowledge is needed* in a strange corrupt world.

4. The logic of the same, its effects, and the way out of it

4.1 Critique of a hegemony history of ideas

Since ancient times, the hegemony of the one has underpinned a long-standing dualism between the sexes, male and female, that still dominates our time. The priority of the mind, the logos, the male-speaking subject, the relegation of the woman, embodiment, and “our nature of being two” upholds a cold logic of the same that is seen from the male perspective. Throughout history, the male and the female have been positioned against each other as two entities, and even as enemies, leading to prejudices, domination, exclusion, and sexual abuse. This implies a total ignorance of the other and our relationships — a prioritization of the self-enclosed, rational subject and of one master narrative. Due to this lack of in-between phenomenology and inter-affectivity, we forget how we assist each other on an ethical level and in the formation of subjectivity. Thus, sexuate difference is converted into opposite polarities that have prevented two subjects from approaching each other in reciprocal nearness (STF.85). All this has arrested our thinking, leading to loneliness and confusion.

The foundation of dualism consists in prioritizing the hegemony of the one based on phallogocentrism.⁴² In this symbolic economy, woman’s difference can only be represented as a defective variation of the same (TS.68-86). Yet, the role of women is to uphold the centrality of men, supporting their representation and their belief system. Thus, the woman is deprived of a bodily referent and positioned as a mirror to the male, reflecting back to him, thereby demonstrating the truth of his centrality as the universal and his own image of the same. In this neutral valuation of upholding meaning, the female body is a *mirror image* of the male, of the supposedly neutral, universal, or univocal subject. Irigaray calls this mirroring or

⁴² Phallogocentrism is a term coined by Jacques Derrida and refers to the idea that the phallus is the signifier of cognition and the foundation of patriarchy. The term is put forth as a critique of the human sciences in general that privilege one centre of meaning in the history of the humanities (*Writing and Difference*, 1978). Phallogocentric thinking functions as a logic of presence within discourse in which the phallus functions as the ultimate signifier. Logocentrism refers to the view that Western philosophy regards words and language as a fundamental expression or representation of external reality.

specular operation of female erasure “mimesis imposed” (TS.84), which is imposed femininity, a term indicating that a woman is forced to play a role instead of speaking *as* a woman and for herself.

In a close rereading of Freud’s psychoanalysis, as well as of other philosophical texts, Irigaray discusses how the woman and embodiment have been excluded from history and repressed in history and within the sciences.⁴³ The feminine has since ancient times been described as a deficiency, an atrophy, and a lack with regard to the sex that has the monopoly on value: the male sex (TS.69). Hence the woman never appears fully human as a subject or an agent in her own right but is always thought of in relation to the male. Aristotle sometimes implies that the woman is deformed or even formless (S.167). Further, Freud’s psychoanalysis and especially his myth about Oedipus continues to regard the female in masculine terms, bringing to the fore that the female is defined as a disadvantaged man, lacking the privileged signifier, the phallus (Freud 1933; Whitford 1991). The male subject becomes in that way the main frame of reference in the production of meaning, or, as Irigaray puts it, phallogocentrism is a name for the male-dominant economy of sexuate beings in which males are the speaking beings and women are the objects, targets, and stakes of a masculine discourse (S.13).

The over-emphasis on reason as a main criterium for cognition, presented as absolute knowledge, has formed the hierarchical structure of body-mind dualism that has permeated our thinking. Dualism upholds the hegemony of the one that can be traced back to Plato and the true Forms. Moreover, philosophy after Plato has “[...] lost touch with the other through its priority of a language of monologue” (Söderbäck 2020, 151). The idea of the neuter generic subject is based on a dream of individualism and a dream of one language that can master knowledge and that only reinforces the power of language over the body. There is no meta-narrative for all of us (TS.101); as we are different and not the same, we have different stories to tell. Repeating and imitating the same narrative is a false transcendence, an illusion imposed upon us. Besides, the neuter has a sex; it belongs to the male.

The idea of neutrality can be traced back to the Enlightenment in the 17th and

⁴³ Irigaray’s struggle with Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis in the beginning of her philosophical career made her uncover something important that has been going on in Western culture for decades, which is neutrality or absolute knowledge in the production of meaning that is mainly based on the centrality of the logos, of the male perspective and of vision (with respect to the visibility of the sexual organs).

18th centuries, where values of individualism and reason were based on the idea of a sovereign identity, which is defined as having the full right and power of a governing body over itself without any interference from outside sources, such as from the other or other bodies. Thus, the philosophical logos and sameness repress what one really experiences that could give us clarity of things. Such a reduction minimizes the possibility for a phenomenology of the in-between to unfold that allows transcendence and cultivation of differences whereby we give birth to one another. It also minimizes our “freedom to make sense” that is inspired by embodied thinking, which is thinking into and with the bodily situation.⁴⁴ The possibility of a new horizon is thus closed off, which means that knowledge in science and philosophy depends on the myth of the generic abstract idea of the same. Irigaray says: “The teleologically constructive project it takes on is always also a project of diversion, deflection, reduction of the other in the Same” (TS.74). She continues this thought elsewhere:

Our culture is based on a sharing of the same between those who have become the same [...] In order for those who become alike not to be in conflict, a vertical authority, which gathers and governs them, is necessary. A truth or a power, exercised or passed on by a master, a chief, a leader, a God the Father, must organize from on high these people who are all the same, but whom nothing really unites. (IBSW.9-10)

The economy of the same is based on an illusionary certainty of knowledge that threatens humanity and prevents us from being in lateral relation with others that is life-giving. The consequence is the long-standing essentialism opposing the two sexes, male and female, in a vertical authority that upholds the hegemony of the one in the history of ideas. The history of ideas is based on the insight of the mind, outside the material and physical world.

⁴⁴ The notion of “freedom to make sense” is inspired by critical thinking. This thinking is characterized by engaging with experience in an attempt to formulate complex structures toward clarity in thinking. This kind of freedom plays out in conditions that allow us to sense the problems, dilemmas, and questions that arise from actual experience. This is not a trivial capacity. It needs training, support, and cultivation. See Schoeller, “Towards a concept of “freedom to make sense”” (2023).

4.2 The critique towards Irigaray is infused with essentialist thinking

The longstanding critique towards Irigaray as an essentialist is a way of thinking that is very much criticized by Irigaray herself and which is part of her overall critique of the vertical hierarchy of the one and sameness in thinking. At the beginning of her career, she was accused by her critics of being an essentialist, which is a rather hasty interpretation.⁴⁵ These accusations were partly due to an inbuilt fear of falling back into essentialism, to the old definition of the woman (Whitford 1991a, 9-27). This fear is thus infused with essentialist thinking. Essentialism implies a pre-given meaning of subjectivity, ordered in a vertical hierarchy, the female being inferior to the male-speaking subject. Essentialism is a belief in a true essence that is unchanging and constitutive of a given person or a thing.⁴⁶ This implies that the essence of humans has a set of characteristics that are given and which make them what they are.

Sexuate differences have been converted to metaphysics of binaries where the essence of the subject is already defined. While men were associated with positive characteristics as the intellectual and the rational speaking subject, representing a model for the ideal of the human being, women were regarded as oppositional or as a negation to the positive terms, often associated with nature, the passive body, and its illogical feelings. The woman is not regarded as a full subject but is rather objectified and doomed to inferiority and to being a lesser man, compelled to imitate the ideal of the woman that the male has made for her.

These essential characteristics of the sexes are arranged in dualistic pairs: male-female, "I"-the other, subject-non-subject, logos-feelings, positive-negative, inside-outside, presence-absence, active-passive, and culture-nature. The male-female paradigm is systematically arranged in dualistic pairs of fixed bodies, upholding the gap between body and mind, nature and culture, with the consequences

⁴⁵ She was, among other things, accused by feminist critics within philosophy and literature of not being political enough, of upholding heterosexuality, of anticipating femininity, and of being a biological essentialist, mainly because she was said to define woman based on her biology (Whitford 1991a).

⁴⁶ The implication is that objects or every entity have a set of traits or innate qualities that are necessary to their identity. Essentialism is based on the idea that we are "naturally" born as the person we are. The doctrine is that essence is prior to existence, which means that the task of science and philosophy is to discover and express these characteristics or set of attributes that are already given.

that the lived body and touch are strongly devaluated (TS.68-86). In short, the idea of essentialism splits the two sexes apart into two poles of opposites that prevent them from meeting in real interconnectivity and reciprocal ethical engagement. Instead, the divide between the sexes has formed the hierarchy of superiority-inferiority, dominance-subordination, and master-slave that has characterized the production of meaning in a neuter economy in the Western tradition. Hence, the woman is absent in the discourse and forced to imitate the fixed univocal subject.

Irigaray's explicit rejection of the various charges of essentialism occurs in "Veiled Lips", a section of *Marine Lover* where she claims that the woman has no essence. The woman, she argues, "[...] does not set herself up as *one*, as a (single) female unit. She is not closed up or around one single truth or essence. The essence of a truth remains foreign to her" (ML.86). Irigaray repeatedly claims that there is no universal language on how to speak the woman; she speaks herself as a woman but not in a meta-language (TS.144; JLI). The woman cannot be described once and for all, reduced to an idea or an object; thus, she is already relational in herself (ML.86).

Essentialism, as an objective standard of representation, only degrades our use of sensory attention and our capacity to think for ourselves. We lose sight of the other as the other, and we fail ourselves as sexuate beings (TS.205). This order of essentialism implies that our utterances are masked by the neuter economy that prevents us from moving inward and outward in self-reflection with the other(s). The negative part of subjectivity, the differences of the other that we can never fully know, has moreover been delegated to the woman, which implies that her subjectivity is endlessly deferred in the single discourse of the one, in a master narrative that suppresses her difference and her specificity (as the ability to give birth, etc.).

When thinking about our living as sexuate beings at this very moment, we realize that the square paradigm of binaries between the sexes, male and female, *does not make sense*. When I am for instance situated inside the house, doing philosophy, struggling with words, and my partner is outside, nourishing the garden and his inner self, we are not to be understood as oppositions of what it means to be active-passive, inside-outside, present-absent, culture-nature. As two different bodies, we are not oppositional as "either-or" but differently *situated* in the world, extending differently toward the world based on different longings and interests. The particular inter-affection with the world is individual, specific, and the most natural for us, and

should compel us to share our experiences in a reciprocal intersubjectivity that allows us to happen and come to be.

Even though we implicitly know that this scheme of oppositions and the strict mind-body divide is unreasonable, it still impacts our thinking and belief systems. The priority of logos and the position of the male subject has led to the exclusion of the woman in the philosophical discourse. This, according to Irigaray, implies that the woman is *not* counted as a second sex, as termed by Simone de Beauvoir, but as *none* (TS.26). The feminine occurs only within models and laws devised by male subject, which implies that there are “not really two sexes, but only one” (TS.86). To refer to de Beauvoir’s famous quote, “one is not born, but rather becomes a woman” implies that “becoming a woman” is determined by a society made by men where women are seen as secondary to men. For Irigaray, the question is *not* centred on whether one is born a woman or whether one is made a woman; the question is how we cultivate our becoming in a culture that respects differences and the potential of the unknown — the mystery that the other brings to all encounters and all knowledge. Which implies that we relate in differences and not to the male, the neuter. As transcendental beings, we interact and undergo changes in relation to the different other, and we are imbrications of the other that we cannot overcome.

Inherently, and within the metaphysics of the same, the female has difficulties in presenting herself, as she is positioned outside discourse, and mapped into “silent femaleness” (TS.68-86). As there is only one narrative and remaining on the negative side or outside the discourse, it is difficult for her to be in the position of opposing; she is always enforced to say that woman is *not* (Whitford 1991a, 135-36). Moreover, it is difficult for her (and for other marginal voices) to transcend when kept in an inferior position and shut up in immanence — which makes it difficult for her to relate to herself.

Thus, the woman becomes an *indifferent* one in the sense of being non-different because she has no right to self-differentiate but must accept the masculine order of knowledge — an order of sexuate *indifference* (TS.74, 85 & 220-21). The implication is that we have lost the enactive account of the in-between space of touching-being touched as the precondition for subjectivity and growth. As the woman discovers: “You’re indifferent, insignificant little receptacle, subject to their demands alone” (TS.208). The woman has been thought of in terms of men and serves here as the male’s unacknowledged support, appearing as the other or counted

as none, even though her sexuality is, according to Irigaray, plural or at least double (TS.26-28).

Within sameness in thinking, according to Irigaray, we share “[...] the same impossibility of making connections” (TS.205). Besides, the meaning does not belong to one group or one kind of language. Thus, being on the wrong side of the discourse is an illusion that serves to uphold the hegemony of the one and the subordination of the other as the other (TS). The real supporter of my becoming is not the generic subject but the *real other*.

Due to the misinterpretation of the real other and to disregarding the absolute inherent in us that takes the form of two, Irigaray’s concept of sexuate difference has been reduced to gender dualism. This missing link is our natural forces of embodiment based on the aspiration after the different other.⁴⁷ As Irigaray points out: “Despite the stir it provokes, the question of sexual difference has not yet satisfactorily been treated at the scientific level. When research is done on the distinctive traits of each sex or each gender, it gives rise to comparisons, oppositions, or measurements” (LIKW.77).

When we save the difference from the other, we save the quality for ourselves in a life-giving way that supports my subjectivity in respect for the other. At all times the task of sexuate difference is to build a culture of two that is meaningful based on our nature of being two (STF; CON.75-76). How is it possible to respect the other as the other? The answer would be that one must admit and recognize one’s own limited self in the becoming of oneself. Recognition of sexuate difference is what can do justice to all sexes and what overrides essentialism and the neuter.

Sexuate difference is not a category of unified structure based on the opposition of two static entities. Rather, Irigaray’s concept takes its departure from the hierarchical dualism of the sexes in an attempt to transform the hierarchy into lateral intersubjectivity.

⁴⁷ For instance, in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler misunderstands Irigaray’s concept of sexuate difference and reduces it to repressive forces of heterosexuality, which is an unfair and hasty interpretation. She accuses her of privileging the difference between man and woman over all other types of difference, and she accuses her of helping the oppressor. Butler misses the ontological and embodied critical status of her concept, the ontology of the other, and the negative. See further, Grosz 2011, 106-108.

Many of Irigaray's critics have defended her work from the charges of essentialism by clarifying that the term *sexuate difference* can neither be reduced to biological difference nor fixed essence; rather it should be labelled fundamental as an ontological concept of the body "being in the world" as two (Fuss 1989; Schor and Weed 1994; Stone 2006, 95; Grosz 2011). Besides, the metaphysical aspect of *sexuate difference* is linked to our life forces and implies that bodies are interactional and in interplay with culture. Further, the enactive account of perception and the phenomenology of the body debunks the idea of essence that is static, a-historical, and unchangeable in accordance with the neuter economy.

How is it possible to transcend and bloom as a generic subject? How is it possible for the woman and other marginal voices to fly into language and bloom when their wings and their desire are cut off? To bridge between nature and culture and as an individual, we need *our* language. How could there be one language for all? Language is not isolated within an ivory tower; it comes from the singular body, and no one speaks the same or senses in the same way. Thus, the dream of one language or a meta-language for all of us is an illusion, a fake (TS.144). The human being is not an abstract being, made by logos — but made by flesh, desire, and interaction between two. As argued by Irigaray and Thomas Nagel, an abstract being only exists in thought in a view from nowhere (SNN; Nagel 1986). There is no master narrative converted into a neutral one, regardless of lived experience. Furthermore, the male subject has interpreted the world so how can we say that speech is neutral? All this implies the necessity of letting go of contemporary values and of the ideas of individualism that only reinforce binaries and the hegemony of the one.

Contemporary critique of Irigaray's work does not focus on purported essentialism but rather, as Halsema and other critics point out, on the privileges of *sexuate differences* over other differences, such as race and class (Halsema 2008, 82). However, based on the irreducible other and when we understand the quality of the negative, Irigaray's work "[...] would entail at once recognition of self-limitation on the basis of gender, skin color, age, physical health, and other differences, *and* respect for the other as the other" (Halsema 2008, 83). The aim is not to privilege one form for *sexuate structuration* but rather to free the woman from her long-lasting inferior position that flows from essentialism. *Sexuate difference* serves to improve women's situation and to turn the attention to the nature of our relationship in general. Moreover, it is the vertical hierarchy based on the conceptual gesture of the

one (the male) that needs to be debunked. As argued by Rawlinson: “This gesture authorizes all the hegemonies of gender, colonialism, and race” (Rawlinson 2023, 45). The recognition of our self-limitation and the importance of the other is part of my transcendence and becoming that applies to all human beings in an open and never-ending process.

Differences can neither be reduced to essentialism nor to constructionism, which means that sexuate difference is not simply a product of given social structures (constructionism) nor an expression of unchangeable entities (essentialism). The debate on essentialism versus constructionism is, according to Diana Fuss, “[...] polarized around the issue of the relation between the social and the natural” (Fuss 1989, 3). Rather, sexuate difference is the unpredictable becoming of sexed forces as they *emerge* in each body in a vital interplay with the other and with culture. Considering the enactive account of perception and based on our double subjectivity, sexuate difference *disturbs the idea of essence*. I am interactive and not oppositional. Whom should I be oppositional to? The same, the neuter? The sexuate being is more than a construction of language, and it is constantly affected by the irreducible other in a process that is undecidable.

The debate about essentialism versus constructionism has grown out of the hegemony of the one, and the idea of the neuter that has ignored sexuate difference and our nature of being two, the interval. The question of essentialism versus constructionism is not a real problem but rather an irrelevant one. The real problem is how to think embodied and be *responsible* as a *responding and speaking* sexuate being based on a lived order that has reference to lived experience. In Irigaray’s philosophy, the main question is how we can *enter into a culture of two subjects* that is non-possessive without reducing the other, respecting the interval. How do we become as sexuate beings? How does the subject take on meaning? Irigaray insists that we must think beyond the fabricated ideas of the same based on “scientific intuition” that is outside our living. Scientific intuition presents absolute knowledge or the universal and thereby excludes us from the living world. It is always a matter of:

- Positing *a* world in front of the self, constituting a world *in front of the self*.

- Imposing *a model* on the universe so as to take possession of it, an abstract, invisible, intangible model that is *thrown over* the universe like an encasing garment. Which amounts to clothing the universe in one's own identity. One's own blindness, perhaps? (ESD.121)

This kind of intuition is a fabricated and disembodied form of universality, leaving out the real relation we have to things and the other. The observer can never cut themselves from the world. Challenging this model of the universality of the one requires the cultivation of a real relationality between two, of the interval. We need to direct our attention to the temporality of touch, desire, and the sensitive life that unveils this falsity of meaning that is disembodied and lifeless and only leads to narcissistic auto-production, or to imitation that separates us from nature.

Despite what our past metaphysics has taught us, our nature is not separated from culture. Nature functions towards “the shaping” of a culture which we inhabit ourselves. There is no clear cut between sex and gender, nature and culture in Irigaray's philosophy. The absence of a clear cut in the sex/gender distinction, in Jones's words,

[...] reflects a deep commitment to undoing the traditional oppositions between mind and body, nature and culture, form and matter, in ways that are central to Irigaray's project. Instead of the sex/gender distinction then, we need to sensitize ourselves to the notion of ‘sexuate difference’ which is neither grounded in nature nor imposed by culture, but articulates both nature and culture, and the relations between them. (Jones 2011, 6)

With the concept of sexuate difference, Irigaray departs from essentialisms of the sexes towards a richer understanding of what it means to be a sex-situated, interactive, relational, and dependent being. The aim of her concept is to break down dualism and the very opposition that relies on a fixed essence and a fixed structure in language as presented in the metaphysics of oneness — that only increases the gap between me and others and inflames prejudices and fear among us.

4.3 The elaboration of the basic forms of relating to self and others is part of Irigaray's critical oeuvre

The aim of this sub-chapter is to demonstrate how Irigaray uses inter-affection to think outside of traditional discourse to undo the polarization of the sexes and debunk the idea of the self-producing subject. The ethical and fluid "in-between space" is a counteract to the illusionary self-reliant subject. Hence, her relational ontology of sexuante difference and ethics work together.

When caught up in a cold logic of the same and mental reduplications, we are detached from the body. We become frozen or fixed, and almost like in a puppet theater, we are not able to move or think without help from a constructor, a third person. In the fairytale by H.C. Andersen, "The Emperor's New Clothes," all people are supposed to sense "the same" (the beautiful clothes of the emperor that were never sewn). The adults are cut off from their sensory perception, not able to sense the world on their premises, saying what they really sense and mean. When praising and admiring the emperor's new clothes, their speech is false and imitated, produced from the view of nowhere. Only a little boy who has not yet learned the proper order of "speaking" is honest and authentic in his immediate response and he dares say what he really senses: that the emperor has no clothes on and that he is naked. Thus, he makes sense of the strange ambiguous situation whereby he increases personal and situational awareness.

When stuck in dualistic and hierarchical thinking, we not only become strangers to ourselves, but we also become irresponsible as thinking beings and unfaithful to nature. This increases the possibility of being betrayed, manipulated or gaslighted by others. Being responsible is part of being aware of how everything touches. Irigaray says: "Not to learn to speak an already existing language and to find in it the means for being sheltered, but to succeed in transforming what happens, from within or from without, into saying" (WOL.64). This requires that we listen to how we are touched and hold on to the aspiration, which is also the freedom to *make sense* (Schoeller 2023). To make sense we must put our own lived experience into perspective, just like the child does in the fairytale, by saying what we mean. It concerns making the *birth of sense* and being engaged in an authentic way, which is the premise of the becoming of ourselves through which the world becomes available (Lehtinen 2014,17).

We are never totally detached from our body, or totally lost in men's world (forever), the neuter, which means that we are *not* cut off from the in-between space as the most fundamental of our living experience. We are after all concrete living thinking beings and not abstract fabricated ones. As very well illustrated in the text "When Our Lips Speak Together", woman simply feels from her perspective that she *is* different and not the same (TS.220). She is double, fluid, and relational from the very beginning — in how she touches herself and is touched back in dynamic inter-affection (outside the subject-object dichotomy).

In the lips-text and in a liberating way, Irigaray critically and creatively puts self-affection and inter-affection against the self-producing subject, the neuter. The female body knows that the privileging of an objective standard of meaning and mental mastery is fake — that the idea of the passive image of the female body is a bad joke. She argues:

So they think we're indifferent. Doesn't that make you laugh? At least for the moment, here and now? *We are indifferent?* (If you keep on laughing that way, we'll never be able to talk to each other. We'll remain absorbed in their words, violated by them. So let's try to take back some part of our mouth to speak with). [...] The unity, the truth, the property of words comes from their lack of lips, their forgetting of lips. (TS.208)

Even though women have been thought of as lacking in relation to men throughout history, Irigaray demonstrates that she is not lacking but rich in *relational energy*. Disposed with the two lips, the woman differentiates in vital relationality and endless self-touching with the other in herself — continuously affected by herself and within herself whereby she develops and comes to be.

Maybe the man (in an economy of the same) has forgotten his body, his touch, and the importance of relating to the other when philosophizing. Men's sciences have not only excluded women from philosophy, but they have also forgotten to connect to their bodies and the sensitive touch in general. The caring interaction of the female lips counteracts the illusionary self-constituting autonomy. Their continuous inter-affection in the invisible fluid space of the in-between and endless touching does not stand the test of the same or the neuter.

With the text, Irigaray explains not only the specificity of the woman but also that the enactive matter matters. She further demonstrates that the embodied

morphological lips are more disposed to self-affection and non-hierarchical interaction than men, which is natural for them, and that cannot be divided into active-passive, subject-object (IBSW.154-58). Being two, the lips emerge without opposition in fluid touching based on desire for the other and for life, which implies many voices and perspectives. Irigaray says:

Why only one song, one speech, one text at a time? [...] Between us the house has no walls, the clearing no enclosure, language no circularity. When you kiss me, the world grows so large that the horizon itself disappears. (TS. 209-210)

The embodied speaking lips know how to hold on to the aspiration and the heartfelt affect, exploring, enjoying life, still awakening their desire, surprisingly moving inward and outward in constant inter-reflection with the other and the world. The lips become their wings, their hope, and their certainty that carries them forward. Most importantly, the interval is kept open — the space for self-structuring and embracing the other without a hierarchy that overrides a “mimesis imposed” and the repetition of the same.

Just like the embodied female lips, we must think and work together and recognize that we are body and soul for each other. An underlying thought in Irigaray’s philosophy is that two longings must learn to approach each other in a dialectic with one another without reducing themselves to an object or a word — something that sexuate difference can grant us thanks to its way of determining our subjectivity (STF.40).

Based on her relational ontology, Irigaray elaborates a *radical shift* in thinking about the subject that neither relies upon categorical, discursive norms nor on natural forces only, but on differences that are relational, open, and in process. Reconnecting to the lived body and one’s own narrative self as a responsible user of language is part of her project of cultivating sexuate differences. For that purpose, the attempt is to intertwine the body with the language, the pre-discursive with the discursive, bridging the gap between private and public life, thereby contributing to a more human world (TNHB). Furthermore, Irigaray encourages us to use language pragmatically and for ourselves, to express ourselves in a way that is self-structuring and self-organizing instead of letting the word tell us (TBB.44).

Our being is forever marked by our meeting with the other that is not only unpredictable and in process but is also filled with an air that is different from the elemental, living air (Mortensen 2002, 90). It is an air of nourishing touch between us that is carefully enacted and felt. Breath refers to the transcendental and ethical space between us; breath animates our being and growth and allows us to become spiritualized in a living movement that cannot happen without the other (Jones 2011, 128). Our unavoidable relationship is the key to understanding how Irigaray's ontology and ethics function together, which requires that we relate to one another differently than expected by given norms of sameness.

Irigaray's concept of sexuate difference is a radical tool to undo the polarization of the sexes. It is radically thought through and is an affirmation of the *irreducible other* — of the one who is sexually other than me, the one who offers me a world other than the one I occupy — as Elizabeth Grosz and Mary Rawlinson have especially emphasized in their work. Sexuate difference is a critical term that enables us to undo the polarization between the sexes and solve the problem of the same, transforming the cold logic of vertical hierarchy as presented in mono-sexism into a lateral intersubjectivity, given that we keep the interval open toward a creative “we” and a more friendly culture. The irreducible other is an affirmation of the vital dialectic and the transcendental felt meaning between the two. As Rawlinson writes:

After Irigaray philosophy will never be the same again. After Irigaray's demonstration of the irreducibility of sexual difference, it is no longer possible in philosophy to operate under the hegemony of the One, the fiction of a generic subject, or the logic of the same. For centuries philosophers sought to install Man as the figure of the human, but this sleight of hand can no longer be sustained. Philosophers can no longer proceed as if the difference of sexual difference makes no difference. (Rawlinson 2013, 65)

4.4 Debunking dualism does not just imply changing concepts but a shift in *how we think*

Certainly, it is not easy to tear down the polarization of the sexes or the rigid structures of dualism, to jam the discursive power or simply to replace the idea of

the neuter economy with a relational ontology. What is needed is to speak *outside* of the discursive machinery, beyond the solidity of the same, or of the one, and restore what has been left out in the history of philosophy. Debunking dualism does not simply mean changing concepts; it requires a total change in *how* we think, realizing *how* our interactions take on meaning.

Firstly, it is relevant to mention that erasing the dualism between the two sexes, male and female, does not mean erasing differences, making woman equal to man, being the same as man, or making the woman better than man (TTD.xiv). Regarding women, respecting differences requires that we respect embodied specificity – and not *only* civil rights. As Irigaray puts it: “There are other women’s rights that must be gained or enforced concerning identity, work, love (especially sexual), relationship to children and so on” (TTD.xiv). Thus, the first step is to respect the generative aspect of sexuate difference — that we are made by two, we are *different*, and we assist each other in becoming a subject. The implication is that instead of putting forth demands “of being” like men, as men have done based on the logic of the same, we must preserve our specificity and our differences (JLI.341). The main flaw is that women have been shaped into a masculine subject and into masculine values, which means that their specificity and their work, such as raising children and caring for others, are not considered as productive or creative.

Thus, to change the idea of essence and hierarchy, it is crucial to keep the discussion of equality within the zone of experiential thinking, be it in private life or not. Thus, equality refers to our ability to respond as sexuate affective beings (IBSW). Most of all, Irigaray thinks equality through sexuate differences, that we are *different* and not oppositional, which also means abolishing the right and the privilege of one sex over the other. She insists that equality can only happen when respecting differences and making changes in the way we speak based on the doubleness of our being (TTD).

Debunking dualism must take place through the felt enactive body — the way we act as *responding* beings (Gendlin 1997). Through our responsive order and our ongoing interaction and inter-affection, the task is to find the means to replace neutrality with the first-person perspective and figure out what *we* experience here and now and link it to our reasoning, which Irigaray does with her affective turn, especially in her later writings.

To cultivate humanity, we are forced to deal with the power of dualism,

finding ways to change our habits of valorizing a conceptual male perspective. We can explore and discover what is left out in the history of philosophy, and, at the same time, we can discover the repressed *hidden in ourselves* to figure out the missing link in the power of the discourse and what serves as ground for the operational discourse. To make a shift in thinking, we need to figure out *how* we think and *how* our interaction takes on meaning. Thus, the meaning arises from the body situation that is felt and lived. What is it we *want* to say?

It is not an easy task to step out of phallogocentrism by simply opposing the hierarchy. It takes time to debunk ideas that have been fostered in our minds, and this can only happen through cultivation of our embodied thinking self which requires that we open the space of the in-between. It also takes time to connect to oneself as an embodied thinking being and investigate what one really feels and means. The task of “making connection” needs to be practiced (Gendlin 2007; 1962; 1997; Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir 2019; Schoeller 2021). Such a practice takes time and will not be discussed in detail here, but the intention is to elaborate how, when learning to think as embodied and connecting to our thinking self and to affect, it would make our individual agency much richer and more immediate and authentic.

As affective-responding beings, we must learn to pay attention to the subtle invisible world between us, the interval, and give it a place within language. The power of our responsiveness is a resistance to the power of discourse that has formed the long-standing essentialism in our culture. The responsive order requires that we think within a lived precision that has reference to lived experience. This implies that we must look inside and listen carefully to what emerges in us and between us — which means turning the attention to how we function as relational beings. If we do not want to proceed towards an even worse nihilism, implying loneliness, solitude, and disconnectedness, we must investigate what energizes our thoughts.

4.5 Mimicry as a subversive reading and writing style

Mimicry, as noted by Irigaray, is a more deliberate and provocative way of opposing dualism in culture (TS.76-78). The mimicking style is a subversive reading and writing style that functions as a radical resistance to given principles of the same. With her use of the mimicking style, Irigaray opposes the “mimesis imposed” and

makes a rift in dualistic structures. In the mimicking process, it is possible to interpose fresh meaning that goes against the false transcendence that excludes the other, as well as the false universality based on the hegemony of the one.

Mimesis is a Greek word and means imitation in the sense of re-presentation of nature — of what really exists in the world of ideas (beyond the physical world). Irigaray's translation of it implies repeating and reproducing the economy of the same. This also implies that one is a copy or imitation, constantly trying to fit with an idea or trying to be "someone" one is not.⁴⁸ Irigaray's mimicry is subversive in the sense that she does not read or interpret the intentionality of the linear written/spoken word. Instead, she reads what is hidden between the lines to explore what *is postponed* in the discourse. Thus, she traces what is left out in the discourse with the aim to shed light on the hidden and the repressed at the discursive level. Finding this hidden repressed makes us more aware of how the words take on meaning, and it becomes easier for us to debunk ideas that are sterile and repressive. The hidden and the repressed are linked to the exclusion of our living process.

Irigaray's use of mimicry is a process of repeating playfully the stereotypical views of women to call the views themselves into question and reduce them to such a degree that a new perspective and meaning can emerge. The mimicking operation consists in repeating unfaithfully these views and in such a degree that they must be discarded. Irigaray's purpose in deploying mimicry is to problematize masculine neutral thinking and debunk its structure to make space for fresh voices. As Irigaray asserts:

There is, an initial phase, perhaps only one "path," the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it [...]. To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. (TS.76)

⁴⁸ The philosophical history of the concept of mimesis is long, ranging from Plato's idea of art as mimesis (imitation of reality) to Nietzsche's idea of woman as a creative actor (*Gay Science* aph. 361), to more modern concept of mimesis, specially Adorno's thought of mimesis as the artistic capability to express something that undermines repressive structures (Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 1979; Benjamin, "On the Mimetic faculty" 1999). Irigaray's idea of mimesis also stands in this tradition of mimesis as a creative, liberating capacity based on the expressing self, which is an attempt to overcome the hierarchy and structuration of sameness in Western culture.

The Slut-walk is an example of mimicry which consists of deliberately and playfully repeating slut-blaming and slut-shaming, making fun of it to the degree that it loses its meaning.⁴⁹ The Slut-walk is a feminist and political movement, often performed in a protest march, calling for an end to rape culture, including victim blaming and slut-shaming of assault victims. If women's bodies are regarded as objects or as sluts, women should speak from that position in a playful way that suggests that this perspective stems from a masculine economy that excludes women. Mimicry is a way of entering the discourse, and it consists of repeating the negative view (without reducing women to that view), and making fun of it such that the view itself must be discarded. Mimicry is successful when the negative perspective appears to be false, or nothing more than a fabrication or an illusion. Thus, it is always possible to interpose fresh perspectives and new voices.

Irigaray's mimicry is a productive and creative one with its source in provocation, resistance and change, whereas Plato's mimicry is reproductive and repetitive with its source in the ideas, that are based on the insight of mind (Lehtinen 2014, 24-27). For Irigaray, the reproductive mimicry of Plato is always "[...] already caught up in the process of imitation, specularization, adequation and reproduction" (TS.131). The outcome of reproductive mimicry is a woman's essence or an ideal of a woman seen from a male perspective, external to her humanity as a woman. This implies that she cannot partake in the meaning-making directly but must imitate and repeat the given ideal.

The idea of Irigaray's mimicry is linked to Nietzsche's idea of the woman as a creative and dangerous actor (*Gay Science* aph. 361; Thorgeirsdóttir 1996). For Nietzsche, the acting woman is a compromise of unfulfilled longings; she creates a space for herself and her repressed subjectivity. As the woman grows more and more distant from herself, she becomes an unpredictable actor and even a dangerous one (Thorgeirsdottir 1996). Thus, she is forced to play a role, assume a mask, and put on an appearance, but in this playful way of acting, imitating, and performing, there is a hope of something fresh to come that could change the economy of the same.

Irigaray draws on Nietzsche's concept of the acting woman and uses it as a platform to uncover the dualistic discourse that undermines feminine voices,

⁴⁹ SlutWalk is an international movement. The rallies began in 2011 in Toronto, after a Toronto Police officer suggested that women should avoid dressing like sluts. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/SlutWalk>)

implying that women “know” how to utilize their suppressed energy and seek a way out of their repressed situation by playing a role. Thus, repression cannot last forever. The implication is: What happens when the same thing, story or role is played over and over again, that doesn’t correspond to what we really experience?

With Irigaray’s notion of creative and productive mimicry, the aim is to open the possibility of a *feminine style* that is lived and really experienced. Thus, instead of putting forth an alternative theory that opposes the same, Irigaray is speaking and thinking outside of traditional discourses, exploring the implicit meaning that is underlying the explicitly formulated idea — whereby she creates room for a fresh interpretation and movement in thinking. She creates a place for the woman to “speak as a woman”, opening a path for her to think critically and creatively for herself.

4.6 The mimicking counter-voice to Plato’s allegory of the cave

In an insightful and dialectical rereading of Plato’s allegory of the cave, Irigaray locates a counter-voice that emerges in her reading. For her, the womb-like cave is the place that represents the forgotten material world (Jones 2011, 38-94). As displayed in her text “Plato’s Hysteria”, she traces in a mimicking way the forgotten body and the forgotten touch in Western metaphysics, showing how the origin of things is the *maternal touch*, and not the Ideas or the insight into things (S.243-364). Irigaray traces how the mother — and all women through her — has been repressed and silenced in the discourse. Plato slyly devalues the uterus by recasting it as a dead cave (S.355) and a dark hole (S.340). By re-articulating the allegory, elaborating the body and not the mind, she associates the cave with the womb, the place of birth, and the beginning of life that has been repressed in the history of metaphysics (S.243).

Let us look at Plato’s allegory of the cave, which is one of the most influential passages in *The Republic*. In the words of Eyer,

It vividly illustrates the concept of Idealism as it was taught in the Platonic Academy, and provides a metaphor that philosophers have used for millennia to help us overcome superficiality and materialism. In this dialogue, Socrates (the main speaker) explains to Plato’s brother, Glaucon, that we all resemble prisoners who are chained deep within a cave, who do not yet realize that

there is more to reality than the shadows they see appear on the wall (Eyer 2009).

As already articulated, the male stands for logos, and his insight is seen as being familiar with God, the truth, and the Platonic Forms, whereas the female body represents the devalued earthly nature.

The prisoners inside the cave have never experienced anything beyond the shadows, but on their way out of the cave, they discover that the shadows are merely imitations of things as they really are. The projected images on the wall inside the cave (formed by the shadows created by the fire) are projected copies of the real and thus imperfect and unreliable representations of the truth. Plato uses these projected images as a metaphor for the illusionary nature of worldly things that keep man from contemplating true Forms or the envisioned Ideal (Diamond 1989, 63). Thus, the shadow world inside the dark cave represents the everyday world of the human senses, whereas the world outside stands for the light, and the logos, the idea, as unchanging Archetypes.

The cave allegory suggests that we must leave the dark cave, the shadow world, and the unreal world and emerge into the light to reach (and see) the real truth and the sun. The emphasis is on the differences between the darkness inside the cave (the shadow world) and the enlightened world outside. These opposites constitute the dualistic pairs of inside-outside, body-logos, illusion-truth, appearance-reality, and (imperfect) copy-original. This indicates, moreover, a process from the worse to the better (S.247). Thus, the cave metaphor posits two worlds that exist simultaneously, one (the maternal material) repressed by the same (patriarchal system of the one, the logos) whereby the body and the mother — and all female subjects with her — are devaluated or silenced (Geerts 2010-11; Jones 2011, 30-66).

In short, the allegory is a prioritization of mind, and it discusses leaving our embodiment and the sensible world which marks the start of dualism between body and mind in Western culture. The implication is that transcendence can only be accessed by the intellect, beyond the physical world. The journey towards wisdom is the passage out of the cave and marks a total devaluation of the living, experiencing body and the twoness of our being. In her reading and re-writing of the cave allegory, and with the phenomenology of the body and the in-between in mind, Irigaray playfully works out a different perspective from the one offered by Plato,

who posits that everything has its origin in the Ideas that are ready for us to grasp by the insight of the mind, outside human experience.

In her re-interpretation, Irigaray takes us back to the cave, the body, ourselves, to the physical world and our bodily senses, and reveals the blind spot or what is missing. The origin of things is not based on the insight of *mind*. Our existence has its origin in the womb, the material maternal touch, and words and ideas derive from living bodies. Besides, the allegory posits that we transcend vertically to the idea of heaven and God, outside the experience of earthly things and beyond relationships with each other. The vertical transcendence as presented in the allegory is disembodied and portrays thought as opposed to our bodily senses. Irigaray's aim is to change this inhuman hierarchical order that exists within the history of metaphysics that leaves lived experience behind. The transcendence lies between us that is embodied and sexuate, and *not* beyond us or *outside* earthly experience. The shadowy, imperfect world inside the cave is the sensible world we must account for to become and blossom. The fire inside the cave is our life energy that energizes the body. Briefly put, the cave allegory is a manifestation of the forgotten material touch as the "true real" and the most universal that is underlying our very existence and thought.

Instead of turning away from the cave or repressing it, Irigaray directs our attention to the sensible, maternal touch, the place where life begins in birth. She draws attention to the earthly and lateral transcendence whereby she replaces the superiority of the one, or of the Father, with *the twoness* of our being, indicating that we are forever relational and dependent. The real meaning is enacted and experienced, and it requires at least two bodies. The implication is that we need *another logic to debunk the dis-logical one-sidedness* of thinking that disregards the evidence of women and others and the differences that come with it. We need another logic that refers to the becoming and blooming of subjects, a logic that is lived that connects us as subjects in the physical world.

Especially, Irigaray interprets the journey out of the cave/the womb as the way the singular being *enters the world* via the female body and comes into existence. As noted in *Speculum*, Irigaray demonstrates that the painful journey out of the cave depicts the *painful birth* of each singular being (S.279; cf. Jones 2011, 82). Most significant is the way "[...] in which the released prisoner is dragged reluctantly up the passage in a painful journey into the world" (Jones 2011, 82).

Irigaray invites us to relate to the forgotten female body, to actual pregnancy, and more generally to our relationality of being two (Jones 2011, 81). All this belongs to the non-representational in our history but still is the *condition* of our existence.

Another significant aspect of her reading of the allegory of the cave is the way the candidate in philosophy is forced to move upwards and away from the sensible world to turn towards the real world of Ideas, the sun (Jones 2011, 82-83). Thus, to start to know true reality the philosopher must cut loose from the projections of objects, i.e. the shadows on the wall of the cave – the unreliability of the senses. How can we possibly know the physical world when situated outside our living process? We become indifferent, undifferentiated, disembodied, and abstract, and thus prisoners of language and ideas. Avoiding these demands of an embodied approach to our sensitive life calls for an empirical investigation of how our mind and body work together.

Irigaray replaces the origin of the father and the logos with the maternal and sensible touch as a precondition of life and development, pointing out that the maternal touch is indeed what metaphysics depends on (Jones 2011). Thus, she mimics the idea of vertical transcendence as implied in Plato's allegory of the cave. The emphasis on the body is an effort to combine spirit and matter and debunk the metaphysics of presence as presented by the logos, thereby opening for the possibility of an ethical relationship between two.

By playing with perspective and pointing out the missing link in Plato's theory (the lived body and the twoness of being), Irigaray makes explicit in his theory the *forgotten process* in the *production of meaning*, which starts with the vital inter-affection that includes the interval of dynamic dialectic between living bodies. For Irigaray, the path to the spirit is through the vital (lateral) touch between at least two — a path from the body to the spirit, and thus rather a passage from the material touch to the intelligible idea, the words.

Plato's system, she argues, forms the beginning of Western metaphysics in philosophy and psychoanalysis, based on dualism and hierarchical thinking that *relies on* and presupposes *the forgotten materiality* and *the forgotten touch*, which is a repression of the female body and all women through her (S.247-83; Jones 2011, 80-88).⁵⁰ This flaw in the Western tradition serves to maintain the endless repetition

⁵⁰ Dualism between the sexes can be traced back to the early Western metaphysics of Aristotle, where

of the same, a polarized split between the body and the mind that upholds the hegemony of the one.

By turning the allegory upside-down, the cave becomes in her reading an *appropriation of the body and of the maternal touch* that has endlessly been postponed in the history of philosophy and psychoanalysis. For her, the allegory does not encourage us to overcome materiality. On the contrary, the allegory helps us to reveal the true nature of things that have been forgotten and repressed. The myth invites us to look closer at how we emerge as a lived body and from the body to the spirit whereby we realize that the theatrical scene in the dead cave is a fake offspring. Thus, the idea or the “true reality of things” *outside* human reality is an illusion. Rather, the true reality is our embodied sensing situation that we cannot overcome and that cannot be contained in a static theory.

The sensing being is more than a copy or an imitation of the one, of the logos or of the light that reduces all others to the economy of the same to repetition or to imitation based on an idea situated in space (heaven) outside me — a space that is always more than me/us. Moreover, within this hierarchical order of the true Forms, the uterus is not seen as an origin but has the function to serve the male as a passive receptacle and as a speculum for his ideas and truth, that first and foremost serves his love of self and the self-same (ESD.62).

Irigaray’s embodied engagement is self-reflecting, which helps her to enter the discourse as a full subject, whereby she disrupts the center of truth that upholds the meaning (the maleness, the logos, the insight). Briefly put, Irigaray shows how the “system of thought” is put together. She invites us to think of another perspective, of another horizon of the world that has reference to the woman. Hence, she evokes an image of the womb, the desire and puts the woman, and her own situated experience into perspective. By elaborating on the womb and the female morphology, she brings to light how the myth implicitly builds on the female body and our first relation to the other, the mother — “[...] that the myth borrows yet cannot fully account for” (Jones 2011, 82).

By taking lived experience into account, Irigaray points out that the meaning is not derived from God, from a place removed from our daily interactions, debates,

mind and reason had priority over the body, and to Plato’s idea of the rational mind as the basis for human cognition. This implies that we cannot believe anything we experience via the bodily senses because they can be tricked and are thus unreliable.

and valuations, or a place that leaves the self behind (ESD.104). The Platonic myth not only *covers the maternal touch*; Jones explains: “[...] it also forecloses the possibility of thinking sexual difference in ways that would recognize the irreducibility of the sexes, by making all beings reflections of the one and the same Being” (Jones 2011, 84).

Irigaray replaces the metaphysics of the One with the metaphysics of *being two*, indicating that our existence comes from the *two* (that originate from the *body* of the mother — and not from the logos of the father). Irigaray takes the transcendental from the skies of idealism and replaces it with *sexuate difference*, which has room for embodiment, the (heartfelt) touch, openness and freshness in thinking. The embodied touch is the beauty that surprises again and again and that which also follows bringing new life into the world. Based on her ontology of *sexuate difference*, she proceeds from a quantitative logic of the one and transforms it to a qualitative logic between at least two.

The missing link is the enactive movement between us that enables the process of *sexuate differentiation* and embodied thinking. To come to be, we must differentiate from the original maternal touch to achieve subjectivity in a world outside the womb. The peculiar way one prisoner is forced to leave the dark cave to enter the sun implies that he leaves without differentiating sufficiently from the (m)other. Instead of relating to the (m)other, he is forced to be a generic self-producing subject. In Plato’s allegory, Halsema argues: “The maternal-feminine is neither visible nor in itself representational” (S.294, Halsema 2010, 54; Jones 2011, 74). This first relation has been kept in the dark and repressed in our culture (IBSW.154). This repressed dimension of our existence has ultimately led to the overshadowing of not only our natural origin but to a devaluation of the mother/woman and of our relationships in general.

By turning the meaning upside down, the female morphological lips (different from the dark cave or the dead hole) stand for the interval, the “we”, the middle voice, and the fecundity of life that includes a diversity of new identities, new relationships that are non-possessive. The lips in “When Our Lips Speak Together” symbolize real *sexuate differences* between at least two and their reflections are an illustration of lateral transcendental and reciprocal closeness that connects them in ethical relationships. Paying attention to what resides in felt experience and not only what resides in a word, the lips achieve meaning that is their own, and that is original

and not a copy of the same. Their interaction symbolizes multiple feminine voices that do not stand the test of the neuter that has dominated Western philosophy.

4.7 Rejecting (in-)sight as the origin of thought

Based on the phenomenology of touch and the in-between, Irigaray rejects the privilege of sight (insight) and the male-centered perception as displayed in the Platonic myth: “Not that the idea is visible or representable either, but *it conjures us a blindness over origin*” (S.294). This is a blindness that prioritizes the mind over the body. With the enactive account of sexuate difference, the embodied touch becomes the primacy of reality, and not sight or vision. The touch doesn’t need sight; furthermore, the touch is before the distinction between darkness and light. With the morphology of the woman’s body, the gap between her lips, Irigaray demonstrates that the endless movement between two overrides the domination of vision (insight) and the Platonic metaphysical conception of the gaze, or of vision. Irigaray says:

Light, for us, is not violent. Not deadly. For us the sun does not simply rise or set. Day and night are mingled in our gazes. Our gestures. Our bodies. Strictly speaking, we cast no shadow. There is no danger that one or the other may be a darker double. I want to remain nocturnal, and find my night softly luminous, in you. (TS. 217)

The lips are not blinded by the visions of things; they prefer to stay in relation (which is their lightness or their transcendence), and they do not cast any shadow on the other or exclude the other because they know that they need to be two to blossom. The blossoming light is between them, which is before the strict division between darkness and light, as laid out in Plato’s allegory. Their transcendence is not achieved by logos, vision, or (in)sight but by their touching and embracing, thanks to the interval or the invisible heartfelt space between them.

With the notion of the “twoness of our being” concerning any two bodies interacting and touching, Irigaray radically withdraws from the vision-centrism or the domination of the gaze that belongs to the phallic order. The female lips figure two lovers in a lateral position in rich care that has an ethical dimension of becoming

human (cultivating differences). They speak for themselves, free of the many representations that have separated them and repressed them as passive objects.

As Cecilia Sjöholm points out, sexuate difference precedes the chiasm between the visible and the invisible, the body and the world (Sjöholm 2000, 100-102). The implication is that our relationships and sexuation, the way we are attracted to each other, refer to the invisible and non-representational world that is ontological and exists *prior to sight* and *before perception* in general.

Irigaray's re-reading of the cave allegory is put forth not only to counteract the Platonic idea and the Freudian lack and their sight-based subjectivity⁵¹ — but also as a model for the quality of inter-affectivity between two living subjects that must interact carefully to come to be. Her relational ontology and ethics of sexuate difference work.

Accordingly, the morphology of the female body, the female lips, becomes a model for the interval, for intersubjectivity, for inter-affectivity, and for the lateral transcendental between two, that makes ethical relationship possible. The embodied speaking lips touch each other and themselves, and they cannot be counted as a quantity and “seen” as one. The touch remains fluid and unforeseen as the quality of our being and becoming. In the end, the cave-like morphological lips become metaphorical for a lateral intersubjectivity and a fluid logic that cannot be reduced to a static idea of the mind.

If we want to elaborate on the wisdom of life, we must abolish the privilege of ideology over the body and change our praxis of thinking and our praxis of philosophizing. Our living is so rich of experiential touch and so close to us that enables us to move forward, spiritually, cognitively, and transcendently — together, in sexuate difference that cannot be mastered by the logic of the one.

4.8 Going back to experience as a critical move to correct history

It is relevant to note that Irigaray's interpretation of the allegory of the cave is more than a reading and writing mimicking style. Her voice is self-reflecting and open

⁵¹ The Freudian lack refers to the lacking woman based on his vision-centrism in his theory on the development of the sexes, the woman being a lesser man because her sexual organ is less visible in relation to the male, whereby castration anxiety is developed because she does not have the privileged sexual organ (Freud 1933).

with direct reference to her experience of being excluded as a woman in a culture of sameness. The way the cave *touches* her that is based on rich and embodied insight whereby she relates to herself, anchoring in lived experience *as a woman* and as a mother. Thus, along with the scientific time as played out in the Platonic allegory, she uses her experiential time based on the temporality of self-affection (IBSW; Browne 2014).⁵²

There seems to be ways or levels in which Irigaray responds to the challenge of overcoming the crises of the univocal subject with all its implications and binaries. On the *discursive level*, she uses mimesis deliberately as a weapon or strategy against a reductive tradition of the same to oppose and disrupt the neuter whereby she interposes fresh meaning. The other level is *embodied* or sex-situated as a form of new relating or attending to oneself that needs to be cultivated — and which is not a strategic position but rather a *political and philosophical stance* that needs to be practiced and cultivated based on self-affection.

The implication is that mimicry is only a temporary form of liberation, and the topic is primarily mentioned at the beginning of Irigaray's career, namely in her second book, *This Sex Which is Not One* (TS. 76-78). In summary, mimicry is a deliberate style, a textual strategy, a protest, a provocative performance that does not ensure that we keep a real connection to our embodied thinking self and the other. We might become stuck in the play — speaking in strategies, caught up in the process of an ironical and calculated way of speaking that prevents us from being immediate and present. Irigaray stresses that mimicry is in the end a strategy. Even though embodied thinking is involved with the mimic operation, it does not ensure that we differentiate from the other and cultivate sexuate differences on an intersubjective and ethical level.

In her later works, and especially in *In the Beginning She Was*, she emphasizes the return to oneself, to self-affection and inter-affection that works towards the cultivation of sexuate difference (IBSW.139-162). Our everyday problem is that we are not cultivated to think embodied and relational. Irigaray says: “Our natural energy is not yet educated towards a communication with respect for our differences(s). This energy is left both uncultivated and repressed” (PCTS.130).

⁵² Temporality of self-affection and the linear time will be unfolded in chapter five.

Instead, it is transformed into a neutral energy, always masked with the perspective of the same.

In that respect, Irigaray asserts that women must cultivate self-love (based on their enigma) out of which a non-dominating love of the other is possible: When women integrate their own space of embodiment, the real difference between the sexes can first become the basis of a revolution in ethics (ESD.5-20). The return to oneself and to affect is always more immediate and more intense than can be formulated under the operation of a deliberated performed mimicry, and it ensures embracing “[...] another living being while still respecting him as a subject” (TBT.40).

The real step towards liberation means cultivating self-affection and becoming aware of how it serves to connect to one’s own embodied speaking self. Irigaray claims that explicitly formulating our feelings and affects is a political action:

The first issue facing liberation movements is that of making each woman “conscious” of the fact that what she has felt in her personal experience is a condition shared by all women, thus *allowing that experience to be politicized*. [...] When women want to escape from exploitation, they do not merely destroy a few “prejudices”, they disrupt the entire order of dominant values, economic, social, moral, and sexual. They call into question all existing theories, all thought, all language, inasmuch as these are monopolized by men and men alone. They challenge *the very foundation of our social and cultural order*, whose organization has been prescribed by the patriarchal system. (TS.164-65)

The personal and the experiential felt meaning is political and is a confirmation that we are different and not the same (Grosz 2011, 88-99; 145). Furthermore, we don’t experience in dualism but in our *relation* to things through the body and with the other. To be engaged, touched, moved (even with tears), and to think critically and creatively with the body and with the other are political acts to escape structures of binaries. Affect functions as an act of resistance and change (Petitmengin 2021) and is a powerful mode of thinking that is life-involving and self-organizing and that doesn’t stand the test of neutrality.

With the ethics of sexuate difference, Irigaray rethinks the roots of our being and the role of philosophy and how it should be practiced on a discursive and embodied level that is dialectical, open, and transformational. Re-engaging with the old sceneries and ideas of the past is in line with Irigaray's dialectical style of doing philosophy, which is a style that allows the text to open for a possible encounter in the interval. Thus, she is not describing but invites the reader to be open and to *relate* to the signified in the discursive that is self-reflecting and hermeneutical (JLI.349). She says: "Thus, the text is always open onto a new sense, and onto a future sense, and I would say also onto a potential "You" [Tu], a potential interlocutor" (JLI.349).

4.9 Cultivating attention and listening

Throughout her philosophy, Irigaray insists that the body is the primacy of our being and the medium of perception — the word comes from the body and is spoken by the body. Irigaray brings to light that every idea starts within the body or with the pre-conceptual touch that needs to be two. To arrive at a clarity of things requires cultivation of listening-to the other.

In Irigaray's essay on listening, thinking, and teaching, she claims: "Western tradition is founded on looking-at rather than listening-to. [...] Listening-to is a way of opening ourselves to the other and of welcoming this other, its truth and its world as different from us, from ours" (TEA.231-32). Later in the text, she adds: "After listening to the other and to the world — and not only the world built by us — we have to return home, to return to ourselves, within ourselves" (TEA.234). This is always more than a mental undertaking and implies at least a few steps: reposing, reflecting, and resonating in openness towards the other that affects the whole body (TBB.17).

The question is, how can we cultivate desire and life energy in care for life? One mode of cultivating our ethical nature of listening is allowing the difference to simmer in you — whether it is an experience of frustration or attraction and facing the fear that might occur when meeting the unexpected and unknown. Listening is an active process of sensing what is really here, which also means listening to the felt dimension of words, to how words affect you, reflecting and reevaluating them so as not to become fixed and congealed in them (TEA; Schoeller and Thorgeirsdottir

2019). When listening to another person, I pay attention not only to the propositional content of words and what they mean but also to the voice, the tone, and the felt atmosphere that gradually emerges into a novelty and even into kindness, given that I am awake to the quality of the different other. If we allow words to have fixed meaning novelty can hardly emerge. In our daily lives, we are so shaped by mass culture and images that we hardly pay attention to how and what we sense.

Listening with *full attention* is an act of care — an act of giving-receiving, of recognizing-being recognized, of holding-being held. Simone Weil anticipates Irigaray's account of attention. For Weil, attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity, an act of giving-receiving, because novelty and kindness grow out of it (1947).⁵³ The experience of receiving and giving back is mostly overlooked in our tradition of practicing philosophy; we are mostly occupied with sharing arguments, and overlooking what emerges and affects. Listening to the other is the greatest gift of life, given that through it we respect the other, our relationship, and the beauty of life. Thus, attention is evoked by the other/otherness, and it is what moves in us and enables us to transcend.

Listening is a baseline requirement that can make interaction with others safer, more spiritual, and more effective. We might come to grips with the fact that we give birth to one another on an ethical level and to reconcile what the other is giving to us ethically, spiritually, and transcendently. Through attention, we can adopt another way of thinking that has room for another logic other than information, facts, or representations based on sameness, where everybody thinks the same based on phallogocentric denotations of words. Thus, we could think more freely and for ourselves. Most importantly, we must turn our attention from the consoling dream of the individual self-legislating will and the illusionary idea of the wholeness of the subject. The sexuate person is not whole and definable but ineffable, different, and incomplete in an incomplete world. When paying full attention and in faithfulness to nature, we could notice how we emerge from our sex-situatedness (that includes the other) in a way that is delightful, non-repressing, and non-judgmental.

In all phases of life, whether it concerns caring for relationships or the word, logic or feelings, entering into contact with one's own experience is crucial. Between

⁵³ Weil considers the superiority of attention over the will as the ultimate tool of self-transformant and suggests that we have to try to cure our faults by attention and not by will. Thus, the ethical aspect of being is a matter of attention, not will (Weil 1947, 116).

the tightly woven fabric of rules and orders (of the same) we must find spaces of individual responses and resistance (Petitmengin 2006). That means that representation is not simply to be understood as our Western tendency to objectify things in a pure discursive-linguistic manner. When thinking outside the representational, there is a lived body, always involved and intertwined with the environment whereby the meaning is forming and structuring.

Conceptual knowledge and concepts are certainly a necessary condition for our blossoming, and we must speak together, sharing words. Certainly, we live in a world of categories, and we need words to express ourselves. When we look around us, everything seems to have a name. However, we are more than abstract subjects and ideas. Thus, our natural feelings and desires are in interplay with the words that need constant fresh expression.

As engaged knowers, we must consider what the body wants to tell us and whether we are using the words or whether the words are telling us or describing us. Are we servants of signs or do they contribute to our becoming and blossoming? The question is: how can we say the implicit invisible world between us, that arises, touches, and stirs in us and between us without being stuck in imposed ideas of the same? Irigaray attempts to answer this question:

Such saying is not necessarily articulated in words, but it performs and structures our: I live, I exist, I grow, I become, and even I will, I desire, I love. It helps us to build a living bridge between the past, the present and the future, without stopping this process, especially by terms which fix it and prevent it from evolving. It assists us to become what and who we are, [...] Language is a necessary condition for our blossoming as humans, but it cannot accomplish this task if it does not correspond to a living word—a word which says us in the present, in faithfulness to the past and to prepare the future, with the will to achieve our human destiny. (TBB.48)

Irigaray understands the vital role of the living body that is underlying the cognitive and she also understands that how we speak can never correspond accurately and transparently to the living activity itself, the body. She states: “Life never speaks simply. It shows itself in its flower, hides itself in its roots” (IBSW.33).

Our roots belong to the desire that is always implicit in our interaction and in the production of meaning, whether it concerns our daily life, art, or philosophy.

5. The temporal body, the order of affect and the emergence of meaning

5.1 The primacy of temporal touch and intersubjectivity

The relation we have to others, or intersubjectivity, is the most elemental part of our being and becoming — and of reality itself. It is always on its way, emerging, forming and structuring. In our daily lives, relationality is imbued with felt meaning and pre-conceptual intricacy that is fragmentally perceived and that is not easy to grasp.

The aim of chapter five is to unfold this relationality and develop the idea of a temporal touch preceding individuality and knowledge as assigned in language and as clearly shown in loving relationships like that between the infant and its mother (TBB). Irigaray demonstrates that bodily action and the way it emerges involves the primacy of perception that is open, fluid, and subtly felt. As shown with the infant, the frame of perception is its affective/affected body in the way it moves, touches and discloses the world it participates in. When touching upon the world, the infant is part of the world; thus, it is already relational, intertwined with its (m)other and the world.

The way we enter relationships with one another and the way we are touched by others refers to the *temporality of the body*, that is simply given to us. Reflecting on the infant, Irigaray considers the question of desire as the natural bodily intuition and the root of human interaction. The child theme is key to understanding our relationships and the felt meaning that *emerges* between us. Desire arises only from differences (in our longings for reciprocal nearness) and functions as a relational and unstructured energy between at least two (Szopa 2019).⁵⁴ Through our process of interaction and inter-affectivity we form our relationships and the quality of our being, which implies novelty and *change* when preserving and cultivating affect.

Our ongoing, changing interaction can never be definitively predicted or formulated, and we are capable of more than we express (ESD.7-8). Thanks to the undecidable aspect of knowledge, the temporality of my body allows transcendence

⁵⁴ Szopa focuses on, among other things, the manner through which Irigaray tries to solve the Oedipal problem by releasing desire from the patriarchal family triangle and by encouraging the development of the feminine morphology thanks to self-affection.

from immanence to a novel state of being, whereby my sexuate structure is forming. In contrast to the linear time we normally live in, the temporality of affect belongs to the discontinuous time that constitutes the relation we have to ourselves and others, and that is filled with curiosity, wonder, and novelty.

When born, the immediate temporal body is the device that connects us *here and now to the other* that doesn't need reasoning. As very well illustrated with the infant and its interactions, it cannot separate itself from the present experience, the way it is touched by its (m)other. It lives and acts in the intuitive time of sensibility and sensitivity according to its self-affection, which is pre-reflecting and pre-conceptual, happening before perception.

However, the temporality of the body is not only about being situationally aware and coming in touch with the world. It has an efficient and revolutionary function that we can use creatively to express ourselves and the world; a function that is of a sexuate nature. With the temporal body, thinking with present and past experience, we (re)connect to ourselves, which enables us to redeem given principles or ideas that help us to overcome the old images and the solid perspective of the same (Sjöholm 2002, 92; Söderbäck 2019). As will be illustrated with reference to Irigaray's text on the female lips, "When Our Lips Speak Together", they redeem their past whereby they find their identity and come to be (TS.205-2019; Burke 1980; Whitford 1991b). Their affected/affective body remembers the past in a continuous reflection with the other and the world whereby they reveal repressed hidden meanings in the economy of the same.

Self-affection in Irigaray's philosophy belongs to the embodied power that connects and discovers, which she uses to think outside the calculated male- and vision-centric speech (IBSW; TBB; STF). However, Irigaray is not dividing felt sense from language but inviting us to connect and think embodied critically and creatively, enjoining us to reflect on *how* affect is part of the transcendental and the formation of subjectivity that emerges. She challenges us to *think with* immediate pre-conceptual and temporal experience, the pre-reflective dimension of meaning, showing how it precedes categories and identity. Let us turn to the infant and the immediate temporal dimension of the body to make this clear.

5.2 Relationality precedes individuality — the immediate inter-affection between the infant and its (m)other.

Irigaray's return to the infant in *To Be Born* is part of her theme of returning to oneself, to nature in a broad sense and to our temporal creative thinking self. In the book, Irigaray stresses the importance of our potential for temporal self-creation and survival based on touch. The theme of the return is thus not a return to knowledge, to ideas and representations but to those natural matters which constitute *the relation to oneself, others, and life*, the flesh of our passions. (IBSW). Through her discussion of the movements of the infant, Irigaray redirects our attention to the temporal sensed body that is (so far) free from repression and projection of the same and demonstrates that already from the beginning we participate in the production of meaning that is felt and pre-conceptual and that requires the presence of the other. A relation is never only of one's own; it exists between the one and the other, produced and saved by the two (IBSW.158-162; TBT).

Irigaray redirects our attention from the symbolic and stable concepts to the relation itself, pointing out that the skill to affect/to be affected is a skill that we have inherited from the first relation to the mother (IBSW.160; TBB). The present temporal dimension of the body is what enables the infant to "grab" the quality or the texture of the particular situation, whereby it projects itself towards the world.

By following the infant's initial movement and the way it is affected, Irigaray demonstrates the *primacy of relationality* and the sense of self that surges forth in dynamic fluidity. Beneath the interaction, there is a deep desire to belong to someone/something and establish an intimate relation with the (m)other, which also means getting a grip on the situation. The infant insists on being taken care of, and, most of all, it seeks a touch of intimacy, a proximity necessary for its well-being (TBB.20). Thus, implicitly in its *aiming at*, amorous desire is at work.

What characterizes the newborn's inhabiting the world is how it is totally *exposed* to the world and how it experiences fragmentarily the situation in deep curiosity. In an absolute openness, the infant responds immediately without reflection, without anticipating or submitting itself to a specific intentionality. The becoming of the infant requires it to venture beyond what is already experienced in life, as it cannot know in advance how to anticipate or calculate the knowable world (TBB). The infant must explore the world for itself; thus, there is no neutral

experience, no neutral consciousness at hand. The aim of its movements is not to get a neutral picture of the world but rather to be in relation with it, transcending itself with its (m)other.

The infant senses what it does here and now through its physical rhythm of interaction and remains in the interactional and temporal field of touching-being touched. The response of the infant is what occurs instantly and unexpectedly, whether that entails a feeling of anger or confusion or a feeling of joy that is, for instance, followed by a smile from its mother. The smile is intuitively felt; it is an instantiation of novelty that grows out of relationality (Petitmengin 2006, 232). It is what mobilizes a thought and sets the infant in motion. The smile is a direct knowledge of a *present touch* and is, in other words, something genuine, an undisputed *origin*, and not a copy, imitation, or calculation.

From the beginning, the newborn enters the world by breathing — the air space being the first environment outside the womb. Then, the newborn must cultivate its own life, a life irreducible to any other (TBB.1-5). After being one with the mother in the womb, the infant realizes that it differs from the mother in body, in becoming, in history as an individual subject (TBT.30). However, the newborn is totally dependent on the (m)other and the world external to it for its survival.

In the womb, the infant is already moving in close interaction with its environment, being in the amniotic fluid and inside the mother's body, which nourishes its movement and maturation. In a similar way when born and from a phenomenological perspective, we are touched and enveloped by the environment, whether being in the water (the pool), dozing in the warm sun, or sitting with a person, we interact with the environment and gradually we learn to move in it and with it. Most significantly, we need not look at them (the water, the sun) because we sense and feel it very clearly, just as we feel the nearness of another person. We are permeated by each other in our sensing and thinking in which we shape our relationships; we are in that sense *each other's environment* (for better or worse). In the process of touching and responsiveness, I am interacting within the environment and the environment is interacting with me in an open and unforeseen living relation — in which the pre-verbal meaning is constituted (TBB). Hence, the environment is much closer to us than we usually think.

In a vital curiosity, still touching, the infant tries to figure out how to reach the world to belong to it in a constant “aiming at” (TBB.19-25). Through its bodily

sensory perception of *doing*, and without being able to speak, the newborn gradually inhabits its world. The most significant aspect of the infant's exploring the world is how the infant *touches* everything around itself. It listens and begins looking at things, and it even licks and tastes, using all its bodily sensory perception intensely and irregularly, to get the most out of the immediate interaction (TBB.10-19).

The infant's bodily senses work simultaneously in a way that is synesthetic and fluid. This means that a sense impression relates to one sense or part of the body by stimulation of another sense. Its sensory modalities (the auditory, tactile, and the visual for example), work together in a trans-modality as a *fluid stream* of embodied pre-reflection (Petitmengin 2007). In micro-phenomenology, which is the study of the pre-reflective and pre-verbal dimension as a source of thought, trans-modality refers to the gestural and rhythmic dimension of lived experience, which plays an essential role in the process of all thoughts and understanding (Petitmengin 2007).

Furthermore, as emphasized by Daniel Stern, the baby perceives a world in dynamic vitality and deep curiosity with others/the environment — but not in a world of objects (Stern 2010). The infant does not perceive the bottle or the diaper, but rather *how* its mother handles them in the rhythms of her gesture, “the tone” that emerges. The infant is particularly sensitive and responsive to the rhythms of the world around it, which means that it notes especially the felt temporal touch in the present situations. These rhythms — transposable from one sensory modality to the other — “[...] also enable attunement between the mother and the child” (Petitmengin 2007, 66; cf. Stern 2010). These rhythms of sensing are felt and fluid and not separated.

The implication is that vision is not the privileged form of perception but the felt quality and the emergence of thought (Ratcliffe 2008). Like the infant, we must direct our attention to *what* the body is *implying* in the process of enacting that is non-representational and lived (Gendlin 1962; 2018). Thus, it is the invisible felt space between us that matters and whereby a relation and reality between me and the other is established and developed.

Beneath the verbal and visual interactions, we grab the particular atmosphere, as it emerges from the other person and between us. This implies that one pays attention to the texture of our meeting with the other, the distinctive way of approaching, the variations in the intensity of the gaze, and the rhythm and melody of the voice (Petitmengin 2007, 64-65). This transmodal dimension of experience

has been highlighted by Daniel Stern (1985; 1989) on the subjective experience of babies. Stern concludes that the world the child experiences is not a world of images, sounds and tactile sensation, but a world of forms, movements, intensities and rhythms — in other words, a world of transmodal qualities that can be transposed from one mode to another and which he calls vitality affects (distinct from categorial affects like happiness, sadness, fear, anger, disgust, surprise, and shame) (Petitmengin 2007, 64-65). The implication is that the felt somatic meaning or the texture of our body-environment-interaction is the primary mode of perceiving and underlies our thoughts and actions.

Self-affection is not a categorial affect, such as being sad and happy, but rather a continuous implication that occurs unexpectedly in our being together. It is the quality of the interaction itself. Thus, self-affection is not a static form of affect but rather the ongoing changing interaction that is immediately felt, as demonstrated by the perceiving of the infant whereby a relation between me and the other and the world is created. Its temporal body is constantly exploring, searching, approaching, and aiming at, the forming of a self, whereby it learns to take responsibility for its own thoughts.

Through vital interaction and inter-affection, the newborn perceives the world, which means that the body-environment interaction brings forth the knowable world. Hence, there is no strict division between the internal and the external — the meaning emerges through our ongoing interaction and inter-affection and our skillful bodily activity, in which we achieve consciousness of the world and ourselves.

The newborn does not distinguish between itself and the world, and it cannot yet speak but interacts and transcends itself in the field of sensibility and inter-affectivity, where thought is played out (TBB.10). Rather than copying images out there and pasting them in our minds, we perceive things through *touch* and *interaction*. As John L. Austin pointed out, things don't come in "handy denotative packages" (cf. Gendlin 1997). Living is a continuous process that emerges and changes. Representation is thus not restricted to the objective but involves pre-reflective lived processes of interaction that is meditative, felt, self-creating, and self-organizing. This implies that we should start with the lived body as a source of cognition, not perception or ideas, and realize that we are not outside the representational meaning.

In *To Be Born*, Irigaray gives bodily action primacy over vision in perception that precedes individuation. She invites us to reflect on our interactions and the vital rhythm in all its variable modes and to take them into account in our thoughts and actions. She implicitly points out, that we are each other's environment. Relationships are our construction; they are something that we accomplish by interacting with others and the environment and what allows transcendence and growth. In this way, Irigaray invites us to connect more consciously to our body and to the way we transcend our limited selves with others.

Even though the newborn has, within itself, the source of its growth, its development will be inflected by models and norms, which are ordered or imposed on it from the outside. Being attentive is a starting point and we could, like the infant, explore the world more open-mindedly in curiosity, without anticipating given categories and principles. The implication is that we must give the pre-verbal and temporal knowing in our daily life more appropriate attention to *connect* to ourselves. That could lead to a more intimate and fertile world, given that we pay attention to it — and that could contribute to resistance to, and the changing of, given principles that are imposed on us. The temporal body implies that the body is never the same but changes in a continuous process of self-structuring in interplay with the other/the world.

5.3 The embodied speaking lips redeem the past towards a future touch

In the text “When Our Lips Speak Together” (TS.205-219), Irigaray demonstrates that self-affection is the *discontinuous time* that must be elaborated to debunk the patriarchal order of the same. To enter the discourse, the woman must have a relation to time to speak as a woman. More generally, to redeem the past and cultivate the present touch we need to question the philosophy about time; we must ask how time has through the history of metaphysics been distributed to the two sexes, male and female (Söderbäck 2019).

As argued by Fanny Söderbäck, men have been regarded as bearers of linear time and capable of progress and transcendence in a way that is linked to activity, language and ideas, whereas women have been confined within cyclical time based on their nature involving reproduction and the receptive materiality that generates life (without itself being capable of creativity and agency). Thus, linear time, based

on the repetition of ideas and norms, and cyclical time, based on reproduction and passivity, are two models of time that have in the history of philosophy been associated with two modalities of subjectivity (Söderbäck 2019, 7). Those modalities serve to uphold the oppositional polarization between the sexes that is difficult to tear down. The argument is that these modes of temporality *make change impossible* because they either repeat the past or repress the past.

Instead, Söderbäck suggests a revolutionary time that aims at returning to the body and revitalizing the past to make possible a dynamic-embodied present and a future filled with change (Söderbäck 2019). This time belongs to the body and to the reflection of the body — not as an essentialist tendency to imprison us in the body but as an effort “[...] to construct a model of time and transcendence that neither represses the body nor confines women and other oppressed groups to the realm of embodiment, but which recognizes embodiment as the condition of possibility for futurity” (Söderbäck 2019, 8).

For Irigaray, this means a return to oneself and to self-affection (that includes relation to the other) — a *radical turn to the lived order of affect* as the implicit meaning in the formation of knowledge and subjectivity (IBSW). In a return to the body, we need to explore and trace in ourselves the touch of the other as the “othering in ourselves” and listen to how it touches and stirs. This means perceiving the world through the *trace* in ourselves of the others’ way of touching us (STF.96). It allows us to have a relation to ourselves and the world based on a lived experience that is truly ours.

Repeating the past of a neuter economy of the same (the male sex) and reducing time to a cycle of reproduction does not allow one to relate to oneself or to touch towards the growth of oneself. The models of linear and cyclical time belong to the disembodied and disengaged philosophy that holds thinking in place in a neuter economy, which is a repression of the woman, a denial of the enactive felt body and a denial of the becoming of sexuate difference (TS; IBSW; EDP; Söderbäck 2019).

What is at stake is that the mind has been constrained to repress or overcome nature. Irigaray says: “The cultural perspective that submits the woman, body-nature, to the man, mind-society, has led to the reduction of the feminine to procreation and the tasks linked to that. Paradoxically, the domination of nature has turned into a cult of reproduction: in the family, in the State, in religion” (EDP.46). All this is to serve

the logic of the same and repetition of the same that reinforces dualism and repression — preventing real intersubjectivity.

For the woman to open the path from nature to her transcendence, it is crucial to invest/anchor in her own embodied thinking self that enables disrupting the linear time of the same and the cyclical time of passivity. She must discover her body, without being complementary to men (as a receptive matter) outside imposed requirements of the same. This implies that she must have a “relationship with time” which she finds by relating to her body and her self-affection.

The revolutionary aspect of time consists of connecting to internal and external processes of interaction that allow connection and fluidity between two, that bridges between the body and logos, immanence and transcendence, one and the other. This can only happen when including the temporal dimension of the sensitive body that overrides the strict linearity of the same and the cyclical time of reproduction. We need an ontology that can bring us together in a shared world, and this can only happen when returning to affect and to our double subjectivity of being.

In Irigaray’s groundbreaking text “When Our Lips Speak Together,” she explores the embodied speaking lips and looks at woman’s discovery of herself (TS.205-219). The two lips are presented lyrically as fictive lovers and indicate that the woman is already affected within herself and by herself. As she is already morphologically two, her natural inter-affection is double, which indicates that her touching calls out for lateral exchanges with the other (in herself).

In total openness and deep interconnectivity, the lips redeem the past (the hierarchical authority of the same) whereby they bring to light the hidden secret: the forgotten touch and the forgotten time that has prevented our becoming towards fertility. The lips discover the meaningfulness of their relationality, that they can neither become nor transcend without the other. From the beginning, their relationship is double and unconditional, and their ethics is inscribed in their bodies. As they confess: “That ‘I love you’ is neither gift nor debt. You ‘give’ me nothing when you touch yourself, touch me, when you touch yourself again through me. [...] Alternatives, oppositions, choices, bargains like these have no business between us” (TS.206). Or, as Irigaray puts it elsewhere:

Ownership and property are doubtless quite foreign to the feminine. At least sexually. But not *nearness*. Nearness so pronounced that it makes all discrimination of identity, and thus all forms of property, impossible. (TS.31)

The logic of their intimacy is a temporality of affect that is without calculation and subjugation. Affect is subtly felt, immediate, and relational, and it cannot be thought of in terms of linearity or of a logic of the subject-object distinction. Thus, the lips are intuitively intertwined and outside binaries of superiority-inferiority. Thanks to the mucous, it is not possible “[...] to distinguish neatly between what is touched and what is touching, between object and subject, known and knower, passive and active” (Canters and Jantzen 2005, 106). Their touch emerges unforeseen and fleetingly without fixed banks and boundaries — never congealing or solidifying (TS.215). They are open and closed and keep touching themselves from within and from without in a tender embrace that is dialectical and makes them remember and reflect on the past. Instead of forgetting or repressing the past, they *invest* in it. This allows them to relate differently and to be fully here and to for themselves.

Your body is not the same today as yesterday. Your body remembers. There’s no need for *you* to remember. No need to hold fast to yesterday, to store it up as a capital in your head. Your memory? Your body expresses yesterday in what it wants today. [...] Our body, right here, right now, gives us a very different certainty. Truth is necessary for those who are so distanced from their body that they have forgotten it. [...] Let’s hurry and invent our own phrases. So that everywhere and always we can continue to embrace. (TS.214-15)

The discovery of their body remembering enables them to deal with the past towards a future touch (Sjöholm 2000). By feeling into the complexity, thinking with the words (made in the past), they manage to transform the propositional content of the words into a fresh horizon that makes sense for them — that changes the situation — why *nothing can be the same*. For instance, the word “lack” does not refer to their body (as Freud once claimed) (TS.207; 209). Rather, a *real lack* consists of *not* being able to *relate to the real other* and think for oneself, not being able to cultivate touch

and the twoness of our being. As the dialogue progresses, the outdated words of others are gradually emptying, becoming bloodless and meaningless (TS.212). In an intuitive inter-affection, the lips touch themselves all the time, and even if they are closed, thanks to the mucous, they keep on touching. (They are never simply closed or open but keep on relating and moving.)

Memory is a manifestation of the fact that the body matters and that affect is inherently involved in knowing. Memories are not floating pictures but are recorded in our body, which is why the body remembers and knows (Gendlin 2018). A memory helps us to return to ourselves and recall something in ourselves that evokes a thought. The body remembers when it is heartfelt, moved and hurt; the particular feeling is anchored in the body, and putting this particular feeling into perspective is part of dealing with it and changing it (Petitmengin 2021).

As Irigaray points out, sometimes memory is kept in the flesh that has not yet been born into language because it has no discourse to wrap itself in. When the felt sense expresses itself for the first time, the hidden repressed feeling is revealed, and this can only happen by declaring oneself to the other in silence, through touching (TS.215). Allowing the felt sense to emerge and form in constant reflection with the other, the touch and the world, the lips manage to fully *reveal their story* – their past — that they bring with them into their future.

The unique quality of a present touch that stirs inside goes against solid ideas of the same. Thus, the touch functions as an act of resistance and change that disturbs the neuter and the idea of the self-voluntary and self-reliant subject (Petitmengin 2021). Irigaray remarks upon the moment the lips discover in their body:

When you stir, you disturb their order. You upset everything. You break the circle of their habits, the circularity of their exchanges, their knowledge, their desire. Their world. Indifferent one, you mustn't move, or be moved, unless they call you. (TS.207)

In close nearness, they relate to themselves differently than the phallic economy of the same (that lacks relation to the other). As a woman, the other *already* affects her. Thus, they gradually open the closure of time where everything remains frozen in a circle of the same. In this process of opening, they get rid of ideas that make them immobile and paralyzed. In slow thinking (outside the speed we normally live in), they recognize that the repressed body is a result of patriarchy's striving to

master knowledge — to ensure certainty and the continuity of linearity in desire for the finitude in knowledge: “What hierarchy, what subordination lurks there, waiting to break our resistance?” (TS.213). They realize the illusion of the certainty of the same (belonging to the male), which implies further that cyclical time is a fake idea imposed upon them. Thus, they can no longer be defined as a passive receptacle for the one, the self-same. Their nature, as Irigaray puts it, is much wider and richer than “[...] lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plenitude, fulfillment from the other” (TS.209).

Reconnecting and reflecting on the past, the lips *restore* the loss of contact they have with themselves. This leads to a *felt shift* in their consciousness that brings new insights and new horizons to the fore, and that is liberating. Nothing can stop them from touching more, feeling more; thus, they dare to feel into the void of the infinite in themselves and the gap between them. Irigaray says:

Wait. My blood is coming back. From their senses. It's warm inside us again. Among us. Their words are emptying out, becoming bloodless, dead skins. While our lips are growing red again. They're stirring, moving, they want to speak. [...] We have so much space to share. Our horizon will never stop expanding; we are always open. (TS.212-13)

Connecting to desire and touch involves another logic than absolute knowledge — a logic that is lived and without a limit (TS.205-19). Between the lips, language has no circularity, and their dual subjectivity widens their horizon of experiencing and transcending that is never-ending, always new. As Irigaray says: “When you kiss me, the world grows so large that the horizon itself disappears” (TS.210).

By interacting in faithfulness to nature (being two), reflecting back and forth in rich subjective engagement, the embodied speaking lips trace the hidden meaning that has haunted them; they realize that they have not been able to connect to themselves. Gradually, they unlearn the already coded meaning and peel the dead skins of words (TS.212). In this process of reconnecting, they trace the implicit lost meaning in the explicitly formulated lines whereby they regain their natural life energy that allows them to exist on their terms and express what they really feel and think. The implication is that the woman is no longer on the wrong side of the

discourse but interacts and expresses herself in a vital dynamic that has reference to her experience.

The void between her lips is no longer the cyclical time of reproduction but a time of self-affection that is infinite and sensitive. As two, they are luminous, not fixed. They long for *light* in form of a new logic that is not constrained to the right ideas (TS.207). For them, light is neither violent nor imposing (TS.217). The luminosity is the moving force between them which means that they cannot be caught up in narcissistic auto-production of the one (Sjöholm 2000, 99). They become and transcend very carefully like whispering leaves or like a climbing plant, growing into the light that is creative and blossoming, without being too speculative. Irigaray says: “Light becomes the most precious gift: the light of the sun of the other. Inner light awakens as well and demands a language other than the one already forged and fixed by reason” (EDP.39).

As shown with the lips text, the woman reveals her story by understanding her past. She understands that patriarchal conditions of sameness have caused her disconnectedness, pain and frustration. By returning to her body, she gathers things together and understands that she is no longer the passive other, as a mirror image or a substitute for the male. She is no longer forced to imitate the same. On the contrary, and in faithfulness to nature, and to the interval, she is mirroring herself within herself in deep reflection with the other, which leads to felt shifts, change, and transformation. She speaks *as* a woman and establishes a new relation with herself which implies a change in consciousness, empirically, transcendently, ethically, and spiritually. The interaction of loving care *leads the way* and contributes to creative thinking that is both embodied and spiritual, and in which the woman finds herself, speaking as a woman.

Another important aspect of knowing is that not only are we different in morphology and irreducible to one another, but we also all have different experiences and different perspectives as sex-situated beings. Part of the discovery of one’s own body is the *discovery* of the *different worlds* we inhabit; thus, we sense, perceive and extend differently toward the world. Our task is to share those worlds which is also part of debunking sameness, as well as the becoming of possible new worlds (STW). Our sharing of the worlds contributes to the transcendental and is always rooted in respect for the irreducible other that is never fully knowable (STW). Irigaray says: “So long as the other subject remains alive and free with respect to another world,

especially to my world, time and space are kept in a dialectical process between us in an always indefinite and open way” (STW.ix-x). Irigaray seeks to free humans from the false transcendence of the one that only operates within the economy of the self-same with no space for lived experience. As very well formulated by Fanny Söderbäck:

In a world where transcendence is defined from the point of view of one subject alone (the male subject who transcends linearly and forwardly through his various projects and projections), transcendence is no longer a question of time but rather of repetitive movement within a confined space: the space of one single subject. In such a world we are incapable of renewal and creative production since all it can do is produce selfsame image of the one that inhabits it alone. The world, and time, close up “in a circle.” And such transcendence—which in fact is no transcendence at all—can only proceed violently: the dynamic dialectic of time becomes reduced to a historical dialectic that, as Irigaray puts it, assures progress only at the cost of “some harm”. (Söderbäck 2019, 70)

Instead of preserving time from our differentiation, we lose time and we become trapped in a hall of mirrors where the same images are reflected again and again (Söderbäck 2019, 70). We lose track of a culture of two worlds that is of sexuate differences with the consequences of turning life into a strategy of a harmful culture and lost desires.

5.4 In a temporal process of double intertwining, the lips speak outside binaries and the metaphysics of presence in language

The dialogue of the lips consists of two pairs of lips: the lips of the mouth and the lips of the vulva, which signifies a *double intertwining: an interaction between the me and the other is intertwining with the dialectic between body and language*. This double intertwining, taking place in the interval, indicates that subjectivity is founded on two who interact as different two and with the word. As demonstrated by the embodied speaking lips, language has no power over the living body. Rather, they

demonstrate how affect flows inconsistently and in a trans-modal way into words in a rich dialectic and re-touching whereby the meaning is constituted.

Thinking with and from the body in rich intimacy with the other, staying with the implied in a situation, the lips speak outside binaries and the metaphysics of presence in language whereby they disrupt the metaphysical ideas of presence-absence, active-passive, and subject-object as presented in the economy of the same. The lips text demonstrates that the logic of the same is illusory and forecloses lived experience, real interconnectivity and transcendence.

In the text, the continuous touching in a “love of self and love of the other” serves to unsettle subject-object positions, which is why Irigaray prefers to use the words “I” and the “other” and not subject and object (Canters and Jantzen 2005, 57). Hence, the lips are not presented as subject-object but as forever relational and dependent. They are *self-othering* in themselves (the other in oneself) which opposes the self-produced subject, the love of the self-same, the phallic love (love of property), and the objectivation and ownership of any kind. The relational dynamism of “being two” refers to the incompleteness, the formlessness, and the emergence of meaning that is never finished.

By referring to the morphology of the female body, the fluid in-between, Irigaray challenges us to relate to ourselves and others outside given structures and imposed meaning of the same. She demonstrates that the body orients itself in the space of twoness and at the same time it structures space for itself (Lehtinen 2014, 58). Hence, the body is both a source of meaning that is implicitly felt, a receiver of meaning, and the medium of perception. The body is doing in perception and the bearer of meaning.

Thinking embodied and in close nearness with the other requires that I am awake and attentive to the other in me. I am attentive to the different worlds of others. This implies a (re)thinking of the fluid relationship we have with one another and our need for touch and intersubjectivity, which overrides binary thinking and the clear cut between body and mind. Thus, we must be attentive to the space between us and fill it with a qualitative time of coming closer, not allowing ideas of binary thinking to inflame more hate and error between us.

From the perspective of time, the superiority of the self-enclosed linear time and the inferiority of the cyclical receptive body is the blind spot that has caused disorientation and exclusion and haunts modern philosophy (Söderbäck 2019). Thus,

the ghost of our living experience (still in motion and never fully defined) is there for us, always around the corner, reminding us to get connected and engaged with one another to get clarity of our longings, thoughts, and actions. With the lips text, as well as in *To Be Born*, Irigaray rethinks the time-space of subjectivity and the felt dynamic that contributes to subjective agency and relational ontology that can bring us closer in body and spirit. As Phyllis Kaminski states: she “[...] offers a new philosophical foundation for non-hierarchical loving relations, movement within and between (the interval) that allows each to retain autonomy, as each seeks the flourishing of the other” (Kaminski 2019, 160).

Irigaray invites us to change the model of time and recognize the temporal body, affect, as a condition for the possibility of a future, allowing us to enter into history in a fresh and revolutionary manner — on our terms (Söderbäck 2019, 21-22). Irigaray always thinks of sexuate differences as the becoming of the body. Thus, the body wants a “possibility of future” (ILTY.10) and a renewal of life (that includes the other) that is yet to be experienced and lived. Without the different other, the world would be the same.

Irigaray radically adds the irreducible other to the phenomenology of the body and thereby she links the becoming of oneself to the ethical obligation/requirement we have to the different other based on our nature of being two. The lips text is an elaboration of a meaningful dialectic in the in-between (the interval), a demonstration of vitality that functions as a counteract to male- and logocentrism and ocular-centrism in Western philosophy.

The lips text is a search for feminine transcendence that is surprising and fulfilling. As two lovers, the lips retrieve a feminine pleasure in their mutual touching and redeem the past towards a creative future. In a reciprocal nearness, they are constantly reaching, embracing, and never grasping. Uniquely, and by enacting and continuously relating to themselves and concepts, they open multiple horizons towards futurity whereby they find themselves. To sum up:

The two (lips) become a model for non-hierarchical and lateral exchange between *subject and subject* (not subject and object). One lip cannot dominate the other or impose her voice on her. Yet, being double in their body, they are both active and passive and cannot exist or function without the other. The text is a confirmation of the interval and a knowledge of attraction that is lateral, open and multi-dimensional. The way a woman relates to herself through “love of the other in

herself” becomes a model for perception for the new human being — a figure for fluidity in perception that includes transcendental and ethical dimensions of meaning.

5.5 Different self-affection of men and women.

Irigaray asserts that the modalities of self-affection, the way we are touched and affected, are not the same for men and women, and neither is their perversion of self-affection. Her notion of their different self-affection, as laid out in *In the Beginning She Was* (IBSW.148-58), is based on empirical observation of the sexes in a culture that is based on dualism and the hierarchy of the same: The man standing for logos and oneness in thinking that is constituted of a world of his own, and the woman standing for nature and devaluated feelings.

Irigaray argues that men have been trapped in a culture of oneness and that they have not been successful in differentiating themselves from their mother (their first other) and cultivate self-affection in real relation to the other, whereas women are “more relational” and thus more likely to cultivate self-affection — being two in herself (being both a woman and a potential mother) (IBSW.148-158). The relation the male child has with his mother has not been developed sufficiently, which means that his self-affection has not successfully been submitted to the dialectical process with the other. The consequence is that the mother is merely seen as the opposite of the same, the logos, that he represents (IBSW.149). Through the logic of coupling opposites of the one, masculine subjectivity has not been able to save its differences or “[...] separate off from its natural and affective origin [...]” (IBSW.149). Instead, self-affection is neutralized, seen from the perspective of the one, and not from our nature of being two, which means that he is *not* affected sufficiently within himself. However, Irigaray argues that the masculine can achieve different self-affection because the man too has the lips of the mouth and two eyelids, touching each other.

The lack of cultivating self-affection results in closed metaphysical systems where everything is reduced to known-in-advance positions that in turn lead to “[...] a closed mental world that protects oneself from affects” (IBSW.149). At all times Irigaray stresses that natural differences are “[...] less hierarchical because each remains faithful to its own origin, growth and blossoming and is not standardized

through its submission to one unique world that knows only quantitative differences” (IBSW.131).

In contrast to man, the woman is familiar with being two; she is double in morphology and self-affection (signified by her female lips), being the other in herself, and being potentially capable of giving birth to another body. As Irigaray points out, the girl is similar in morphology as her mother which implies that she does not form a dyad with her in the same way as the boy. She knows what it means to beget, to have another body in herself (IBSW.157-158).

With her notion of different self-affection for men and women, Irigaray is not risking essentialism (or putting forth a model for different self-affection for men and women). Her notion is primarily based on a phenomenological description of *how* the two sexes, male and female, appear as subjects in a culture based on longstanding essentialism (separating between the sexes) and their coupling opposites that are polarized in a monopoly of the same. Thus, Irigaray is *questioning a culture of self-affection in the masculine* that is enclosed in a logic of the same, pointing out the danger at stake when we repress and exclude inter-affection and the way we are touched by one another.

However, Irigaray notes that self-affection for men and women is different and is required to be so (IBSW.159). The point is that everyone is differently affected, and it is what makes us approach each other and save differences from each other in our process of individuation. No two bodies are the same and we respond differently to the world. We all have different self-affection, different voices and different stories to tell that are in a continuous lived process based on our sexuation and self-differentiating.

Nevertheless, upholding a certain meaning of the self-affection of others (men) is dangerous as self-affection is always open, uniquely experienced and unpredictable. Irigaray is aware that it is difficult for her “[...] to define what self-affection could be for a man: it would amount to substituting myself for him. I can only question a culture in the masculine” (IBSW.148). Certainly, we cannot define self-affection for others as self-affection is in process and not here yet. Even though the girl identifies herself with her mother already at an early stage, there are examples of women who have not been able to differentiate from their mother. Furthermore, it is questionable and a rather hasty interpretation to hold the focus on the relation to the mother *at the early stage* of our living. The child differentiates itself as a *sex* in

various ways by relating to others and its own body which doesn't need to lead to denial of the mother.

Restricting self-affection to the early stage of childhood is not feasible and could easily remind us of the Oedipal triangle of the child-mother-father as displayed in Freud's analyses of the two sexes, male and female, and their development based on their sexual organs. In his analyses, the woman is doomed to be a lesser man due to the invisibility of her sexual organ. Self-affection is not a permanent stage but is in process and needs to be cultivated and reflected on in all phases of life (TBB.17).

The main point is that one's self-affection in all phases of life needs to enter a relation with another self-affection, and one must relate to oneself through the other—in constant self-differentiation—to become and grow. This relation is in principle a movement and implies that self-affection is never a proper "auto-affection". Self-affection has no singular or particular form; it is relational and indeterminable, and it allows opening oneself to what is new and surprising without closure.

Furthermore, it could be questioned whether we should focus on *parts* of the body (as in this case on the lips of the vulva and the lips of the mouth) and not on the whole body; thus, we could risk becoming enclosed in a kind of compartmentalization without considering the multiple living experiential interactions between persons.⁵⁵ Thus, we should direct our attention to the mutual desire that connects—the way of approaching the other that opens to oneself, while respecting otherness and differences. *Indeed, this is exactly what Irigaray is doing.*

Her effort to elaborate on the morphology of the woman is to emphasize our *nature of being two* and the interval, and the space between us. Our nature of being two exists already in the female body, signified by her morphology. Irigaray is putting forth a positive signifier of the female body that represents the *whole body*, referring to our *natural sexual duality* that is self-differentiating—and cannot be reduced to her sexual organ (TS.28). The aim is to make space for *all bodies* to interact for themselves, in themselves, and in relation to others.

Human self-differentiation is the most natural in life and derives from the desire to be in relation with the other, which is also part of finding oneself. As lateral

⁵⁵ Judith Butler notes that an ontology of fragmentation and compartmentalisation (dividing the body into parts) draws a distinct line between the body and the world, as if the skin were a wall (Butler 1990, 156). The implication is that by a focus on bodily parts such as the sexual organ we steer *the way* we can become a sexual being in our interaction with each other.

humans, we can neither ignore the felt body (the way we are attracted and affected by the other) nor the duality of our subjectivity (EDP.46). This is what Irigaray seeks to bring to light in her discussion of different self-affection of men and women and involves a critique of the masculine economy of the one. She draws attention from vision-centrism, the gaze, and the representational based on the logic of one world. Ewa P. Ziarek adds: “The female imaginary opposes the idea of “one universe” not because it inscribes the essential fluidity of the female body, but because it reflects the discontinuous temporality of the body” (Ziarek 1998, 64).

The attention is on our possible vital relationships, the time of self-affection, and the sap or the mucous that connects and that cannot be caught up in oppositions. Touch refers to the intimate interaction one has within oneself and the other, and touching is the process of approaching that represents the relation itself, hetero, as the sap that binds differences together (Bevan 2019, 63). Irigaray’s interest is to elaborate on the interval, creating space for real vital relationships and newness between us. Hence, woman’s self-affection cannot be reduced to her sexual organ but involves a sexuete structure that is sensible transcendental and in motion (Hadikoesoemo 2021, 109).

This implies that our *true nature* (of being two) and the *relation* itself are in the foreground. Unfortunately, and paradoxically, nature has been caught up in a cult of the reproduction of time that has repressed the feminine, embodiment, and sensitive touch, that has allowed disaster in love and relationships. (EDP.46). The twoness of the lips and the eyelids signifies the natural *fluid touch of contiguity that is necessary for us to function as a body and as two* — that cannot be analyzed and compared as opposites. Irigaray says: “As for woman, she touches herself in and of herself without any need for mediation, and before there is any way to distinguish activity from passivity” (TS.24).

Further, a relation to the mother, the first touch, and a female genealogy is brought to light, implying that we are *born of a woman*. The mother is the *first other* for all of us. As Whitford argues, “[...] the two lips stand for what has been left out of the social contract: namely the maternal genealogy, and women’s relations between and among themselves” (Whitford 1991b, 101). In that sense, and by referring to Iris Marion Young, the two embodied speaking lips mean “[...] a discovery, recovery, and invention of women’s culture” (Whitford 1991b, 101). Besides, it cannot go unnoticed that the lips display “[...] an alternative privileged

signifier, not an organ, part of the body; they exist *only in the symbolic realm* and disturb the monopoly of the phallus” (Whitford 1991b, 100). Irigaray is questioning the way the female body has been signified, reduced, and postponed in our male-centric tradition.

The elaboration on self-affection linked to female morphology includes, according to Bevan, the following aspects: “[...] the critique of past patriarchal thinking, how to elaborate a feminine subjectivity, and how to think the relation between this feminine subjectivity and masculine subjectivity” (Bevan 2019, 58). Further, this involves a critique of disembodied thinking, a lack of inter-affection, a critique of a masculine transcendence (as the male person is not able to relate to the sexuate other), and a critique of past metaphysics of the coupling opposites that is rooted in paradigms of mind-body, male-female, and active-passive (IBSW). The lips refer to intra-active forces of embodiment; thus, the relation between at least two and the relation between material and discursive forces is already there as entangled agencies, emerging in mutual interaction (IBSW; Barad 2007).⁵⁶

The female body becomes a model for us to gain access to subjectivity and for entering into a *dual relation* with the other that is intuitively felt and (pre)reflectively enacted. With her account of the morphology of the female body, Irigaray offers us a model of perception that respects sexuate differences. (IBSW.159). The point is that we could *learn* from female self-affection and use it to challenge past metaphysics of the neuter and the coupling opposites. We could use it to question time, desire, and the fluid touching of undecidability and transcendence beneath our common understanding of the representational, which is often marked by the logical discourse of the same. The female lips are the most intimate and sensitive part of the female body and represent our deepest desire to connect and touch that is naturally given.

⁵⁶ “The neologism “intra-action” *signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies*. That is, in contrast to the usual “interaction,” which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the “distinct” agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don’t exist as individual elements” (Barad 2007, 33).

5.6 Speaking from the interval is demanding a space for the one and the other

We are not supposed to read the lips text linearly as a description of woman's biology or essence. As in many of Irigaray's texts, such as *Elemental Passions* and *To Be Two*, she says surprisingly little about the female body (for example about her face or age). The aim is to withdraw from domination and the threat of the gaze of the phallic philosophical subject (Sjöholm 2000, 100 & 102). There is nothing to be seen; there is only the "I" and the "you" touching each other. The focus is on the intricate relations or the dynamic itself in a search for transcendency and intimacy (Sjöholm 2000, 97). The temporal self-affection here and now, along with the revised elements of knowing are the kernel and are always about to happen. Beyond the unpredictable written dialogue, there is a deep desire to *connect* to the unknown other. This is a fundamental demand in the becoming of humanity and the key to understanding oneself.

The "I" and the "you" are blended into one another fragmentarily (without a linear coherence) in search of an expression that emerges forth. The focus is on the process of desiring, searching, approaching, and coming closer — not on the person. As demonstrated in the lips text, the two subtle voices are dynamically blended into one another in a provoking manner, switching from the past to the present and the future. For instance, the reader senses the feeling of sadness of not belonging to someone, which is blended with a strong desire for real connection and a more livable future. As the dialogue progresses, the lips truly connect in relation and meet in the midst whereby they gradually open to themselves that is new, meaningful and blossoming.

Irigaray writes in a way where the subject is no longer fixed or formed but rather unformed and ununified, always in the process of searching, emerging and becoming. The atmosphere is driven by endless *striving* to know and love, and an endless search for connecting to oneself and the other, to the word and the world that can never be fully performed or relieved but that keeps the *interval wide open*. All this is an attempt to overcome binaries and reduce the hegemony of the one.

Instead of making an explicit critique of oppressive forces of sameness, Irigaray writes *from the interval* and displays inter-affective forces that are driven by a desire. Writing from the interval (as a mode of disrupting the binary thinking of the

same) she reinforces the space for us to enact and carry forward ourselves and the meaning. Margaret Whitford explains, “[...] the strength of Irigaray’s image lies in the extent to which it exceeds and goes beyond the possible intentionality of a single author, to become part of our cultural and symbolic ‘baggage’” (Whitford 1991b, 99). The female lips imply plurality, infinite openness, and a mode of being “in touch” that differs from the phallic mode of discourse (Whitford 1991b, 99). They are in a vital touch that radically overrides dualism, comparisons, and opposites in thinking. The one lip cannot touch and stir without the other. Besides, the lyric style and the way the body is intuitively and fragmentarily displayed, implies that the process of touching, searching and speaking is never finished or fully formed.

The new speech that she valorizes must explore itself, its selves, in multiple tones and voices. Her text is a process of discovery and an exploration, through language, of the connections between female sexuality and the expression of meaning—in its own terms, between the senses and sense, as women know them. It proceeds haltingly; it is full of stops and starts, blank spaces, questions and changes of direction because, Irigaray believes, there is no final certainty. (Burke 1980, 67)

Based on self-affection, Irigaray disrupts the logic of the syntax of the same and puts forth the unsaid of the felt body, spoken by the woman. For Elizabeth Grosz and very aptly formulated, the lyric style in the lips-text is a question of a poetic of the body and writing of a body, “[...] whose function is *inter-discursive* rather than referential” (Grosz 1986, 76; cf. Whitford 1991b, 99).

To deepen this point of view, Irigaray situates herself in a kind of in-between space, demanding a space for one and the other to meet and embrace, without subjugation and dominance. It is a *demand for another magnetism* rather than the polarized opposites of the one and the other in a system of representation — a magnetism of attraction, touching and transcendence. We originate from the void between self and other, immanence and transcendence, which implies that the other is the very source of such becoming (Ziarek 1998, 60).

The lips signify a strong wish for the other. Yet, the other re-opens my horizon and questions its finality. Irigaray says: “As such, the other undoes the familiarity that was mine” (STW.97). She continues:

Nevertheless, an appeal to the other exists in me. [...] Something, or someone, who takes place in the most intimate core of my being – perhaps more familiar to me than familiarity that I feel towards my own world. There is, in me, someone who is longing for the other as a condition for the appropriation of a familiarity more familiar than of the world already known as a condition for discovering an intimacy that I have not yet experienced. Such a wish for the other, for the coming of the other and the meeting with the other inside the horizon of my world, inside my most personal and inner boundaries, could be called: desire. (STW.97-98)

Cultivating desire is not without hardship and demands a preservation of differences and progress in the becoming of humanity. “It asks us to overcome all dichotomies: body/spirit, outward movement/inward movement, substance/becoming, unity/duality, etc.” (STW.98). We are neither one nor two, but forever fluid and in motion, sharing the space between us.

5.7 The theme of the return is a search for expressing the universal

The elaboration on inter-affectivity in Irigaray’s philosophy challenges not only past metaphysics but also philosophy in general and is a radical call for bringing affect and sensibly felt intimacy back to life (IBSW). In a return to oneself, this is a matter of the becoming of oneself, and of cultivating and expressing the universal — affect.

Self-affection permits “[...] an individual becoming thanks to a process of going back and forth between the self and the outside with regard to the self — another subject, object, or world” (IBS.159). This is a universal process of saving differences for myself and respecting the differences of others. The dialectical movement between me and the other is intertwining the dialectic between my body and the discursive, in which we inhabit ourselves as embodied and linguistic beings. This process of reflecting and crisscrossing, belonging to the temporality of my body, expands into a wider objectivity of what it means to be a *living responding being*.

Yet, the affective and responding features are a *universality* that we cannot master or convert into absolute knowledge. As part of our vital interaction and inter-

affection, our responsiveness is part of our living and cannot be finally arrested, suspended, or postponed.

The theme of the return in Irigaray's philosophy is not an ignorance of the other but an effort to form a relationship with the other, connecting to oneself and life through the other and through self-affection that is life-affirming (IBSW.139-162; TBB.17). Tomoka Toraiwa explains: "Returning to the self is a stage in maintaining a relationship with the other. This gesture protects the subject from being submitted to the discourse of the other while remaining aware and receptive to this other, and it also prevents each from imposing its terms and truth on the other" (Toraiwa 2015, 82). The return to oneself helps us to *become* in faithfulness to nature and is a challenge to welcome others, to *respect otherness and their differences*. Irigaray states:

Self-affection is the basic and the first condition of human dignity. There is no culture, no democracy, without the preservation of self-affection for each one. Self-affection today needs a return to our own body, our own breath, a care about our life in order not to become subjected to technologies, to money, to power, to neutralization in a universal 'someone,' to assimilation into an anonymous world. to the solitude of individualism. (IBSW.161)

To preserve the survival for each one and all of us we must rediscover and cultivate self-affection. Self-affection is leaving home to meet with the other (outside societal order) while remaining able to return home, to oneself, within oneself (IBSW.143). It is being with oneself free from representation, images or knowledge already determined, "[...] a repose in oneself of breath, of energy, without any intention or plan; that is, an attempt to go back to the source of our living being, in order to perceive it and let it be and spring up, instead of drying up through our existence" (TBB.41).

Self-affection is the most elemental feature of our being and as necessary as food (IBSW.161). It means nourishing the temporal body and desire, as well as cultivating breathing and life energy. Being faithful and responsible to oneself, and to nature, means being faithful to *the other* and to *time* in its way of touching that brings us back as humans. As Phyllis Kaminski argues, faithfulness to life (the other) requires fidelity to breath and spirit that is graceful; thus, sharing the breath

transcends our bodies and it energizes our bodies in the way it moves through the air within us and the air that envelops us (Kaminski 2019, 154). In Irigaray's words:

Self-affection needs faithfulness to oneself, respect for the other in their singularity, reciprocity in desire and love – more generally, in humanity. We have to rediscover and cultivate self-affection starting, at each time and in every situation, from two, two who respect their difference, in order to preserve the survival and the becoming of humanity, for each one and for all of us. (IBSW.162)

Reflecting on and never fully knowing is connected to a deeper question of the readiness and willingness to *look for oneself* in the space between two, being daring, coming closer, and meeting the fear in curiosity and openness, outside its syntactic laws of sameness, and categories. This means to take on the void which allows for “[...] facing and dealing with emptiness without dying or falling into nothingness” (TVB.97). Facing oneself means allowing the world, the flesh, and also a tiny single thought to appear without having a finished idea about oneself — to partake in a problem, take it further and be prepared for the unexpected, the not yet here.

This requires thinking beyond mastering discourses, which is not an easy task. In philosophy, it implies going from the state of theorizing things to more embodied critical affective thinking based on lived experience that brings us closer to the wisdom of life (IBSW; TBB). With the theme of the return, we can change the *relationship we have with ourselves* or the othering in ourselves that is not yet formed. To restore our life energy, we must think about desire and affect as the most essential in life and allow affect to flow into a word, which could release us from repression and hostility of the same.

The blind spot in our culture is the lack of cultivation of self-affection; thus, we suffer from a lack of life and of inward thinking (TBB.89). Due to the privilege of the mind and the mastering of knowledge, we suffer a general loss of concepts that can express us more transparently at the level of affect — concepts that could express our innate wisdom as the doorway to humanity. Irigaray says: “So returning to the simplest, humblest and most innocent hug means probably returning to the place in which our being can find an origin again—be born or be born again”

(STF.23). To restore our living energy, we need constant reformulation and even new concepts that refer to the vast field of self-affection.

This vast field of affect is not easy to explain. Yet, it points to thinking with touch, with the implied, and what emerges, diving down to where the stillness is that leads to a deeper knowledge about oneself, the other, and our *relationality*. However, affect aims at expressing life and desire and thus bridging the gap between the affective/affected body and logical formulation. As Rainer Maria Rilke once advised the young poet:

There is only one thing you should do. Go into yourself. Find out the reason that commands you to write; see whether it has spread its roots into the very depths of your heart; confess to yourself whether you would have to die if you were forbidden to write. This most of all: ask yourself in the most silent hour of your night: must I write? Dig into yourself for a deep answer. (Rilke 1993, 9-10: Letter One 1903)

We must then build our life in accordance with this necessity. The implication is that we must speak from affect, touch, and listen carefully to the body. To be awake for touch and the invisible world between us means listening again and again and in a bodily way to how everything touches and stirs. The body teaches what an abstract thought cannot do. All this is part of finding new expressions and concepts that respect the place of the interval — that we are different, that we have different perspectives and different worlds. Anchoring in lived experience is a political tool to redeem static images and categories in language that allow *felt shifting, recovery, and change* towards an ethics of sexuate difference and the becoming of ourselves — and this potential is in us and between us.

When realizing our longings for lateral relation with the other, according to Irigaray, “[...] our longing moves from a term of the relation to the relation itself, a relation which exists thanks to the insuperable difference” (STF.73). We might feel and discover that goodness takes place between us, that the *alterity of the other is the key* to understand our desire for love and beautiful thoughts, that the alterity itself is the path to the *beauty of life*. The interval is what allows dialectic between two and beautiful ideas of the spirit to emerge forward.

The universal is shared by all people. Yet, the universal is not what is commonly based on a belief system in a neuter economy. Rather, it is based on what

is common for each individual in each situation, the way one is uniquely touched in a way that is welcoming and new outside mastery of a given belief system. Sexuate difference is the frame for the universal in Irigaray's philosophy and the question of our time (ILTY.47; Grosz 2011, 205). "Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal" (ILTY.47). It is what could facilitate a re-founding of philosophy, what it means to be human, and the relation between any two and between cultures.

5.8 The emergence of meaning as the fifth E to the four E's of cognition

As mentioned in the first chapter, Irigaray draws on the phenomenology of the body and the enactive account of perception (Varela, Thomson and Rosch 1991). Following the understanding of the four E's of cognition (embodied, embedded, enactive and extensive), Irigaray develops and expands the various ideas of the extended mind. With her concept of sexuate difference, she demonstrates that we emerge as relational bodies and as at least two whereby we extend towards the physical world.⁵⁷ This implies that the *emergence* of cognition and identity can be added as *the fifth E to the four E's of cognition*. Thus, we emerge from our limited self-relation towards self-expression and identity — from the place of being a sexuate body through the place of the other that opens for a possible future (Jones 2015, 16).

The extended meaning is not only about putting the brain, the body and the world together (Kalmykova 2011, 89); it is also about incorporating felt sensing or affect in thinking that is of a sexuate nature. The implication is that the extension of the mind is not restricted to the usage of instruments that "[...] extend our bodily capabilities or compensate deficiency" (Kalmykova 2011, 91). We not only incorporate things or instruments in our mind, but we also incorporate *the other* in

⁵⁷ Extending into the external world means that the mind, body and the environment act as a coupled system that is both internally and externally perceived (Clark and Chalmers 1998). The way we extend as embodied and embedded means originally incorporating "things" into our minds. To refer to Merleau-Ponty's example of this kind of external thing: "A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and things which might break it off" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 165). The feather extends the woman's body just like the blind person's stick extends her body. Thus, object functions as part of the mind. Andy Clark re-evaluates the idea of the extended mind by positing that the mind has the function of controlling the biological body and evolved to make things happen (Kalmykova 2011, 89).

our thinking based on desire and the doubleness of our being that is both pre-reflective and reflective. Thus, inter-affectivity and felt sensing *function* with our production of meaning. This implies that sciences of mind and philosophy in general need to enlarge their horizon to encompass both lived experience (that is sexuate) and enactive accounts of perception.

For Irigaray, the emergence of meaning is rooted in the desire to be in reciprocal relation with the other that includes a (heartfelt) touch. Her emphasis on desire in her book, *Sharing the Fire*, implies that we must turn to self-affection, desire, intimacy and the sensitive life (which is part of our sexuation), and include our ongoing living interaction and inter-affection in our sayings (SFT). The emphasis is on the *emerging living energy* we are. Hence, desire is not something dangerous we need to repress and avoid; it is the energy that serves to connect to the other. Irigaray questions how we use our living energy that emerges and touches — whether we allow it to connect and flow into concepts or not. Do we use our energy to oppose each other, to escape self-affection, or do we use it more subtly and faithfully in listening and connecting to the alterity and the mystery we are, sharing different worlds?

Desire is partly rhizomatic in the way we emerge and extend as a body.⁵⁸ Yet, desire is the incomplete force that works within everything that seeks connection and entirely new experiences that cannot be closed up with a concept or knowledge determined in advance. The rhizome is the un-expressed that works outside representations and signifies a dream of a new culture that is non-hierarchical. It is the implicit, unstructured and timeless force at work, similar to how the tree stands for the representational and structured language that (re)produces itself (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). The implication is that we must connect the *root of our being* (self-affection) to *language* like the rhizome seeks connection to the tree. Yet, desire in Irigaray's philosophy, different from Deleuze's notion of desire, *arises from differences* as an active and unstructured energy between at least two. Desire is an

⁵⁸ The rhizomatic desire in Deleuze moves without a structure in an open space of internal processes, searching for different directions, and a new language. The rhizome in Deleuze's philosophy allows non-hierarchical entry and exit points in data representation to nurture and nourish the desire. For Deleuze, the rhizome is an image of connectivity of things like that of roots, plants, that moves without direction and end, searching forward in unstructured multiplicity that is joyful (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

affirmative vital force of the discontinuous time of our being and becoming that seeks connection, fulfillment, and blossoming in us and between us.

We emerge from the time of self-affection, searching for a connection with the other to become part of the representational whole — that needs to be expressed. Self-affection is the unstoppable force of interaction and experience, the groundless ground of interaction, metaphysical and in process. As illustrated and by directing the touch of the newborn (TBB) and the embodied speaking lips (TS), Irigaray makes us aware of the source of touch beyond the representational, demonstrating how the emergence of meaning is implicit, felt and underlying representations and the explicitly formulated. We cannot overcome the stratum of self-affection. Petitmengin argues: “Beneath the perception, emotions, thought and actions that constitute our conscious experience, this silent stratum is always with us, it is the very stuff of experience” (Petitmengin 2007, 66).

Additionally, there are rhizomatic exchanges in matter that are entangled with the environment, which means that we cannot anticipate bodies or cultures (Sares 2023, 25; Barad 2007). As Irigaray stresses, morphologies are an open volume (JLI.346). The rhizomatic aspect of desire refers to how we emerge in multiplicity — in bewildering sexuate varieties outside the parameter of the two sexes which means that the two-sex system does not encompass the full spectrum of sexuate structure and sexuality (Fausto-Sterling 2000). As noted by Grosz, living matter seeks reciprocity, multiplicity and entirely new experiences (Grosz 2011, 93-96). Thus, it is our work to be attentive to the undecidability of the mysterious forces we are and to be receptive to inter-affection and the emerging in us and between us and respond from that. To change our belief system based on binaries and speak outside the traditional logo-centric discourse we must consider the lived body and the stratum of self-affection.

Yet, the concept of sexuate difference in Irigaray’s philosophy contributes to a phenomenologically-oriented investigation of the embodied, embedded, emerging and enactive meaning whereby we extend and shape our limited self and the world. Sexuate difference plays an essential role in the emergence of all thought and understanding. We belong to the world through the other based on desire to belong to an inter-human world, given that we respect sexuate differences and overcome the reproduction of the same.

The emergence of meaning is part of dissolving dualism and challenges habitual binary thinking in Western culture. As an addition to the 4 E's of cognition, emergence displays and signifies beyond any discourse and is an urge to resort to another way of thinking, another logic that functions with our logical and analytical praxis of doing philosophy (TVB.6).

There is no neuter ontology or neuter experience, and no proper way of speaking. Rather, the proper belongs to our responsibility that requires that we speak from the temporal dimension of the 4 E's of cognition, the way we emerge and become as two. Thus, we exist and emerge forward as temporal bodies which is why nothing can be the same.

6. Concluding remarks on Irigaray's philosophy of fluidity

6.1 The double aim of sexuate difference is emerging and revolutionary

As a political issue of our time, sexuate difference marks a threshold of a new understanding of ourselves and the world that can transform our relation to ourselves and the future. Sexuate difference can change *how* life is understood and lived and *how* affect is involved in the framework of our nature of being two. Throughout philosophy, Irigaray's work is to solve the crises of broken bodies and lost desires that are caught up in dualisms and hierarchy, moving outside this logic towards affect as the most elemental feature of life. The aim of the notion of sexuate difference is at least twofold:

1. To *undo the polarization of the sexes* and transform the cold logic of vertical hierarchy as presented in mono-sexism (by a male) in a logic of the same into a lateral intersubjectivity that takes place in the interval. By undoing the polarized opposition of mind-body, active-passive, and male-female in our culture, we aim to reduce the hegemony of the one that has only room for one narrative, which is subjugating and repressive. The aim, thus, is to make space for vital processes of "touching being touched" where all sexes can meet each other in reciprocal transcendence and interact more freely. This requires a recognition of our longings for relation in difference and how we save the difference for ourselves while respecting the difference of the other in a continuous self-differentiating. This entails a radical shift in perception that includes the richness of affect in our ongoing movement of approaching and aspiring after the other, coming closer while keeping distance. When we incorporate affect in thinking we respond and act, which implies that the meaning is acted out. Thus, our bodies are doing in perception and bringing forth the meaning whereby we achieve subjectivity.
2. To *cultivate self-affection and nourish the interval* — "the invisible world between us" — which means accepting the other in how we/words take on meaning. We might discover how meaning is enacted, still emerging and forming, how the spirit derives from our nature of being two, and we might recognize that there is an *experience* in every touch that affects us in ways that

matter in our relationships and in the becoming of oneself. We might discover how we are conditioned by the unpredictable temporality of affect and the body, the mystery of our being (two), and how this temporal dimension functions as the political tool to express ourselves, outside received norms and values. This means redistributing the discourse between us “[...] to promote that which has never yet taken place: an authentic dialogue between the two” (JLI.343).

The double aim of *sexuate difference* involves a deeper self-knowledge and undertaking and requires a move from the general representation of the same to subjective expressions of an order that is lived and experienced in the interval — the place of an *existence* that is *ours*. The lived order is fluid, (pre)reflective and often surprising, filled with a *discontinuous qualitative time of self-affection* and immediate interaction between at least two. Taking into account the quality of our being reveals that representation is not merely constructed, dependent on some ideal or an abstract idea, a quantity, but emerges from our dynamic living relationship to the real other (STF.84-85).

The first step toward liberation requires that we connect to ourselves and incorporate affect in thinking, which is part of dealing with the fact that we are born into a system of knowledge that depends on an endless auto-production of the self-same. This requires that we use our experiential time of self-affection, not allowing it to transform into a neuter one. Because of the difficulty of defining the subtle quality of our being, *sexuate difference* is immeasurable, incalculable, and irreducible to binaries based on two opposites. Moving from the oppositional quantitative content of “what is,” Irigaray opens the way towards a vital fluid perception of “how we become”. By that she rejects subject-object and active-passive dichotomies (as what it means to be male and female) and elaborates on *subject-subject relationality* and *in-between knowledge* that allows sensible transcendence, the becoming of oneself and the other. The in-between knowledge or the interval entails a cognitive world that is forever emerging, limitless, and open.

6.2 The irreducible other is a principle linked to the universal responsive order

The work of sexual difference is in principle based on the irreducible unknown other we aspire after in our search for relation with the real other. If we are to have a sense for the other that is not projective or selfish, we must consider the infinite and undeterminable meaning of affect. If we on the other hand fail to turn toward the other, hate, ownership and hostility will emerge. (ESD.112). Thus, we must respect the wide-open space between us which means respecting life itself. If this condition of being is not met, then love remains in a state of self-centrism and projection (ESD.111).

Irigaray's radical turn from past metaphysics involves a change in understanding of the concepts of the *objective* and the *universal*. Understanding objectivity as a neuter universal meaning of the same (the one) that applies to everybody at all times is the biggest flaw/mistake in the history of philosophy. The constructed neuter is a blindness to living processes and forecloses real intersubjectivity. Thus, the neuter turns life into a strategy and does not allow us to respond to affect and become.

The universal belongs to the single *subject* and the *irreducible other* based on our ongoing interactions and inter-affectations that include an *infinite openness to life*, rooted in the absolute inherent in us, in our longings for a relation in difference based on an inherent desire to be whole. Being different and how we aspire after the other that touches and stirs, even surprisingly, is the most universal dimension of life. As responding beings, we are implicated in the production of meaning. Hence, it is our job to fill the in-between space with affect, our specificity, responding to touch that is lived and really experienced — in a return to oneself which is part of disturbing the power of the machinery of the one. It is always possible to set in motion the meaning that is one's own, redeem the past, and radically call given views into question.

Behind the metaphysics of presence in the discourse and beyond all signs, their spacing and structures, there is a living sexual being who thinks and feels in relation to the other, driven by desire to belong to the world. At all times, we are energized and mediated by each other in subtle fluidity, giving birth to each other which also means that we are responding to each other whether we are aware of it or

not. Thus, we are each other's environment, dependent and relational, marked by the other. One does not stir or move without the other, and the sex which is one does not exist.

Instead of directly opposing the supposedly neuter (male perspective) or taking a position regarding other differences, such as transgender or homosexuality, Irigaray creates a philosophy of the in-between grounded on our nature of being two that can do justice to all people. She widens the code of what it means to be human based on our relationship and rooted in the fact that we are derived from the two, a mother and a father. Our nature of being at least two is not naïve, applying only to traditional heterosexuality, male and female (Halsema 1998), but has room for all sexes and calls for responsibility of our embodied thinking self and requires that we put our own experience into perspective as ever-changing, affective and never the same.

Thanks to the irreducible other and our ability to be affective and responding beings, Irigaray thinks and speaks outside of the power of dualistic discourses and provides us with a philosophy of relational ontology that opens for (1) self-representation and self-structuration, (2) a lateral transcendence between two and a creative thinking that has ethical and spiritual implications. The effort is to reclaim proximity in thinking and increase our responsiveness in faithfulness to nature — as a political move that can thwart the philosophy and the power of the discourse that depends on the logic of the same.

6.3 To correct history and move outside the power of discourse means giving back what man has borrowed from the feminine

The power of discourse is in line with phallogocentric thinking and will always consist in the power to reduce, subordinate and fix vertically. However, we are not powerless or voiceless in the face of this power (TS.68-86; cf. Tyson 2013, 490). There is a mode of returning to another source, the body. The aim is not to top the order of the same so as to replace it — “[...] but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an “outside” that is exempt, in part, from phallocratic law” (TS. 68). With the dynamic felt quality between two and by thinking outside the hierarchy,

respecting differences, Irigaray ensures that her philosophy cannot be trapped in oppositions or abstract thought.

Thinking of the interval as the possibility of our existence and relationships is a metalevel as the *condition of possibility for our ongoing touching and exchanging*. The interval is a metaphysical condition of our inter-relations and inter-affectations as the place of our relationships. Irigaray elaborates the morphology of the female (the two lips) as an example of a new perception that does *not* allow the ignorance or domination of the other. By referring to the lips, the body becomes the source of meaning that is embracing, caring and touching, continuously at play, unpredictable, and never finished. The lips refer to the sap between us, the membrane that holds the two together, to the mucous of the carnal and intimate touch that connects and mediates, and the desire for life.

The invisible in her philosophy is not linked to our sensory perception, the tactile touch — as in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of touch (the touching hands) — but to the interval, the time-space of our “in-between”, that has a deeper meaning. The interval includes an endless process of a double intertwining: a relation between two persons intertwining the relation between body and language, feeling and thinking. For Irigaray, the interval is the place of the new human being, of new horizons that allow us to emerge, transcend and happen in an open space between two with room for reflexive care — that is also revolutionary and progressive. Thus, affect invites us to open concepts and images that define us. As Irigaray argues:

Whence the necessity of “reopening” the figures of philosophical discourse—idea, substance, subject, transcendental subjectivity, absolute knowledge—in order to pry out of them what they have borrowed that is the feminine, from the feminine, to make them “render up” and give back what they owe to the feminine. (TS.74)

The “figures of the philosophical discourse” are made by male subjects who have borrowed “the feminine body” and converted it into a mirror of themselves in an economy of the same instead of relating to the negative within themselves, the real other, saving and respecting differences. This is a dangerous affair and involves a transference of our intimate relationality to a self-enclosed subjectivity, which implies that the self-same subject remains uninterpreted. It is time to stop the mirroring operation and imitation of the self-same “[...] that allows the logos, the

subject, to reduplicate itself, to reflect itself by itself” (TS.75). Irigaray’s claim that the male subject has borrowed the feminine (as the other side of himself) is also quite significant because it is a manifestation, however unintended, that we need the other.

Understandably, sexuate difference is not yet the foundation of perception in Western culture. Firstly, habitual thinking is incredibly hard to put down and it takes time to correct the history of philosophy. Secondly, we do not simply re-construct meaning. The new thinking that Irigaray aims at does not happen by analyzing and dismantling the discursive machinery — or simply by rejecting the history of philosophy. Irigaray’s thought of sexual difference is not a method in a traditional sense but rather an *event that happens* and is historically a “structure in movement,” inherently unstable and changeable (Derrida 1983, 2-3; Thorsteinsson 2014, 254). Irigaray’s philosophy is a radical contribution to such an event, given that we accept and practice sexuate difference in our thinking.

Correcting history is a matter of cultivating the interval and the beautiful blossoming that derives from *two* and is what really binds us together. Sexuate difference is fleeting, incalculable, a term of becoming, and implies a fundamental indeterminacy that is lived and open towards the infinite. Thus, we can always think the difference freshly and in a new way. Cultivating the “invisible world between us” — to refer to the title of this dissertation — is the place of reflexive care, growth and transformation that can bring us back to ourselves (again), to a more livable culture outside prejudiced ideas of the fixed and stable that would continue to trap us in the logic of the same. Returning to the softness of our being, our desire for relation as the most basic and natural aspect of life, we realize that we are mediated by each other in subtle fluidity. Our longing for reciprocal nearness is something we can never overcome. As the emerging and mediative energy we are, we are never finished. Hence, we are deemed to endless search for connection and relation — as the riddle of life itself.

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