

A WORLD OF DIFFERENCE: LIFE, SEX, ONTOLOGY

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation is an exploration of the co-imbrications of Being, life, and sex: of the sexuate dimensions of Being (or, perhaps better put: of *living*) and of the ontological (or, perhaps better put: *vital*) dimensions of sex. It asks: What is the relationship between Being and living? Does Being, or life, have (a) sex? What is the, often implicit, ontology of life and sex that prevails in feminist and queer theory and politics? And what questions and practices might another thinking of Being, life, and sex enable? Its goal is to outline a feminist and queer theory of sexuation as a mode of individuation and relation that moves beyond the ontology of the individual that dominates Euro-American philosophy (and therefore most feminist and queer theory): rather than taking the individual as a starting point and analyzing sexuality as a form of identity, subjectivity, or interaction between individuals, it thinks sexuation as a vital ontological process of individuation and relation at work at a number of “levels” from the physico-chemical to the ecological, technological, artistic, and political. Its central argument is that, as a mode of

individuation, sexuation consists simultaneously of differentiation and relation and that this is a process given by Being, or life, “itself.” As such, it thinks Being, or life, as always already *more-than-one*. This theory of sexuation, then, is a theory of life’s Being, or becoming, that insists on sexual difference as an ineradicable and ontological force while also insisting on its open-endedness. We do not know what forms of sexuation life may bring, or what modes of life sexuation may bring, but the becomings of life and sex take place in and through one another. Understanding sexuation this way, it suggests, cuts across many ongoing debates in feminist, queer, and trans theory and highlights unexplored areas of transdisciplinary research and feminist inquiry. If there is no dimension of Being, or life, at which the isolated individual exists and if there is no dimension of Being, or life, at which sexuation is *not* at play, then there is no dimension that does not call for feminist and queer analysis.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

In cases where both the original and translated versions of a text have been consulted, the citation will refer first to the original and then to the translation (e.g., GA2 46/45). In all such cases, translations have been occasionally modified.

Works by Martin Heidegger

In general, citations refer to the *Heidegger Gesamtausgabe* (GA); however, there are a few English volumes that do not directly correspond to any volume in the GA.

DT	<i>Discourse on Thinking</i>
EGT	<i>Early Greek Thinking</i>
FS	<i>Four Seminars</i>
GA2	<i>Sein und Zeit (Being and Time)</i>
GA5	<i>Holzwege (Off the Beaten Track)</i>
GA6.2	<i>Nietzsche, Zweiter Band (Nietzsche, Volumes Three and Four)</i>
GA7	<i>Vorträge und Aufsätze</i>
GA9	<i>Wegmarken (Pathmarks)</i>
GA11	<i>Identität und Differenz (Identity and Difference)</i>
GA12	<i>Unterwegs zur Sprache (The Way to Language)</i>
GA14	<i>Zur Sache des Denkens (On Time and Being)</i>
GA15	<i>Seminare (Four Seminars)</i>
GA16	<i>Reden und andere Zeugnisse eines Lebensweges</i>
GA26	<i>Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Logik (Metaphysical Foundations of Logic)</i>
GA29	<i>Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik (The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics)</i>
GA40	<i>Einführung in die Metaphysik (Introduction to Metaphysics)</i>
GA41	<i>Die Frage nach dem Ding (What Is A Thing?)</i>
GA65	<i>Beiträge zur Philosophie (Contributions to Philosophy)</i>
GA79	<i>Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge (Bremen and Freiburg Lectures)</i>
H	<i>Heraclitus</i>
NNT	<i>Neuzeitliche Naturwissenschaft und Moderne Technik (bilingual edition)</i>
QCT	<i>The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays</i>

Works by Luce Irigaray

BEW	<i>Between East and West</i>
C	<i>Conversations</i>
CS	<i>Ce sexe qui n'en pas un (This Sex Which Is Not One)</i>
DBT	<i>Democracy Begins Between Two</i>
E	<i>Ethique de la différence sexuelle (An Ethics of Sexual Difference)</i>
ED	<i>Être Deux (To Be Two)</i>
EP	<i>Elemental Passions</i>
FFA	<i>"From The Forgetting of Air to To Be Two"</i>
IBSW	<i>In the Beginning, She Was</i>
JAT	<i>J'aime à toi (I Love to You)</i>
JLI	<i>"Je—Luce Irigaray"</i>
KW	<i>Key Writings</i>

OA	<i>L'Oubli de l'air: chez Martin Heidegger (The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger)</i>
PCT	"Perhaps Cultivating Touch Can Still Save Us"
S	<i>Speculum: de l'autre femme (Speculum of the Other Woman)</i>
SNN	<i>To Speak Is Never Neutral</i>
SP	<i>Sexes et parentés (Sexes and Genealogies)</i>
SW	<i>Sharing the World</i>
TBB	<i>To Be Born</i>
WD	<i>Why Different?</i>
WE	"Women's Exile"
WL	<i>The Way of Love</i>
VB	<i>Through Vegetal Being</i>

Works by Other Authors

Ch	"Chorégraphies" ("Choreographies") by Jacques Derrida
D	"Différance" in <i>Marges de la philosophie (Margins of Philosophy)</i> by Jacques Derrida
DR	<i>Différence et répétition (Difference and Repetition)</i> by Gilles Deleuze
G	"Geschlecht" in <i>Psyché: Invention de l'autre (Psyche: Invention of the Other, Vol. II)</i> by Jacques Derrida
HS	<i>Histoire de la sexualité, tome 1 (History of Sexuality, Vol. 1)</i> by Michel Foucault
IFLI	<i>Individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information</i> by Gilbert Simondon

Do you desire the most astonishing proof of how far the transfiguring power of intoxication can go?—"Love" is this proof: that which is called love in all the languages and silences of the world. In this case, intoxication has done with reality to such degree that it is extinguished and something else seems to have taken its place—a vibration and glittering of all the magic mirrors of Circe—

Here it makes no difference whether one is human or animal; even less whether one has Spirit, the Good, Righteousness. If one is subtle, one is fooled subtly; if one is coarse, one is fooled coarsely; but love, and even the love of God, the saintly love of 'redeemed souls,' remains the single root: a fever that has the good reason to transfigure itself, an intoxication that does well to lie about itself—And in any case, one lies well when one loves, about oneself and to oneself: one seems to oneself transfigured, stronger, richer, more perfect, one is more perfect—Here we discover art as an organic function: we discover it in the most angelic instinct of life, "love"; we discover it as the greatest stimulus of life—art thus sublimely expedient even when it lies—

But it would be an error to stop with its power to lie: it does more than merely imagine; it even transposes values. And it is not only that it transposes the feeling of values: the lover is more valuable, is stronger. In animals this condition produces new weapons, pigments, colors, and forms; above all, new movements, new rhythms, new love calls and seductions. It is no different with humans. The lover's whole economy is richer than before, more powerful, more complete than those who do not love. The lover becomes a squanderer: he is rich enough for it. The lover dares, becomes an adventurer, becomes an ass in magnanimity and innocence; the lover believes in God again, believes in virtue, because he believes in love; and on the other hand, this happy idiot grows wings and new capabilities, and even the door of art is opened to him. If we subtracted all traces of this intestinal fever from lyricism in sound and word, what would be left of lyrical poetry and music? — L'art pour l'art, perhaps: the virtuoso croaking of shivering frogs, despairing in their swamps—all the rest was created by love—

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *The Will to Power*

INTRODUCTION

BEING, LIFE, SEX

“Things could be thought differently.”

—LUCE IRIGARAY, *I Love to You*

“Only when we turn thoughtfully toward what has already been thought, will we be turned to use for what must still be thought.”

—MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Identity and Difference*

This dissertation is an exploration of the co-imbrications of Being, life, and sex: of the sexuate dimensions of Being (or, perhaps better put: of *living*) and of the ontological (or, perhaps better put: *vital*) dimensions of sex.¹ It asks: What is the relationship between Being and living? Does Being, or life, have (a) sex? What is the, often implicit, ontology of life and sex that prevails in feminist and queer theory and politics? And what questions and practices might another thinking of Being, life, and sex enable? Its goal is to outline a feminist and queer theory of sexuation as a mode of individuation and relation that moves beyond the ontology of the individual that dominates Euro-American philosophy (and therefore most feminist and queer theory): rather than taking the individual as a starting point and analyzing sexuality as a form of identity, subjectivity, or interaction between

¹ Throughout the dissertation I will capitalize the word Being following the standard practice of English translations of Heidegger. Being is a translation of Heidegger’s *das Sein*, which is a verbal noun, distinct from *das Seiende*, or beings, which is a simple noun. Being (capitalized, as a verbal noun), then, is irreducible to any being or entity. Heidegger himself was troubled by the fact that capitalizing the word “Being” in the English translations made it sound like he was referring to some supreme being, which is precisely what he meant to avoid (a supreme being would still be *a* being, lower case). Perhaps the most correct way to translate *das Sein* in English would make a noun out of the infinitive “the to be,” but because that (as well as the other alternatives in Heidegger’s translations: “Be-ing” and “~~Be~~ing”) are unwieldy, I will use “Being” throughout for the sake of simplicity. Because the three French thinkers who I use most in this project—Irigaray, Simondon, Foucault (each having been a reader of Heidegger)—are attentive to the difference between Being and entities and speak of Being as something irreducible to any existent entity, I will generally use the capitalized Being to render *l’être* in their works even though this is not standard with their English translators. I do this for consistency, as well as because part of the argument is that these three thinkers avoid the error of thinking Being as an entity in a way that many contemporary thinkers do not.

individuals, it thinks sexuation as a vital ontological process of individuation and relation at work at a number of “levels” from the physico-chemical to the ecological, technological, artistic, and political. Its central argument is that, as a mode of individuation, sexuation consists simultaneously of differentiation and relation and that this is a process given by Being, or life, “itself.” As such, it thinks Being, or life, as always already *more-than-one*. This theory of sexuation, then, is a theory of life’s Being, or becoming, that insists on sexual difference as an ineradicable and ontological force while also insisting on its open-endedness. We do not know what forms of sexuation life may bring, or what modes of life sexuation may bring, but the becomings of life and sex take place in and through one another. Understanding sexuation this way, it suggests, cuts across many ongoing debates in feminist, queer, and trans theory and highlights unexplored areas of transdisciplinary research and feminist inquiry. If there is no dimension of Being, or life, at which the isolated individual exists and if there is no dimension of Being, or life, at which sexuation is *not* at play, then there is no dimension that does not call for feminist and queer analysis.

Beyond these philosophical concerns, the project also has political and ethical motivations. Certainly, many of the most pressing issues facing us today—planetary ecological crisis; the transmutations of life and sex by social, information, reproductive, and bio-technologies; the proliferation of psychic dis-ease and the “new maladies of the soul;”² the emergence of biocapitalism; and the widespread ethical and spiritual collapse resulting from the decadence and disenchantment of neoliberal capitalism as well as the defensive forms of fascism and fundamentalism it engenders—all in some way call the

² See Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, trans. Ross Guberman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

prevailing relationships between Being, life, and sex into question. As such, the central animating force of the project is Luce Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference. This is because it is Irigaray who, in her posing of the question of sexual difference as "one of the questions, or the question, that is to be thought in our age" (E 13/5), most relentlessly demonstrates what is at stake in rethinking the relationships between Being, life and sex, beyond the hegemonic phallogocentrism of western thought, politics, and ethics. That Irigaray uses the word "question" here with specific reference to Heidegger is significant because for Heidegger, questions are *pathways* toward a different way of Being and thinking. Indeed, for Irigaray, "a *revolution* in thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place. We need to 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" (E 14/6). The implications of such a revolution are far-reaching: "Think of it," she writes, "as an approach that would allow us to check the many forms that destruction takes in our world, to counteract a nihilism that merely affirms the reversal or the repetitive proliferation of status quo values—whether you call them the consumer society, the circularity of discourse, the more or less cancerous diseases of our age, the unreliability of words, the end of philosophy, religious despair or regression to religiosity, scientific or technical imperialism that fails to consider the living subject" (E 13/5). Following Irigaray, I therefore endeavor to make the case in this dissertation that another ontology of life and sex will enable different approaches to these questions precisely through a transformation in Being and thinking—a revolution in thought and ethics—that would allow these questions to be posed

differently and, one hopes, in a way that is more appropriate to the task of building and cultivating a more just future.

In recent years, feminist theorists have exhibited a growing concern with the ontology, ethics, and politics of “life itself.”³ Judith Butler’s later work, for instance, has elaborated an “ethics of cohabitation” that moves beyond the ontology of liberal individualism toward an ontology of “precarious life” and shared vulnerability. “[A]n ontology of individualism,” Butler argues, “fails to recognize that life, understood as precarious life, implies a social ontology which calls that form of individualism into question. There is no life without the conditions of life that variably sustain life, and those conditions are pervasively social, establishing not the discrete ontology of the person, but rather the interdependency of persons, involving reproducible and sustaining social relations, and relations to the environment and to non-human forms of life, broadly considered.”⁴ Seemingly very far, in its affirmative tone, from Butler’s concern with mourning, grief, precarity, and violence, is Rosi Braidotti’s defense of a “posthumanist” ethics grounded in a vitalist ontology of life as *zoe*. While western conceptions of ethics and politics have been founded on determinate forms of human life (*bios*)—excluding “natural” or “animal” life (*zoe*) as the outside of the *polis* associated with women, slaves, non-human animals and other non-citizens—Braidotti emphasizes *zoe*, or the “generative power that flows across species,” as the basis of a new “vitalist egalitarianism.” This shared dimension of *zoe* therefore opens an ethics of life that is effectively the positive

³ See Hasana Sharp and Chloë Taylor eds., *Feminist Philosophies of Life* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press, 2016).

⁴ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2009), 19. See also *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Brooklyn: Verso, 2004) and “Precarious Life, Vulnerability, and the Ethics of Cohabitation,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, No. 2 (2012): 134-51.

spin on Butler's: "The new transversal alliance across species and among posthuman subjects [through *zoe*] opens up unexpected possibilities for the recomposition of communities, for the very idea of humanity and for ethical forms of belonging. These are not confined to negative bonding in terms of sharing the same planetary threats: climate change, environmental crisis or even extinction."⁵ And in her recent work, Elizabeth Grosz has developed an ontology of "life itself" as a force of temporal becoming and creative differentiation through a radical feminist reading of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Grosz's ontology is neither quite vitalist nor materialist, but instead attuned to the "durational entwinements" of life and matter in their mutual becoming. For Grosz, this ontology of life is the ground neither of an ethics of shared vulnerability nor of vitalist egalitarianism, but rather an "inhumanist" ethics and politics of excess and overcoming—"excesses of creativity, intensity, sexuality, and force that produce life as more than itself, a form of self-overcoming that incorporates matter and its capacities for self-overcoming within its own becomings. This capacity for self-overcoming is the condition for the emergence of art, for the eruption of collective life, and for the creation of new forms of politics, new modes of living."⁶ Despite their (not inconsequential) differences, Butler, Braidotti, and Grosz have made ontological questions about life—What is life? What does it mean to live?—central feminist philosophical and political concerns, influencing a robust and growing field of feminist and queer inquiry into "life itself."

⁵ Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge UK: Polity, 2013), 103.

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Becoming Undone: Darwinian Reflections on Life, Politics, and Art* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 8. See also *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2004) and *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

This dissertation project takes off from this work. It does so, however, by placing more emphasis on the sexual dimensions of life. In some cases, the feminist turn to life seems to entail a turn *away* from sex, with sex and gender being decentered as central categories of queer and feminist analysis.⁷ There is an operative assumption, it seems, that reflection on life leads, or should lead, feminist theory to something more originary or fundamental than sex—that recent terms of investigation such as vulnerability, materiality, animality, and affect are beyond, beneath, or before sexualization. Feminist and queer theorists have therefore taken an interest in these terms because they are said to destabilize the reigning Eurocentric ontologies of “the human”—founded as they are on the philosophical and political exclusion of vulnerability, materiality, animality, and affect—and therefore the heteronormativity and phallogentrism to which these ontologies are bound. As such, much recent work in feminist post-humanism, science studies, new materialism, and affect theory, takes these terms to be self-evidently feminist and queer.⁸ To explicitly think materiality, animality, life, affect, and so on in terms of sex is therefore not only unnecessary, it risks an extreme anthropomorphism, as if sex is somehow proper to “the human.” This dissertation suggests, on the contrary, that there is nothing inherently feminist or queer about these terms and that feminist and queer theory cannot dispense with thinking about sexualization and sexual difference. In developing an ontology of sexualization it argues that there is no “life itself” abstracted from sex, that to think matter, animality, affect, life, and ontology always already implicates sex. With

⁷ On this point, see the critique offered by Lynne Huffer, “Foucault’s Fossils: Life Itself and the Return to Nature in Feminist Philosophy,” in Sharp and Taylor, *Feminist Philosophies of Life*.

⁸ See, for example, several of the essays in the edited volume Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird eds., *Queering the Non/Human* (Hampshire UK: Ashgate, 2012). I am, of course, not suggesting that all of the thinkers associated with these trajectories of thought ignore sex and sexual difference.

Grosz, one of the only thinkers in the feminist turn to life to foreground sex in her analysis, I strongly defend sexual difference “as one of the ontological characteristics of life itself, not merely a detail, a feature that will pass.”⁹ Given this centrality and ineradicability of sexuation to life, I therefore believe that feminist and queer theory and politics can afford to ignore it only to their own detriment.

Central Terms of the Project

By way of introduction, I will offer a brief overview of the dissertation’s three central terms—Being (or ontology), life, and sex—in order to better situate this project’s orientation to these questions and its relation to other recent work.

I. Being or ontology

“...ontology...itself still needs a guideline.”

– MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*

It is now commonplace to associate twentieth century European philosophy with a “postmodern” end of ontology as a systematic thinking of Being “itself” in reaction to the limits of the grand metaphysical systems developed by the great “modern” thinkers such as Kant and Hegel. The death of ontology is typically associated most explicitly with Martin Heidegger’s devastating “*Destruktion*” of western metaphysics, and its considerable development in the work of Jacques Derrida. For Heidegger, western metaphysics is characterized by an “oblivion of Being” (*Seinsvergessenheit*) which consists in the erasure of the “ontological difference” between Being (*das Sein*) and being(s) or entities (*das Seiende*): “Metaphysics does indeed represent beings in their

⁹ Grosz, *Time Travels*, 31.

Being, and so it thinks the Being of beings. But it does not think Being *as such*, does not think *the difference* between Being and beings....Metaphysics has not only failed up to now to ask this question, the question is inaccessible to metaphysics as such” (GA9 322/246). While metaphysics does seek to go beyond individual beings to ask about beings as a whole, it understands Being as the presence of beings, whether this presence is to be understood in terms of substance or of subjectivity.¹⁰ Thus, even though ontology goes beyond the research into specific beings that distinguishes the “ontic” inquiries of the “positive sciences” by asking about the *Being* of these beings, it fails to ask about the *meaning or sense (Sinn)* of Being “as such” and therefore “ontology...still needs a guideline” (GA2 11/10). In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger therefore calls for a “fundamental ontology” that would ground not only the ontic inquiries of the sciences, but also the “regional” ontologies that give rise to the different scientific domains:

The question of Being [*Seinsfrage*] thus aims not only at an a priori condition of possibility of the sciences, which investigate beings as this or that kind of being and which thus *always already move within an understanding of Being* [*Seinsverständnis*], but also at the condition of the possibility of the ontologies which precede the ontic sciences and found them. *All ontology...remains fundamentally blind and perverts its innermost intent if it has not previously clarified the meaning of Being [Sinn von Sein] sufficiently and grasped this clarification as its fundamental task* (GA2 11/10).

However, as is well known, after his “turn” in the mid-1930s, Heidegger himself abandoned the earlier project of developing a fundamental ontology because it does not sufficiently depart from western metaphysics. Here, Heidegger turns away from the idiom of “fundamental ontology” toward a thinking of “historical Being” (*Sein*) that differs from all accounts of “metaphysical Being” (*Sein*) in that it attempts to think Being

¹⁰ “The matter [*Sache*] of philosophy as metaphysics is the Being of beings, their presence in the form of substantiality and subjectivity” (GA14 77/62).

“without any recourse to the explanations that could be provided by beings” (GA65 471/371).¹¹ For Heidegger, no “ontology” can ever fully distance itself from representational and conceptual thinking in order to think the “truth of Being” as it is “given” or “sent” in the “appropriative event” (*Ereignis*) because its goal is above all to give beings a positive ground. This is why, in his late work, Heidegger prefers to speak in terms of the “It” (*Es*) that *gives* all Being. Drawing on the fact that, in German, the phrase “There is”—*Es gibt*—literally means “It gives,” Heidegger suggests that what western metaphysics has never asked about is this “It” which gives: “In the beginning of Western thinking, Being is thought, but not the ‘It’ that gives as such. The latter withdraws in favor of the gift which It gives. That gift is thought and conceptualized from then on as Being with regard for beings” (GA14 13/8). For Heidegger, then, the “task for thinking” that is still held in reserve at the “end” of metaphysics is to ask about *what gives Being*.¹²

While much recent work in feminist and queer theory, as well as in the humanities more generally, frames itself as an “ontological (re)turn,” much of it, in my estimation,

¹¹ “The term ‘ontology’ was first coined in the seventeenth century. It designates the development of the traditional doctrine of beings into a philosophical discipline and a branch of the philosophical system. But the traditional doctrine is the academic analysis and ordering of what for Plato and Aristotle, and again for Kant, was a *question*. . . In this [latter] case, ‘ontology’ means the effort to put Being into words, and to do so by passing through the question of how it stands with Being (not just with beings as such). But because until now this question has found neither an accord nor even a resonance, but instead it is explicitly rejected by the various circles of academic philosophical scholarship, which pursues an ‘ontology’ in the traditional sense, it may be good in the future to forgo the use of the terms ‘ontology’ and ‘ontological.’ Two modes of questioning, which . . . are worlds apart should not bear the same name” (GA40 31/43-4). It is only within traditional academic philosophy, according to Heidegger, that the divisions between “ontology,” “epistemology,” and “ethics” have any meaning: for him, the “question of Being [*Seinsfrage*]” traverses and encompasses them all insofar as the “sense of Being” pertains to what Being and beings are, how they are known, and the relations between them.

¹² In light of this, the later Heidegger in many respects also moves away from the “ontological difference,” which he comes to see as causing an “even firmer entrenchment in ‘ontology’” instead of functioning as a “passageway” from metaphysics to a new thinking (GA65 467/367). Heidegger’s point, however, was not that it is no longer important to consider this difference—that between Being and beings, or between what gives and the given—but rather that fundamental ontology is not enough to get over the metaphysical oblivion of Being. It is not enough, in other words, to stop at the difference between Being and beings, one must “leap over” it (GA65 251/197). In order to do so, however, Being must first be recovered [*Verwinden*] from its oblivion.

falls afoul of the critique of ontology developed by Heidegger. In many cases, the word “ontology” is used merely as a synonym for “material” or “real,” in opposition to “linguistic” or “socially constructed” (which are, also rather dubiously, associated with “epistemology”).¹³ In this, these theorists are not so much thinking ontology as the Being of beings, let alone as the question of the sense of Being as such; instead, in Heidegger’s terms, these are generally ontic inquiries into beings or entities that thereby move within a *pre-ontological* understanding of Being. There is typically, in this work, no consideration of the ontological difference between Being and beings, and no account of that which gives Being. A central premise of this project, however, is that the attempt to rethink the ontology of life and sex cannot simply slide past Heidegger, who, perhaps more than any other European thinker, both poetically and graphically makes clear that the course of western metaphysics is not “merely” a philosophical problem, but presents a grave danger to the survival of the Earth and all its inhabitants. This is because the metaphysical oblivion of Being, which reduces Being to present beings, opens the way for the mathematical ordering and technical “positioning” (*Ge-Stell*) of all that is as a “standing-reserve” (*Bestand*) for experimentation, manipulation, accumulation, and exploitation (see QCT and GA79). For Heidegger, this technical-scientific positioning *is* the meaning of Being in the age of “modern” technology. It is therefore telling that many of the thinkers in the recent “ontological turn” produce “ontologies” that draw heavily, and often uncritically, on technical and scientific understandings of Being. In this sense,

¹³ See, for instance, Arun Saldanha’s “materialist ontology of race,” in “Reontologizing Race: The Machinic Geography of Phenotype,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 24 (2006): 9-24; Karen Barad’s “quantum ontology” in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: The Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2007); and Myra Hird’s “bacterial micro-ontologies” in *The Origins of Sociable Life: Evolution after Science Studies* (Hampshire UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

these are not “new” ontologies at all, but rather expressions of the same technical-scientific understanding of Being within which modern metaphysics is always already thinking.

By pointing us to the oblivion of Being, Heidegger therefore brings us to the threshold of a different thinking—a path beyond western metaphysics and its culmination in the modern technical-scientific world-picture. To think otherwise about Being, life, and sex, then, requires taking off from the question of Being as the condition of possibility of any ontological or ontic investigation. I therefore remain committed to the question of Being as what Heidegger calls the “basic/grounding question” [*Grundfrage*]¹⁴ but I want to distance the use of the word “ontology” in this project from its use in much of the recent literature: while I retain the term provisionally, I use it to question after Being as such, or, more precisely, *that which gives*. In sum, there are five basic claims that are key to the project’s thinking of ontology:

1. A philosophy of Being as such is necessary, without which we move uncritically within the prevailing ontology, meaning that even beings cannot ultimately be thought otherwise. Without attention to the question of Being, beings are only described and redescribed in the terms of the existing metaphysics.
2. Being cannot be rethought “retroactively” on the basis of beings or entities. All attempts to derive “ontologies” from ontic inquiries (e.g., the sciences) continue

¹⁴ Heidegger distinguished between the “guiding-question” [*Vorfrage*] and the “grounding-question” [*Grundfrage*]: “For the guiding-question, the *Being* of beings, the determination of beingness (i.e., the declaration of ‘categories’ for *ousia*), is the *answer*...for the grounding-question, on the other hand, Being is neither the answer nor even the domain of the answer. Rather, Being is what is most *question-worthy*” (GA65 76/61).

to move within the understanding of Being that opens up the given scientific domain in the first place.

3. Beings or entities must be thought in terms of their generative conditions. To annihilate the question of what gives is to remain within the prevailing metaphysics.

4. Being as such is not itself an entity or being. It refers, rather, to the process or event by which beings come to be, are, and can be known. Being is therefore never One and never identical with “itself.”

5. It is *departing from* the philosophy of Being that *everything* can, and must, be rethought.

II. Life

“The central position of the problem of life means not only that it must be accorded a decisive voice in judging any given ontology but also that any treatment of itself must summon the whole of ontology.”

– HANS JONAS, *The Phenomenon of Life*

But what is the relationship between Being and living? Since ancient Greece, the questions of Being and life have been explicitly linked in western philosophy. In *On the Soul*, Aristotle writes that “Being, in the case of the living being [*zonton*], is life [*zoe*].”¹⁵ In his notebooks, Nietzsche similarly declared: “‘Being’—we have no idea of it other than ‘living.’”¹⁶ A number of early twentieth century thinkers, including Wilhelm Dilthey, Henri Bergson, José Ortega y Gasset, and Georges Canguilhem sought to destabilize the Cartesian premises of rationalism, restoring life as the foundation of both

¹⁵ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, II.4.415b13.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, ed. Walter Kaufmann, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1968), #582. Translation modified.

Being and thinking.¹⁷ In *Being and Time*, Heidegger said of “life-philosophy” (*Lebensphilosophie*) that “this expression says about as much as the ‘botany of plants’” (GA2 46/45). But what *is* this “life”? What kind of “life” is “it”? In distinguishing his *Daseinanalytik*, Heidegger points out that both *Lebensphilosophie* and the sciences of anthropology, psychology, and biology all fail to ontologically problematize “‘life’ itself as a kind of being” (GA2 46/46). “Life” cannot ground a fundamental ontology, for Heidegger, because it is treated and known as *a* being or entity in these various disciplines and is therefore derived from a *prior* understanding of Being that renders something like “life” present-at-hand. And this prior understanding of Being, of course, is that of modern meta/physics which interprets “life” as either a form of subjective “experience” (*Erlebnis*) or objectively as matter and energy, and which leaves it open, like any other entity, to be manipulated and exploited by technology and science.¹⁸ As such, Heidegger always prefers to maintain a distance between the thinking of Being and the technical-scientific thinking of “life.”

And yet, Heidegger uncovers another concept of life, forgotten at the commencement of western metaphysics. In *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), Heidegger identifies the origin of metaphysics with the reduction of the ancient Greek

¹⁷ See Wilhelm Dilthey, *Dilthey: Selected Writings*, ed. and trans. H. P. Rickman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Henri Bergson, *Key Writings*, ed. John Mullarkey and Keith Ansell Pearson (London: Bloomsbury, 2002); José Ortega y Gasset, *Toward a Philosophy of History*, trans. Helene Weyl (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1941); Georges Canguilhem, *A Vital Rationalist: Selected Writings of Georges Canguilhem*, ed. François Delaporte, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Zone Books, 1994).

¹⁸ In “The Age of the World-Picture,” Heidegger argues that the “grounding event of modern history” is the “interweaving” of Descartes’s interpretation of “man” as the “*subjectum*” and the interpretation of nature as a calculable coherence of mathematically formulizable causal schemas in modern physics (beginning with Galileo and Newton). As Heidegger puts it, “...the more objectively the object appears [e.g., in the sciences], all the more subjectively (i.e., peremptorily) does the *subjectum* rise up...” (GA5 93/70). For Heidegger, then, the modern understanding of “life” is caught between this subjective and objective view, which are *essentially* two sides of the same coin.

thinking of *phusis*: whereas the term once signified the entire process of “emergence and abiding,” it was later understood to refer only to particular “physical beings” (*phusei onta*). Understood in terms of the ontological difference, then, whereas *phusis* once served as a name for Being in general, it comes to be thought only in terms of beings, with *metaphysics* (literally “beyond the physical” [*meta ta phusika*]) emerging as the philosophical inquiry that goes beyond particular physical beings to ask about the Being of “the physical” as a whole (GA40 11-3/15-8). However, in a 1954 exegesis of the Heraclitean fragment 16—“How can one hide from that which never sets? [*to me dunon pote pos an tis lathoi?*]”—Heidegger returns to *phusis* (as emergence and abiding) in his attempt to interpret *to me dunon pote* (“that which never sets”). In another fragment, of course, Heraclitus also famously said that “Nature loves to hide [*phusis kruptesthai philei*].” Between these two fragments, then, Heidegger locates the play—the “love” (*philei*)—between revealing and concealing. In trying to think *phusis*, as “upsurgence” and abiding from concealment, in terms of “that which never sets,” Heidegger is further drawn to fragment 30, where Heraclitus describes the cosmos as an “ever-living fire [*pur aeizoon*].” This triangulation ultimately takes Heidegger to Homer’s statement that “to live means to see the light of the sun,” which leads him to translate the verb *zín* as “rising into the light.” “The Greek *zín*, *zoe*, *zoon*,” Heidegger tells us, “must not be interpreted in either a zoological or a broader biological sense,” for once upon a time, “*zoe* and *phusis* sa[id] the same: *aeizoon* [ever-living] means *aeiphuon* [ever-emerging-and-abiding], which means *to me dunon pote* [that which never sets]” (GA7 281/EGT 116). If, however, prior to metaphysics and the sciences it birthed, Being “as such” was *phusis*, and *phusis* was also *zoe*, then what metaphysics forgot is not *Being*, but *living*. And as

David Farrell Krell astutely points out, this means that there is another history of Being than the more well-known one Heidegger traces as the oblivion of Being in western metaphysics—“a second history of being, a ‘more covert’ history of *phusis* and *zoe*.”¹⁹

The thinking of the relationship between Being and life in this project takes shape within this “other” history of Being—of Being *as* living, as *phusis* and *zoe*. It therefore does not consider “life” as a present entity to be understood objectively from outside. But neither does it route, as did Heidegger, the question of life through an existential analytic of *Dasein* that would be proper only to “man.” In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes that “Life is its own kind of being, but it is essentially accessible only in *Dasein*....Life is neither purely present-at-hand, nor is it *Dasein*” (GA2 50/49). For the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, the existential analytic of *Dasein* ultimately grounds the fundamental ontology that could answer, by way of a “*privative interpretation*,” the question of the “ontology of life.” To get to anything like “just-plain-life” (*Nur-noch-leben*), then, something must be *subtracted* from *Dasein*; yet, Heidegger also claims, just one sentence later, that “*Dasein* should never be defined ontologically by regarding it as life—(ontologically undetermined) and then something else added on top of that” (GA2 50/49). “More addition will never take us forward from life to *Dasein*. Yet if this is so,” asks Krell, then “how will subtraction help us regress to just-plain-life? What if Heidegger’s words have to be taken quite literally? That is to say, what if life is its *own* mode of Being? Can we be sure that *Dasein* is alive?”²⁰ Heidegger thus points us toward a thinking of life that is beyond the technical-scientific interpretation of modern metaphysics by withdrawing life

¹⁹ David Farrell Krell, *Daimon Life: Heidegger and Life-Philosophy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 292.

²⁰ Krell, *Daimon Life*, 51.

as some present entity, but just as soon he imprisons it in a hermeneutic circle that never frees itself from his own metaphysical interpretation of “man” (given that *Dasein* is both supposedly “neutral” with respect to sexual difference and separated from “the animal” by an “abyss”).²¹ Thus, in spite of Heidegger’s own failures, with the “other” thinking of Being as life (*zoe*) that he uncovers at the threshold of western metaphysics—a thinking Krell develops under the idiom of “za-ology,” rather than “ontology,” drawing on the Greek word “za” that Heidegger offers as the etymological root of *zoe*—Heidegger opens the path for a thinking of Being that neither has to abject life as our “scarcely conceivable, abysmal bodily kinship with the beast”²² nor turns to “life itself” as a post-humanist escape hatch from the prison of man.²³

²¹ Heidegger speaks frequently of the “abyss” between “the animal” and *Dasein* (or *Mensch*—the distinction between the two holds here least of all), for instance in the famous 1929-30 lectures, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (GA29), and the “Letter on Humanism” (in GA9). Yet, as Krell points out, Heidegger also defines *Dasein* “itself” as an “abyss” or as the “dissolution of all grounds” (*Abgrund*). In that case, Krell asks, “what sense can it possibly make to claim that *Dasein* is separated from the animal by any abyss of essence—one abyss separating another, abysmally, with nothing in between?” (*Daimon Life*, 8). In “I Don’t Know Why We Are Doing This,” Jacques Derrida also offers a strong critique of Heidegger’s attempt to ground an ontological difference between “man” and “the animal” (see *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, trans. David Wills [New York: Fordham University Press, 2008], 141-60). I will come back to the question of Heidegger and the neutralization of sexual difference in relation to Irigaray in Chapter One.

²² As Heidegger writes in the “Letter on Humanism,” “Of all the beings that are, presumably the most difficult to think about are living beings, because on the one hand they are in a certain way most closely akin to us, and on the other they are at the same time separated from our ek-sistent essence by an abyss. However, it might also seem as though the essence of divinity is closer to us than what is so alien in other living creatures, closer, namely...than is our scarcely conceivable, abysmal bodily kinship with the beast” (GA9 326/248).

²³ From very different perspectives, Claire Colebrook and Sylvia Wynter have critiqued the “posthumanist” move to embrace “life itself” as an overcoming of “man,” both of which resonate with a Heideggerian orientation. Drawing on Nietzsche, Colebrook points out that “life” has always been thought within an anthropomorphic frame which persists even after “man” has supposedly been “subtracted” (see “Feminist Extinction,” in *Sex After Life: Essays on Extinction*, Vol. 2 [Open Humanities Press, 2014], 7-22). Wynter argues, following Heidegger and Foucault, that “life itself” as a biological entity emerges within the modern “episteme of Man” that “overrepresents” a bourgeois, Eurocentric conception of Man as “the human” itself and cannot therefore be separated from a racializing ontology of the human (see “Unsettling the Coloniality Being/Truth/Power/ Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, No. 3 (Fall 2003): 257-337). I come back to the latter point in the conclusion.

In pursuing this third path, this project therefore departs from some of the current literature on the question of life. While it certainly does not reject the so-called life or natural sciences, it also does not seek to ground a philosophy of life or Being in them. The project argues, on the contrary, that the scientific thinking of life always begins from an implicit ontology and therefore that a different interpretation of Being would lead to a different “science” of life, or as Heidegger suggests, perhaps to a different relation to life altogether other than the “scientific.”²⁴ As such, the project joins ongoing work seeking to renegotiate the relationship between the sciences and philosophy, particularly on the question of life, without for all that ceding ontology to the sciences. In rethinking life beyond the metaphysics of man, the project avoids the impulse to build a materialist or vitalist ontology from either the smallest physical or biological unit or from an abstract concept of “matter” or “life itself.”²⁵ Life, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, is always *a life*.²⁶ And *a life*, even “just-plain-life,” is always *embodied* and *lived*, which makes the specificity of the body central to the question of life, and therefore, in this “other” thinking of Being, to any ontology worthy of the name. This is why Heidegger’s student Hans Jonas identified the living body as “the memento of the still unsolved question of ontology.”²⁷

²⁴ “Can there be ‘biology’ as long as the fundamental relation [*Grundbezug*] to living beings is unclear...? But must there be ‘biology,’ since it derives its justification and its necessity from the sovereignty of science within modern machination? Will not every biology necessarily destroy ‘living beings’ and thwart a fundamental relationship to them? Must this relation not be sought completely outside of ‘science’? In what space should this relation abide?” (GA65 276/217).

²⁵ The former impulse has been criticized by Jordana Rosenberg as the “molecularization of ontology.” See “The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present,” *Theory & Event* 17, no. 2 (2014).

²⁶ Gilles Deleuze, “Immanence: A Life,” in *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975-1995*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 384-9.

²⁷ Hans Jonas, *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 25.

In the 1969 seminar in Le Thor, Heidegger identifies three different ways the question of Being has been formulated in his work, moving from the “sense [*Sinn*] of Being” (in the fundamental ontology of *Being and Time*), to the “truth of Being” (after the “Turn”) to, finally, the “*topology* of Being.” In *Being and Time*, the question of the sense of Being was directed toward the openness of *Dasein* to the openness of Being, while turning to the openness of Being “*itself*” turned Heidegger to the question of the “*truth*” of Being (“truth” here understood as the Greek *aletheia*, or the “unconcealment” of Being and not as propositional correspondence or certitude). In the last phase, Heidegger’s attention turns again, this time to “the question concerning the place or location of Being”—that is, where the unconcealment of Being takes *place* (GA15 82/FS 47). Heidegger’s name for this *topos* is “the Clearing” (*die Lichtung*), which he also identifies precisely with the “*Da*” of *Dasein*—the *there* of Being. But if *Dasein*’s *Da* is the *topos* of Being, and if the *Da* is “sustained” by a human body, then, as Heidegger remarks, “Can one isolate the dark understanding which defines our bodily belonging [*leibhafte Zugehören*] to the earth, from our being placed in the Clearing?” (GA15 233/H 145). In other words, how can *Dasein*’s being-*there* be separated from the living body that sustains it? And then how can Being, the unconcealment of which takes *place* in and through that body, *truly* be separated from the life that courses through it? While this no doubt means that the “body-phenomenon” (*Leibphanomen*) is, as Heidegger put it, the “most difficult problem” (GA15 234/H 146), it also means that the question of Being—its sense, its truth, and its *topos*—is *essentially* indissociable from the question of life.

III. Sex

“Sexual difference remains to be thought...”

—JACQUES DERRIDA, “*Geschlecht*”

According to Giorgio Agamben, the intersection of the question of Being and the question of life is constitutive of the history of western metaphysics and politics insofar as the metaphysics of “pure Being” (*on haplos*) and the politics “bare life” (*zoe*) are co-implicating. To quote Agamben: “The isolation of the sphere of pure Being, which constitutes the fundamental activity of Western metaphysics, is not without analogies with the isolation of bare life in the realm of Western politics.”²⁸ If western metaphysics is the endeavor to locate an unqualified, or “pure,” concept of Being, then western politics is the attempt to isolate “pure life” (*zoe*) from concrete forms of living (*bios*). Agamben therefore suggests that the hidden link between these two processes holds the key to resolving the crises of western metaphysics and politics: “Pure Being, bare life—what is contained in these two concepts, such that both the metaphysics and the politics of the West find their foundation and sense in them and in them alone? What is the link between the two constitutive processes by which metaphysics and politics seem, in isolating their proper element, simultaneously to run up against an unthinkable limit?”²⁹

However, as discussed above in relation to the “other” history of Being that Heidegger uncovers (however unwittingly)—i.e., the history of Being *as zoe*—“before” metaphysics, *zoe* was not understood zoologically or biologically as “animality,” that is, as “bare life.” Rather, it, like both *phusis* and *aletheia*, named the emergence and abiding, the unconcealment, of Being “itself.” As a process of “rising” (*Aufgang*), *zoe* could be

²⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 182.

²⁹ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 182.

found everywhere—“in celestial processes (the rising of the sun), in the surging of the sea, in the growth of plants, in the coming forth of animals and human beings from the womb” (GA40 11/15). In the cosmology of the Orphics, for instance, *phusis* is explicitly identified with *zoe*, as the animating force of growth, metamorphosis, and creation—that which brings everything forth, sustains its persistence, and enables its transformation.³⁰

There is, here, no restriction of *zoe* to living organisms: *zoe* as *phusis* as Being is described as simultaneously common to all, the collectivity of all that is, and the *only* “thing” that is. One finds a similar conception of Being as *phusis* amongst the “first philosophers,” the Milesians. For each thinker associated with this school, the cosmos is composed of one fundamental element—water (Thales), *apeiron* (Anaximander), air (Anaximenes)—which, by the dynamic force of *phusis*, is differentiated into all that is.³¹

Phusis (Being) is thus the process by which the originary element is revealed and persists in different forms: every “thing” *is* the originary element as differentiated and revealed by the power of *phusis*. As thought by the Orphics and the Milesians, there is no conception of Being or life as “pure” and “indeterminate;” rather, Being as *phusis* as *zoe* is an active force of differentiation and revealing, creation and transformation, growth and persistence. It is with Parmenides and the Eleatics that the concept of a “pure” Being emerges—Being as a solitary, unchanging, totality—a perfect circle.³² And it is in relation to this thinking of Being that the opposition between the pure and indeterminate on the one hand, and the determined and changing on the other—i.e., western

³⁰ See Hymn #10 (“To *Phusis*”), in Apostolos N. Athanassakis and Benjamin M. Wolkow, trans., *The Orphic Hymns* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013). Significantly, in this hymn, while *zoe* is used as another name for *phusis*, there is also no division between technics or artifice (*tekhne*) and nature or life—indeed *phusis* is referred to as the “technician-of-all” (*pantotekhnēs*).

³¹ See G. S. Kirk and J. E. Raven, eds., *The Presocratic Philosophers: A Critical History with a Selection of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 74-162.

³² See Kirk and Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 263-85.

metaphysics—takes its force. It is only within such a metaphysics that *zoe*—the process of emergence and abiding—can, and will, eventually be reduced to a purely biological concept of “bare life.”

If Agamben derives his thinking about the co-implication of the themes of bare life and pure Being in no small part from Heidegger’s history of Being as western metaphysics, life and Being can also be thought in terms of the “other,” more “covert,” history of Being as *phusis* and *zoe*. In this history, where Being and life prevail as forces of generation, creation, and differentiation, any pretensions to “pure” Being and “bare” life would be recognized as metaphysical flights of fancy. And in this history, as David Krell writes, “almost everything awaits telling...”³³ What, then, was already forgotten and concealed within the concepts of “pure Being” and “bare life”? What is the hidden link between them that Agamben alludes to? Might it be the erotic, or even sexuate, dimension of Being and life? Indeed, in nearly all of the ancient Greek cosmogonies from Homer, Hesiod, and the Orphics to Empedocles and Aristophanes, the cosmos is suffused with sexuate and erotic elements and forces. In these accounts, the cosmos first consists of elements (e.g., chaos, water, aether, air, earth) and forces (e.g., time, necessity) that are nearly always represented as sexuate. And unlike the anthropomorphic “god of love” that he later becomes, eros, in these earlier cosmogonies, is the force of pro-creation and generation who perpetually brings life (*zoe*) to the cosmos by bringing the elements together. Indeed, one of the only proposed etymologies for “eros” connects it to the hypothetical Proto-Indo-European root “**h₁erh₂*-” which means both “to separate or

³³ Krell, *Daimon Life*, 294.

divide” and to “adjoin.”³⁴ The process of emergence, differentiation, relation, growth, and transformation in these accounts is therefore *essentially erotic* and all processes of creation and bringing-forth are described in terms of sexual reproduction and procreation.³⁵ Here, then, there is no concept of undifferentiated life or Being, but rather an understanding of Being, or life, as a cosmic process of perpetual differentiation and relation, seen as inherently erotic, as well as an acknowledgement of the elements necessary for life. In most of them, moreover, the generative principle of the cosmos is seen as maternal: the bringing-forth of *phusis* and *zoe* is a process of generation and birth. And as dramatized by Aeschylus and Euripides, the founding gesture of the *polis* is not, as it is according to Agamben, the bifurcation of *bios* and *zoe*, but rather the supplanting of the justice (*dike*) of *phusis* itself with justice as law (*nomos*) and the consensus of citizens. The transition to this form of justice takes place only through the triumph of the anthropomorphic Olympians (ruled by Zeus) over the elemental “deities,” the explicit abjection of the generativity of maternity, and an acquittal for matricide.³⁶ The ancient elemental and erotic cosmology subsequently receives an even more fatal blow by

³⁴ Michael Weiss, “Erotica: On the Prehistory of Greek Desire,” *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, vol. 98 (1998): 31-61. The etymology of Eros has long been considered lost; however, Weiss reconstructs it via the Hittite word for “border” (*arḫāš*)

³⁵ Such is the case in Plato’s *Symposium*, for instance, in which Diotima teaches that all forms of *poiesis* (or “bringing-forth”), from nature to poetry to philosophy, are forms of generation driven by Eros. This point is central to a difference between Irigaray and Heidegger, to which I will return in the conclusion.

³⁶ As told by Aeschylus in the *Eumenides*, Orestes is tormented by the Erinyes (or “Furies”), who seek vengeance for the murder of his mother, Clytemnestra. The case is ultimately tried before a jury in Athens, presided over by Athena herself. The Erinyes act as the prosecution, arguing from the basis of the maternal and natural justice, while Orestes is defended by Apollo (who had also encouraged Orestes to murder his mother in the first place). Ultimately, Orestes is acquitted when Athena breaks a hung jury after Apollo convinces her that the maternal plays no important role in procreation in comparison with the paternal, given that Athena herself sprang from Zeus’ head without a maternal birth. Throughout the trial, the Erinyes, who are primordial deities—daughters of Nyx (Night)—defend justice as a form of cosmic balance and the principle of maternal generativity linked to Gaia herself. The anthropomorphic deities Athena and Apollo, on the other hand, defend the subordination of the elemental deities to a conception of justice as law, serving the interests of the patriarchy and the consensus of the (male) citizens in the *polis*.

western metaphysics with the emergence of the Platonic Demiurge—the singular, master technician who imposes an ideal and rational order on the unruly feminine chaos of nature—who will serve as the onto-theological figure of creation in nearly all western philosophy and religion.

My goal here is not to retrieve a suppressed “gynocentrism,” “matriarchy,” or “goddess,” but rather to point out that the “bare life” and “pure Being” that Agamben identifies as constitutive of western metaphysics and politics are themselves founded on an erasure not only of a thinking of Being *as* life (*zoe*), but also a thinking of Being and life as *essentially erotic and sexuate*—a view of Being and life as processes of generation, differentiation and relation. In other words, to the degree that the constitutive principles of western politics and metaphysics are “bare life” and “pure Being,” the founding gesture of western politics and metaphysics is a *de-sexu(aliz)ation and de-eroticization of the cosmos, of life, and of Being*. And in that case, might this de-sexu(aliz)ation and de-eroticization be precisely “the link between the two constitutive processes by which metaphysics and politics seem...simultaneously to run up against an unthinkable limit”? Indeed, what eros, as a force of separation and joining, and sex, as a cleaving and division, already entail is *limitation*—a limitation that is the condition of differentiation and relation, and a limitation that “pure Being” and “bare life” have sought to meta-physically transcend. This project therefore argues that any rethinking of the relationship between Being and life, such as the one sought by Agamben, must think their forgotten erotic and sexuate dimensions. For as Jacques Derrida reminds us, “Sexual difference remains to be thought from the moment one no longer pins one’s hopes on a common *doxa* or bio-anthropological science, both of which are sustained by a

metaphysical interpretation” (G 410/22). To think life and Being beyond the prevailing metaphysics, then, necessarily entails thinking sexual difference as an ontological question. Indeed, if the living body is the *topos* of Being, or at least is indistinguishable from it, and if the life that each body lives is never “bare life” but *a* life that is always already limited and differentiated, that is to say *sexuate*, then, following the final Heidegger, sexual difference *is* the question of Being (or at least indistinguishable from it). And if Being is thought as *zoe*, and *zoe* is an erotic and sexuate force of differentiation, generation, and creativity, and if *a* sexuate life is never an undifferentiated life but always a “*form of life*” (*bios*), then is not sexual difference precisely “a *bios* that is only its own *zoe*” (providing that *zoe* here no longer signifies “bare life” but rather “life-Being”)?³⁷ Thinking the question of Being and life beyond the “bio-anthropological sciences” of metaphysics thus not only *enables* sexual difference to be thought, it demands it. Unlike certain recent work that turns to “life itself” separated from the question of sex, then, this project insists on the essential indissociability of Being, life, and sex.

Overview of Project

The Heideggerian orientation of this project should by now be apparent. It was Heidegger who most forcefully linked the oblivion of Being in the history of western metaphysics with the eventual technical-scientific positioning of all that is (including ourselves) as a standing reserve of cause and effect relations that is always present-at-hand. In this understanding of Being, everything becomes quantifiable and calculable, truth becomes a

³⁷ Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 188.

measure of the efficacy of effects, and technical and scientific rationality become the only way to ask and answer questions. For Heidegger, all of this signals the “completion”

(*Vollendung*) of the course of western philosophy set out by Plato:

Metaphysics is Platonism....We forget that already in the age of Greek philosophy a decisive characteristic of philosophy appears: the development of sciences within the field which philosophy opened up. The development of the sciences is at the same time their separation from philosophy and the establishment of their independence. This process belongs to the completion of philosophy. Its development is in full swing today in all regions of beings. This development looks like the mere dissolution of philosophy, and is in truth its completion....The sciences are now taking over as their own task what philosophy in the course of its history tried to present in part, and even there only inadequately, that is, the ontologies of the various regions of beings (nature, history, law, art) (GA14 71-3/57-8).

And in light of highly popular recent texts that attempt to rethink not only ontology but also ethics and politics on the basis of neuroscience, quantum physics, and microbiology, it appears that Heidegger’s prediction was not so far off base.³⁸ And it is Heidegger who also makes it clear why the culmination of metaphysics in the sciences is not merely a philosophical problem, for “the end of philosophy proves to be the triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technical world and of the social order proper to this world. The end of philosophy means: the beginning of the world civilization based on Western European thinking” (GA14 73/59). Heidegger, for his part, remained committed to “thinking the possibility that the world civilization...might one day overcome the technical-scientific-industrial character as the sole criterion of humanity’s short stay in the world” (GA14 75/60). For Heidegger, thinking this possibility entails a thinking that is neither metaphysics nor science but a “preparatory thinking” that prepares

³⁸ See, respectively, Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008); Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; and Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life*.

for a *transition* in thinking by learning what is held in reserve—an untimely thinking that prepares for a different future by learning what has been unthought in the past. And “to think preparatorily and to fulfill such thinking involves an education in learning *in the midst* [*inmitten*] of the sciences....To *think* in the midst of the sciences means to go beyond them without despising or disrespecting them” (GA5 212/158. Emphasis added). In short, it is Heidegger who most makes clear the stakes of the oblivion of Being and the exhaustion of western metaphysics, demonstrating that to think differently—and therefore to *think* at all—let alone to *be* differently—entails relentlessly returning ourselves to the question of Being.

In the “other” history of Being that Heidegger, perhaps inadvertently, opens, what is forgotten and held in reserve in western metaphysics is the question of life, of life as an erotic and sexuate force of relation and differentiation, of generation and creativity. What this history shows is that a thinking of life is possible that is neither an anthropocentric humanism nor a technical scientism (for these are the two faces of the same metaphysics). It is this other thinking of life that this project insists is necessary to be able to pose different questions about living—questions that are demanded if we are to live differently in the future. And yet, Heidegger himself fails to develop this other thinking of life in any substantive way: it is present in his work, rather, as fragmentary and suggestive, appearing as the limit to his endeavor to get over metaphysics.³⁹ As David Krell puts it, “Heidegger’s history of being...says enough to stake out some of the

³⁹ In a number of texts, Derrida, Irigaray, and Krell point to Heidegger’s failure to think life as the limit to his ability to think beyond western metaphysics. I return to this question extensively in Chapter Two. Krell also suggests that it is Heidegger’s inability to adequately develop an ontology of life that motivates his involvement in Nazism. See *Daimon Life and Ecstasy, Catastrophe: Heidegger from Being and Time to the Black Notebooks* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

beginnings and ends of such a second history,” but that the question of life “remains unplumbed.”⁴⁰ Krell therefore suggests that “a history of being as *phusis*, but of *phusis* as *zoe*” might have to abandon many of the familiar themes that occupied Heidegger’s thinking, including the “epochal principles” that structure his history of Being. And if this second history is ultimately a story of life, then to lose those principles therefore means losing the notions of Being and history themselves, for as Meister Eckhart wrote “Only what is without principles truly lives.”⁴¹ To quote Krell:

Having lost both history and being, such a second history of being would perhaps have to lose Heidegger as well; or, if not, it would have to accept some strange bedfellows for him: Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, Derrida’s *Post Card and Glas*, Bataille’s 1929-30 texts on mythological anthropology, Irigaray’s fluid mechanics of woman and God in *Speculum* and *Ce sexe...*

This project picks up two of these “bedfellows,” Irigaray and Foucault, and brings along a third: Gilbert Simondon’s philosophy of individuation (although Nietzsche and Derrida haunt it). To this list of thinkers and texts in the “other” history of Being—a history of Being as life, as always more-than-one, as erotic—could, of course, be added others, all of which animate this project in significant ways: Raymond Ruyer’s *L’embryogenèse du monde et le Dieux silencieux*, Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Corpus*, Gilles Deleuze’s *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense*, Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, Elizabeth Grosz’s meditations on sexual difference as life’s ludic force of artistic creativity.

The dissertation therefore ultimately departs from Heidegger’s work to consider

⁴⁰ Krell, *Daimon Life*, 292.

⁴¹ Here, Krell is drawing on Reiner Schürmann’s reading of Heidegger, which argues that the end of metaphysics in the triumph of the technological world is the end of foundational principles (*arkhe*) and therefore the beginning of *an-archic* acting instead of Being. The Eckhart quote is the epigraph to Schürmann’s book. See Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987).

the relationship of Being, life, and sex, primarily as it is developed in three thinkers: Luce Irigaray, Gilbert Simondon, and Michel Foucault. At first, these three thinkers would seem to share little but a common intellectual milieu, with next to no thematic and methodological overlap. Indeed, in certain ways they seem to be incompatible. Foucault's well-known historicization of sex and sexuality, for instance, does not sit comfortably with Irigaray's seemingly transhistorical postulation of sexual difference as ontological, natural, and universal. Whereas the theme of sexual difference is a constant in Irigaray's work from the beginning, the question of sexuality seems to only occupy Foucault's concern in his later work and Simondon devotes only a few pages to the subject. In fact, Simondon's and Foucault's apparent lack of interest in questions of sexual difference and feminism might make them seem counterproductive figures to a feminist rethinking of ontology. Simondon's reputation as a "thinker of technics" seems as odds with Irigaray's frequent protestations against science and technology. Methodologically, each approached philosophy in a very unique way: Foucault remained committed to archival research, Simondon developed his philosophy of technology through hands-on work in his own *atelier*, and Irigaray has long worked as a practicing (though unorthodox) linguist and psychoanalyst. Finally, none comment on or directly address the work of the other two. What they do share, however, is a strong relationship to the work of Heidegger; and yet, for each of them, this takes the form of a writing *with* or *to* than a writing *on*. None, in other words, offers an extensive reading of Heidegger, but each reformulates and develops, while taking off from a certain Heideggerian problematic. Indeed, many of Irigaray's texts since *L'oubli de l'air chez Martin Heidegger* (a text that she began as a "letter" to Heidegger on the day of his death in 1976) take the form of a

clandestine dialogue with Heidegger. Foucault famously claimed in his final interview that, although he never wrote on Heidegger, his entire work was framed by his reading of Heidegger who he identifies as “the essential philosopher.” And Simondon’s project can be read as a response to the problematic nexus of technology and ontology in the history of western philosophy that Heidegger formulated in the decades before him. Each of them are indebted to Heidegger’s critique of western metaphysics and each attempts to rethink Being in his wake. In overcoming many of Heidegger’s own limitations, each of these thinkers therefore offers invaluable contributions to the rethinking of Being, life, and sex as well as to the development of a theory of sexual individuation and relation.

The dissertation is therefore both a response to the impasses in Heidegger’s work as well as a Heideggerian response to what I perceive as serious limitations in some of the current trajectories in feminist and queer theory. It is structured as a fold that follows the path of Heidegger in and the paths of Irigaray, Simondon, and Foucault out. It begins with the question of ontology and sexual difference. In Chapter One, I read Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference in light of Heidegger’s return to the question of Being and the project of fundamental ontology in *Being and Time*. Irigaray’s philosophy of sexual difference, I suggest, is aimed at reopening the *question of Being* and not at a *description of existent entities*: it is, in other words, a *guideline* for all ontology and ontic inquiry (such as the sciences). Based on this reading, I distance Irigaray’s philosophy from two of her critics: Judith Butler’s de-ontologization of sexual difference through a political critique of ontology and Myra Hird’s de-ontologization of sexual difference through science studies. I argue that both of these approaches, which are extremely influential in gender studies, fail to consider the ontological difference between Being and beings,

thereby continuing to operate within the existing phallogocentric approach to Being that Irigaray's work challenges.

In developing her ontology of sexual difference, however, Irigaray runs up against the same problem that Heidegger faced in developing his fundamental ontology: the relationship between life, nature, and technology in western metaphysics. Chapter Two, then, explores their respective responses to this impasse. Since the beginning, when the first philosophers sought to go beyond the reigning mythological approach, the thinking of Being in western metaphysics has been intimately bound with *phusis*, or "nature." For Heidegger, this relationship culminates in the approach to nature in modern physics which reduces nature to something present-at-hand in the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology. While Heidegger ties this enframing of *phusis* to the forgetting of Being, Irigaray thinks it in terms of a forgetting of vital, elemental materiality that was part of a sexuate cosmology centered on birth. Thus, Irigaray adds a crucial dimension to Heidegger's critique: the positioning of nature in the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology is not just an enframing of nature, but rather a *phallogomorphic* recreation of the world in the image of man through *tekhne-logos*.

This critique, I argue, enables Irigaray to move beyond the aporia of life and Being in Heidegger's work. Chapter Three, then, begins the move out of this aporia toward a new ontology of vital, sexuate Being. In this chapter, I argue that Irigaray's thought constitutes an entirely different philosophy of *phusis*: instead of a *meta-physics* that seeks to go *beyond phusis*, it is a *dia-phusis* that seeks to think becoming in terms of a relation *through* and *by means of phusis*. For Irigaray such an approach must begin with a cultivation of a relation to the maternal body. According to Irigaray, western

meta/physics—including both science and philosophy—starts here, by thinking material reality without ever thinking the first vital, material relation of all. Irigaray’s diaphysics, then, constitutes a vital, sexuate cosmology that opens an entirely new relation to the world, microcosmic and macrocosmic. To explicate this, I then distinguish between approaches to matter in contemporary physics and new materialist theory to that of Irigaray and the Kogi peoples of Colombia who have an extraordinary sexuate cosmology entirely structured around a relation to The Mother.

This diaphysics of sexual difference, I contend, is the new articulation of life, nature, and Being necessary to develop a new vital, sexuate ontology that moves beyond the techno-phal-logocentric understanding of western metaphysics. In the fourth chapter, I therefore develop Irigaray’s ontology vis-à-vis Simondon’s philosophy of individuation or “ontogenesis.” I begin with Irigaray’s and Simondon’s respective critiques of the *hylemorphic* schema of matter and form that constitutes western metaphysics, showing how they replace this schema with an understanding of nature and life as morphogenic processes. For both thinkers, sexuation is one of the central modes of morphogenesis in living beings. I therefore use Irigaray’s philosophy think through the implications of Simondon’s complex theory of individuation, as well as use Simondon to think in more detail about what Irigaray’s sexuate philosophy of becoming entails. In developing an “ontogenesis of sexual difference,” Chapter Four then completes the ontological project set out in Chapter One by way of a transition from meta/physics to diaphysics. I close the chapter by returning to the two critics of Irigaray’s ontology detailed in Chapter One, namely Butler and Hird, to reassess their criticisms in light of the philosophy of sexuate ontogenesis and detailing the consequences of such a philosophy for feminist and queer

theory.

In the conclusion, I turn to Foucault arguing against the hegemonic reading of him in gender studies, which largely ignores his relation to Heidegger and ontology. Looking at *The History of Sexuality* through the lens of Heidegger's critique of modern technical-scientific theory of nature, I argue that Foucault gives us one of the most significant expositions of what happens to the life and sex in the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology. I argue that Foucault's notorious allusion to "bodies and pleasures" is a way of rereading Heidegger's argument that the "saving power" for a "turn" out of the *Ge-Stell* is poiesis: what if Foucault's erotic ethics of bodies and pleasures in his later life is his allusion to a way out of the bio-political enframing of the vital sexuation elaborated by Irigaray and Simondon? Pursuing this possibility, I note that Heidegger takes his argument about the saving power of *poiesis* from the speech of Socrates in the *Symposium* in which Socrates is relaying the discourse of the priestess Diotima on the virtues of eros and the relation of philosophy to eros. Here I bring Irigaray, Simondon, and Foucault together to argue that eros is the way to another constellation of thinking and Being, another way of living, another ontology, ethics, and politics of life and sex beyond the techno-logic of modernity.

ONE

ÊTRE-SEXUÉ

SEXUAL DIFFERENCE, ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

“Both in theory and in practice, everything resists the discovery and affirmation of such an advent or event [i.e., a “new epoch” of sexual difference]. In theory, philosophy wants to be literature or rhetoric, wishing either to break with ontology or to regress to the ontological. Using the same ground and the same framework as ‘first philosophy,’ working toward its disintegration but without proposing any other goals that might assure new foundations and new works.”

– LUCE IRIGARAY, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*

“Substituting the *two* for the *one* in sexual difference corresponds, then, to a decisive philosophical and political gesture, one which renounces being *one or many* in favor of *Being-two* as the necessary foundation of a new ontology, a new ethics, and a new politics in which the other is recognized as other and not as the same.”

– LUCE IRIGARAY, *Democracy Begins Between Two*

Luce Irigaray is a towering figure in Continental philosophy, particularly in feminist theory. Her readings of the history of philosophy are as famous for their encyclopedic breadth and their microscopic level of attention as they are infamous for the relentless and devastating critiques they offer. “I can think of no feminist,” Judith Butler notes, “who has read and reread the history of philosophy with the kind of detailed and critical attention that she has,” although “the largeness and speculative character of Irigaray’s claims have always put me a bit on edge.”¹ The secondary literature on Irigaray is voluminous.² And while Irigaray’s magisterial early works charting the itinerary of the abjected feminine within phallogocentric economies of representation and exchange, especially *Speculum*, have become canonical in feminist theory, her later works, which

¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 11.

² A sample of important volumes of which Irigaray is the central focus includes: Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford, *Engaging with Irigaray* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994); Penelope Deutscher, *A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Work of Luce Irigaray* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002); Alison Stone, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Rachel Jones, *Irigaray: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy* (New York: Polity, 2011).

largely turn from a critical mode to the elaboration of an affirmative philosophy of sexual difference, have been met with ambivalence, if not outright resistance, from many feminist, gender, and queer theorists. Irigaray's work is often said to have shifted from being purely "critical" or deconstructive, in which the feminine and sexual difference are ultimately inexpressible and impossible, to a conservative form of empirical essentialism that takes "the two sexes" as self-evident and a priori, that grounds ethics in the heterosexual couple, is exclusionary of if not hostile to trans and queer subjects, and is entirely ignorant of race, class, and other forms of difference.³

In this chapter on Irigaray, I argue strongly against this portrayal of her work. Irigaray's entire oeuvre, from the beginning, can be characterized by a common theme: overcoming the metaphysics of the One that has dominated western thought since Parmenides, a One that has also served the basis of ethics and politics. "The natural is at least two," she writes, "All the speculation about overcoming the natural in the universal forgets that nature is not *one*....The universal has been thought as *one*, thought on the basis of *one*. But this *one* does not exist" (JAT 65/35). Therefore if her early works are more concerned with detailing the many ways in which phallogocentric logic has conflated the One with the All of Being throughout the history of philosophy, thereby deconstructing the foundations of western metaphysics, while her later works endeavor to construct the foundations of a new ontology, ethics, and politics in which Being is always already *more-than-One*, there is no fundamental shift in Irigaray's project. Indeed, she is adamant about this fact: "My position did not change. I know this is asserted, but it is a

³ Many of these concerns are debated in a well-known interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell, see Pheng Cheah and Elizabeth Grosz, "The Future of Sexual Difference: Interview with Judith Butler and Drucilla Cornell," *Diacritics* 28, No. 1 (1998): 19-42.

mistake. Perhaps some readers do not understand the passage from criticism to the more constructive aspect of my work” (C 124). From the earliest work to the most recent, Irigaray offers one of the most profound and comprehensive reconceptualizations of western thought. For her, “*everything*,” from the macrocosmic to the microcosmic, must be rethought “if the work of sexual difference is to take place” (E 14/6). Overall, Irigaray’s work opens a vital ontology of life as a process of differentiation, relation, and becoming—a becoming that, as she insists, can take place only in and through sexual difference.

In chapter one of this dissertation, then, I work through Irigaray’s exceedingly complex philosophy of sexual difference. The ontological dimensions of Irigaray’s work have often been overlooked, and when acknowledged have been interpreted as a simplistic and problematic ontologization of the quotidian “gender binary.” Yet, Irigaray identifies one of the “main errors” in the commentary on her work as “the belief that my work is more simple, empirical, and common than it is, and does not require that its original path and methods be considered in order to understand something about it” (C 124). Part of the reason for this is a lack of attention to the relationship between Irigaray’s thought and Heidegger’s.⁴ As I argue here, Irigaray’s philosophy of sexual difference is animated by a Heideggerian return to the question of Being, which must be grasped for her ethical and political project to be understood, and she upholds a fundamental Heideggerian position that Being (and therefore, for her, sexual difference)

⁴ This is not at all to imply that none of Irigaray’s readers think about her relation to Heidegger. For a book-length treatise on this relationship, see Ellen Mortensen, *The Feminine and Nihilism: Luce Irigaray with Nietzsche and Heidegger* (Oslo et al: Scandinavian University Presses, 1994). I also thank Emma Jones, whose dissertation was on the relation of Irigaray’s work to Heidegger and Lacan, for discussing this subject and sharing her work with me (see “The Future of Sexuate Difference: Irigaray, Heidegger, Ontology and Ethics,” *L’Esprit Créateur*, vol. 52, no. 3 [2012], 26-39).

cannot be explained on the basis of beings or entities. In this chapter I therefore trace the relationship between sexual difference and ontological difference as it is presented in Irigaray's work. I begin by outlining the de-ontologization of sexual difference in feminist theory before turning to Irigaray's ontological project. Here, I chart a move from a predominantly psychoanalytic orientation in Irigaray's work to a Heideggerian one and detail some of the features of her ontology. I then conclude the chapter by considering Irigaray's engagement with Heidegger on the question of sexual difference with Jacques Derrida's in order to develop a notion of "sexual *différance*." Throughout, I remain attentive to the ways in which the ethical and political project in Irigaray's work is indissociable from the ontological. In analyzing the relationships between Being, life, and sex in Irigaray's thought, I want not only to defend Irigaray's suggestions that sexual difference is fundamental to Being, or life, "itself" and to suggest that her thought is absolutely indispensable to the ongoing rethinking of ontology in feminist and queer theory, but also to argue that her philosophy of sexual difference offers a far more dynamic account of sexuate becoming, differentiation, and relation than is found in performative gender theory, queer theory, or "post-humanist" and "new materialist" feminist theory. Irigaray's invaluable contribution to the history of philosophy is her relentless insistence on the necessity of thinking sexual difference at all levels of Being, or life, and her work provides a crucial dimension to other philosophies of becoming—a dimension that should be uncontroversial, namely that sexual difference is always at play in processes of becoming.

Gender, Feminist Theory and the De-ontologization of Sexual Difference

To posit sexual difference as irreducible and ontological runs directly counter to the *doxa* of Anglophone gender and queer theory. By and large, this theory has been resistant to the “framework” of sexual difference, instead preferring the more sociological category of “gender,” which carries greater implications of “constructedness” (and therefore of deconstructability).⁵ As Butler, arguably the most well-known and influential gender and queer theorist, puts it in reference to her own work: “for me, gender is so much more unstable. I’m interested in the problem of cross-identification; I’m interested in where masculine/feminine break down, where they cohabit and intersect, where they lose their discreteness. These are *Gender Trouble*-like questions which are not fully compatible with most of the ways in which the sexual difference paradigm functions.”⁶ Gender theory relies on a bifurcation of “sex” from “gender,” which is often said to find its provenance in Simone de Beauvoir’s famous assertion in *The Second Sex* (1949) that

⁵ It is important to remember that “gender” has historically been used primarily in Anglo-American contexts. The shift from “sexual difference,” which had dominated psychoanalytic feminist theory, to “gender” was explicitly called for in a number of texts in the late 1980s, such as Teresa de Lauretis’s *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). For psychoanalytic theorists, sexual difference is always already anatomical, psychic, and social and therefore “gender” as a separate name for the sociocultural interpretations of anatomical “sex” is seen as redundant. Since the 1990s, following the publication of Butler’s massively influential *Gender Trouble*, the separation of queer theory from feminist theory, and the development of “gender studies” (as distinct from “women’s studies”), the idiom of “gender” has almost entirely eclipsed “sexual difference” in Anglo-American theory. In a 1994 dialogue, Rosi Braidotti and Judith Butler extensively discuss the differences between “gender” and “sexual difference” (which remained more popular in Europe, particularly France). See also Butler’s essay “The End of Sexual Difference?” in *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 174-203. For a French discussion on the relationship between the French thinking of sex and U. S. feminist, gender, and queer theory, see Elsa Dorlin, *Sexe, genre, et sexualités* (Paris: PUF, 2008). This is also not to imply a homogenous discourse of “sexual difference” in feminist theory in France. For proposed alternatives to “sexual difference” see Geneviève Fraisse, *La différence des sexes* (Paris: PUF, 1996) and Françoise Collin, *Le diffèrent des sexes* (Paris: Pleins Feux, 2000). The antagonism between gender and sexual difference has erupted outside of the academy in surprising ways in the last few years: in 2013 during the protests against *mariage pour tous* in France, the influence of “gender theory” came under attack (with Butler and *Gender Trouble* specifically singled out) as a forced Americanization that undermines the importance of sexual difference as foundational to French sociocultural life. For a philosophical argument of this sort see Sylviane Agacinski, *Femmes entre sexe et genre* (Paris: Seuil, 2012).

⁶ Cheah and Grosz, “The Future of Sexual Difference,” 24.

“one is not born a woman, one becomes one.”⁷ In the most basic version of this bifurcation, gender is analyzed as a “social construction” in contradistinction to “anatomical” or “biological” sex, with theorists exploring the historical and cultural variability of gender to highlight its contingency. A more sophisticated analysis, often influenced by Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, turns to the category of sex itself: rather than leaving sex as a more or less immutable foundation for the variable constructions of gender, the very idea of “sex” is revealed as itself a product of patriarchal and heterosexist gender ideologies that functions to naturalize them. This critique has been further assisted by feminist scientists, most notably Anne Fausto-Sterling, whose work amply demonstrates that there is no biological basis to any dimorphic understanding of sexual difference.⁸ There are, in sum, (at least) five central charges against sexual difference theory that cause it to be rejected in favor of “gender” by many feminist and queer theorists:

1. While sexual difference theory operates in *binary* terms (e.g., masculine/feminine, man/woman, male/female), gender theory embraces *multiplicity*: the dislocation of gender from sex enables a proliferation of genders, and the “deconstruction” of the sexual dimorphism in feminist science studies points to multiple sexes in humans and nonhuman animals. Sexual difference

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1989), 267. It should be noted that Beauvoir uses the word “gender” (*genre*) only once in *The Second Sex*, in reference to grammatical gender. The sex/gender distinction was actually introduced by sexologist John Money in the 1950s (see Terrie Goldie, *The Man Who Invented Gender: Engaging the Ideas of John Money* [Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2015]). This distinction entered gender theory by way of sociology and was read back into Beauvoir’s work.

⁸ See Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). See also Myra Hird, *Sex, Gender, and Science* (New York: Palgrave, 2004) and Joan Roughgarden, *Evolution’s Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

theory can therefore not accommodate those who do not conform to a gender or sex binary, particularly intersex individuals.

2. While sexual difference theory upholds a *static* conception of sexuate identity, gender theory opens *fluidity*. Sexual difference theory is therefore exclusionary of trans subjects.

3. While sexual difference theory views sexual difference as the *fundamental* difference in psychic and social life, gender theory views gender as one of *many differences*, including race, class, sexuality, disability, and so on. Sexual difference theory is therefore incapable of understanding the “intersectional” reality of identity and how categories of oppression work in and through one another.

4. While sexual difference theory naturalizes *heterosexuality*, gender theory shows how sex and gender are subverted by *non-heterosexual* acts. Sexual difference theory is therefore unhelpful, if not harmful, to queer theory and practice and fails to grasp how sex and gender function in tandem with norms and power.

5. While sexual difference theory operates on a *universal and transhistorical* notion of sexual difference, gender theory exposes sex and gender as highly contingent *historical and cultural productions*. Sexual difference theory therefore makes unfounded assertions, cannot think about the mutability of sex over time and space, and offers very limited possibilities for change.

Before moving on to examine Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference I will briefly detail two particular challenges her work has received from this trajectory of thought: that of

Judith Butler and that of feminist science studies scholar Myra Hird. This is necessary in order to understand two common misinterpretations of Irigaray's ontological project and will better bring into relief the particularity of her thought. These two challenges approach the question of sexual difference from two seemingly opposite directions: the de-naturalization of sex on the one hand and the re-naturalization of it on the other. Yet, as I will suggest, they ultimately remain part of the same fundamental metaphysics—a metaphysics that Irigaray profoundly challenges. In juxtaposing Irigaray's philosophy to these critiques, I thereby hope to demonstrate that many of the above charges against sexual difference are misplaced, at least with respect to Irigaray's work.

Judith Butler's Political De-ontologization of Sexual Difference

Judith Butler's challenging work has been profoundly influential in feminist theory since the publication of the pathbreaking *Gender Trouble* in 1990. Butler's work on gender attempts to synthesize a diverse set of theoretical approaches, all of which she reads in a highly singular way: psychoanalysis, a Foucauldian approach to power and discourse, deconstruction, "French" feminism (Beauvoir, Kristeva, Irigaray, Wittig), and the concept of performativity adopted from J. L. Austin's speech-act theory. There is a large body of scholarship on her work and what follows is in no way an attempt at a systematic presentation of her thought. My goal here is simply to outline her approach to the question of sexual difference and the ways in which she distances herself from Irigaray.

Butler's thinking of sexual difference takes off from Beauvoir's. In a number of essays that precede *Gender Trouble*, Butler interprets Beauvoir's distinction between the factual situation of the body and the way that that situation is taken up as a de-

ontologization of sex and gender. According to Butler, Beauvoir's "insistence that [the categories of 'man' and 'woman'] are historical constructs which must in every case be appropriated by individuals suggests that a binary gender system has no ontological necessity."⁹ In *Gender Trouble*, Butler develops this line of reasoning by turning her attention to feminist theory and politics, arguing against any ontology of gender or woman as the basis of feminism.¹⁰ For Butler, both social constructionist and sexual difference feminists effectively uphold a reified notion of sex as an ontological fact. Far from any foundation—whether biological, psychic, linguistic, or social—the category of sex is produced within what Butler calls the "heterosexual matrix." In Butler's view, all appeals to ontology derive their legitimizing force only within power structures that are already operational, power structures whose operations these ontological appeals render invisible and natural.¹¹ Ontologies of sexual difference or gender, then, derive their intelligibility from the heterosexual matrix while simultaneously naturalizing it. As such, feminism cannot rely on any such ontology without also legitimating the very norms of reproductive heterosexism. To quote Butler:

There is no ontology of gender on which we might construct a politics, for gender ontologies always operate within established political contexts as normative injunctions, determining what qualifies as intelligible sex, invoking and consolidating the reproductive constraints on sexuality, and setting the prescriptive requirements whereby sexed or gendered bodies come into cultural

⁹ Judith Butler, "Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*," *Yale French Studies*, No. 72 (1986), 48. See also the later "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault," in *Feminism As Critique*, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 128-42. Again, Beauvoir herself makes no distinction between "sex" and "gender" as such.

¹⁰ In this, Butler is deeply inspired by Denise Riley's contention that "'being a woman'...can't provide an ontological foundation" for feminism (see "*Am I That Name?*" *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988], 2). The amount of effort put specifically into deconstructing any and every idea of *woman* during this period of feminist theory remains striking, especially given the comparatively scant attention given to any feminist deconstruction of man.

¹¹ Here, Butler follows Monique Wittig who claims that "The concept of difference has nothing ontological about it. It is only the way that the masters interpret a historical situation of domination. The function of difference is to mask at every level the conflicts of interest, including ideological ones" (*The Straight Mind and Other Essays* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1992], 29).

intelligibility. Ontology is, thus, not a foundation, but a *normative injunction* that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground.¹²

In her deconstruction of sex and gender ontology, Butler draws on Nietzsche's critique of the Cartesian metaphysics of substance and subject. According to Nietzsche, a central postulate of this metaphysics is the belief, derived from and enforced by the structures of grammar, in direct causal relations that render every occurrence attributable to an acting subject. In this view, the "subject" becomes an abiding substratum that is metaphysically separate from its actions; but, as Nietzsche writes in *The Genealogy of Morals*, "there is no such substratum; there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything."¹³ Butler turns this critique on the sex/gender distinction, arguing that even when feminist theory has acknowledged gender as a "doing," it has presumed a (sexed) subject as the substratum, the "doer," of the that doing. Building on Nietzsche's will to power and Foucault's theorization of power as productive, Butler therefore inverts this traditional sex/gender ontology arguing for a certain ontological primacy of power or norms. There is no abiding sexed subject or substance; rather, "sex" becomes the "fictive" substratum that is presumed to subsist behind the performance of gender norms or heterosexist power relations. It is here that Butler draws on the linguistic theory of performativity, in which performative utterances *produce* the reality they express, rather than "constate" it. "In other words," as Butler writes:

acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body...Such acts, gestures, enactments,

¹² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 148.

¹³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kauffmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 45.

generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has *no ontological status* apart from the various acts which constitute its reality.¹⁴

As is well known, many critics contended that the theory of performativity as elaborated in *Gender Trouble* amounts to a form of linguistic constructivism that denies the materiality of bodies: if any idea of an abiding substratum is an effect of performed norms that only appears to be prior to these performances, then matter either does not exist as such or is nothing but the passive surface of power relations. In her subsequent work in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler therefore alters her language somewhat, moving from the idiom of “construction” to “materialization,”¹⁵ and revising her Nietzschean-Foucaultian metaphysics of power through a reading of Aristotle’s physics of the form-matter relation. Matter, here, cannot be said to exist outside of or prior to power relations; rather, matter is the congealed form of power.¹⁵ As such, the sexuate body is the *materialization* of heterosexist gender norms: “the regime of heterosexuality operates to circumscribe and contour the ‘materiality’ of sex, and that ‘materiality’ is formed and sustained through and as a materialization of regulatory norms that are in part those of heterosexual hegemony.”¹⁶ Any ontology of sexual difference that would make recourse to the materiality of sexuate bodies would therefore ground itself on nothing but the material effects of power relations, thereby dissimulating the operations of heterosexist

¹⁴ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 136.

¹⁵ Materiality’ designates a certain effect of power or, rather, *is* power in its formative or constituting effects. Insofar as power operates successfully by constituting an object domain, a field of intelligibility, as a taken-for-granted ontology, its material effects are taken as material data or primary givens” (*Bodies that Matter*, 9-10). In her reading of Aristotle, Butler points out that philosophical concepts of “matter” are always already imbued with gendered significance and one cannot appeal to the matter of the body as a neutral substrate for thinking about “sex.” I return to Butler’s use of Aristotle’s form-matter relation in discussing Irigaray’s and Simondon’s critiques of Aristotelian hylemorphism in Chapter Four.

¹⁶ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, xxiii-iv.

regimes of power by which sexuate bodies are constituted. In her more recent work on gender, Butler is less interested in the deconstruction of gender or sexual difference ontologies, speaking of gender and sex in terms of “grids of intelligibility” or legitimating frames of what counts as human.¹⁷ Nevertheless, throughout Butler’s work, any ontology is in fact *secondary* to the operations of power: an ontology only successfully coheres as such when its terms of legitimation are already in force, terms which the ontology then naturalizes by masking the power relations that produce and sustain it. “Sexual difference” thus names the naturalizing ontology that is produced by and sustains heterosexism: “sex” is the retroactive effect, the *materialization*, of the accretion of corporeal performances of regulatory gender norms produced within a heterosexual matrix that determines in advance what forms of sex and gender are intelligible as such.

Butler’s anti-foundationalist approach to sexual difference is motivated not, or not only, by a post-structuralist resistance to ontology or metaphysics, but rather a political concern for the heterosexism that what she calls “sexual difference fundamentalism” seems to necessarily entail.¹⁸ If, however, “sex” is the materialization of heterosexist gender norms, and “sexual difference” is the retroactive ontology that seeks to render these norms natural, then non-heterosexual or non-normative gender performances pose a serious challenge to any ontology of sexual difference. Indeed, according to Butler, “if one really pursues the theoretical consequences of gayness, one finds that even the presupposition of sexual difference is brought into a really important crisis.”¹⁹ It is precisely this “presumptive heterosexuality” that is Butler’s main problem

¹⁷ See Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

¹⁸ Butler uses this phrase in the preface to the 1999 re-publication of *Gender Trouble*.

¹⁹ Cheah and Grosz, “The Future of Sexual Difference,” 24.

with Irigaray. While Butler's early work draws heavily on Irigaray's strategy of mimesis and her critique of the phallogocentric metaphysics of substance, she also distances herself from Irigaray's work almost every time she writes on her and goes so far as to suggest that Irigaray be "put" in "heterosexual studies rather than in feminism."²⁰

Throughout her work, Butler is interested in the potential of non-heterosexual acts and performances—drag and butch lesbians in the early work, the "New Gender Politics" of intersex and trans in the later—to denaturalize, destabilize, or "trouble" heterosexist gender norms. In failing to materialize the regulatory norms of sex and gender, these acts and performances point to the limits of the ontology of sexual difference and therefore, through catachresis, have the potential to expand the domain of intelligible genders and sexualities. "Sexual difference fundamentalism" such as Irigaray's on the other hand, takes the regulatory norms of the heterosexual matrix as foundational and therefore leads to a reduction of the multiplicity of gendered acts and performances to a static ontology that cannot accommodate those whose gender and sexuality are not already intelligible within the domain of heterosexism. In displacing sexual difference from the realm of ontology to the realm of gender performance, Butler is therefore able to attribute to the body the considerable degree of plasticity for which her theory is so well known. If gender is a mode of acting, doing, or performing rather than a fundamental mode of

²⁰ Cheah and Grosz, "The Future of Sexual Difference," 30. Early in this interview Butler adamantly downplays her use of Irigaray, saying that she "do[es]n't engage [Irigaray's texts] that closely...she doesn't actually have a chapter in any of my books." Lynne Huffer has pointed out that Butler's theory of resignification (i.e., that ironic or parodic repetitions of norms can lead to a transformation in the sense of those norms) owes much to Irigaray's mimetic readings of the history of philosophy in *Speculum*, a debt that has been "forgotten" in queer theory's "story about itself as performative, disruptive, and ironic" (*Are The Lips a Grave? A Queer Feminist on the Ethics of Sex* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2013], 42).

Being, then it is always possible to act, do, or perform it otherwise, thereby opening any presumed ontology of sexual difference to trouble.²¹

Myra Hird's Scientific De-ontologization of Sexual Difference

The rich and diverse field of feminist science studies has witnessed an immense proliferation over the past decade. One of the reasons for this is a growing dissatisfaction with the constructivist and performative treatments of materiality that have dominated feminist theory since the 1980s. Indeed, much of this work directly situates itself in a critical relation to Butler's. As such, the rethinking of matter is a central theme in this theoretical trajectory, which has therefore often been referred to as a "new materialism." Feminist theory, according to these thinkers, has long relied on concepts of matter and nature as static and inert, while conceptualizing the domains of human agency, such as culture, language, norms, law, and so on as active and transformative. Because this understanding is scientifically outdated, however, feminist new materialists have turned to the physical and natural sciences in order to re-vitalize and re-animate the concepts of nature and matter for feminist theory.²² As Myra Hird, a leading feminist science studies scholar and new materialist, puts it:

New materialism marks a momentous shift in the natural sciences within the past few decades to suggest an openness and play within the living *and* nonliving world, contesting previous paradigms which posited a changeable culture against

²¹ This is not to imply that Butler's theory of performativity or parodic subversion are a simple form of voluntarism wherein an individual can choose to perform whatever gender s/he desires. Through her use of psychoanalysis, Butler argues that the process of gender subjectification is produced under compulsory and deeply traumatic conditions that leaves little room for any "free" choice. See Chapter Two of *Gender Trouble* and *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997). It is also important to note that Butler does not argue that the denaturalization of heterosexuality or sexual difference is *prima facie* subversive of regulatory norms (*Bodies that Matter*, 176.).

²² See, for instance: Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); and Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin, eds., *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies* (Open Humanities Press, 2012).

a stable and inert nature. I suggest these transformations within the natural sciences might be of interest to feminist social scientists who increasingly find themselves (often through ‘the body’) grappling with issues involving life and matter.²³

Given that in the feminist sex/gender distinction sex has been associated with matter and nature, and given that it is this linkage (i.e., sex-matter-nature) that has received the most deconstructive energy in Butler’s work, it is not surprising that in attempting to rethink the concepts of matter and nature beyond constructivism feminist new materialists would turn their attention to sex and sexual difference. In what follows, then, I will outline the arguments made specifically against Irigaray and the ontology of sexual difference by Hird, one of the thinkers in this body of work who has most explicitly engaged it.

Feminist scientists and science studies scholars have long drawn on biological research to challenge the conception of sexual difference as a dimorphic division of bodies rooted in sexual reproduction. Biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling, for instance, has critically evaluated research in genetics, neuroscience, and endocrinology, arguing that there is absolutely no biological basis on which to stake sexual difference as a mutually exclusive binary.²⁴ She has pointed out that there are far more similarities than differences between “the sexes,” biologically speaking, and that there are far more than two genital, chromosomal, hormonal, and brain configurations. While Fausto-Sterling is primarily concerned with the scientific study of sexual difference in *humans*, much of the newest literature in feminist science studies focuses on nonhuman animals and other forms of living and non-living matter. Hird’s work is exemplary in this regard: in a series of texts, she has challenged the ontology of sexual difference as anthropomorphic and

²³ Myra Hird, *Sex, Gender, and Science*, 2-3.

²⁴ Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*.

scientifically misguided by looking at the diverse range of “sex diversity” throughout the biosphere.²⁵ Given nature’s “queerness,” Hird suggests that it is a *re*-naturalization, rather than a *de*-naturalization, of sex that would best enable a queer and feminist challenge to heterosexist gender norms. Therefore, while Butler and other queer theorists frequently call on the examples of intersexuality and transsexuality in order to de-naturalize sexual difference, Hird moves in the opposite direction, arguing that a re-naturalization of sex would render such phenomena ordinary. Of nature’s “sex diversity,” Hird writes:

Virtually all plant, and many animal species are intersex. That is, living organisms are often both sexes simultaneously—which means that there are not really ‘two sexes’ at all. Many animal species routinely practice transsex, by changing from one sex to another, either once or several times. Other animals practice transvestism [sic] by visually, chemically, or behaviorally resembling the ‘opposite’ sex. And over 4000 known species are parthenogenic; that is, all the individuals are female and they reproduce without sex—what we humans term ‘virgin birth.’²⁶

From the perspective of Hird’s work, featuring lively accounts of transsexual goby fish, transvestitic butterflies, and fungi with 28,000 sexes, an insistence on an ontology of sexual difference, such as Irigaray’s, seems a positively provincial humanist illusion.

Things look even more dire for any idea of sexual difference when Hird turns her attention to the microbial “world.” Taking issue with what she sees as an undue privileging of organisms that are “big like us” in feminist science studies, Hird endeavors to develop a bacterial “microontology” of sex.²⁷ Here, she turns to the biologist Lynn

²⁵ See: “Gender’s Nature: Intersexuality, Transsexualism, and the ‘Sex’/‘Gender’ Binary,” *Feminist Theory* 1, no. 3 (2000): 347-64; “Re(pro)ducing Sexual Difference,” *parallax* 8, no. 2 (2002): 94-107; “Feminist Matters: New Materialist Considerations of Sexual Difference,” *Feminist Theory* 5, no. 2 (2004): 223-32; “Naturally Queer,” *Feminist Theory* 5, no. 1 (2004): 85-9; “Animal Transex,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 21, no. 49 (2006): 35-50; “Digesting Difference: Metabolism and the Question of Sexual Difference,” *Configurations* 20, no. 3 (2012): 213-37. See also her books *Sex, Gender and Science* and *The Origins of Sociable Life*.

²⁶ Hird, *Sex, Gender, and Science*, 99.

²⁷ See Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life*.

Margulis's extraordinary research into the evolutionary origins of sex in bacteria, research that Hird reads as explicitly "challeng[ing] both biological and cultural notions of sexual difference."²⁸ In bacteria, as Margulis details, reproduction (i.e., the production of new individuals in a population or species by existing individuals) typically occurs nonsexually (e.g., through binary fission), whereas sex (i.e., the exchange of genetic information) occurs transversally, without respect for sexual or species differences. For Hird, this fact is not merely of comparative value. Taking Margulis's famous theory of symbiosis "all the way down," Hird argues that a "microontological" view "must recognize that 'I' am bacteria, that bacteria are us."²⁹ As she puts it:

Symbionts all the way down means that we are, ancestrally, made up of bacteria. It also means that any given human body is also a symbiont: 600 species of bacteria in our mouths and 400 species of bacteria in our guts, and the countless more bacteria that inhabit our eyes, anuses, and skin. Indeed, the number of bacteria in our mouths is comparable to the total number of human beings that has ever lived on earth. The number of microbes in our bodies exceeds the number of cells in our bodies by 100 fold....Every living thing that exists now, or has ever lived, is a bacterium.³⁰

If the cells that compose the human body are 90% bacteria, which are engaging in transversal sex that recognizes no coherent forms of species or sexual difference, and if of the remaining 10% the vast majority are unsexed, then sexual difference fundamentalism would seem to be on very shaky ground indeed.³¹ For if only an

²⁸ Hird, "Feminist Matters," 229. For Margulis's work on bacterial sex, see Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *Origins of Sex: Three Billion Years of Genetic Recombination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986); and Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, *What is Sex?* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997). It is important to note that Margulis does not present her work as any kind of feminist or queer alternative ontology to sexual difference; indeed in these two texts neither the phrase "sexual difference" nor "ontology" are used. I return to Margulis's work later in the dissertation to offer a different interpretation of it than Hird's.

²⁹ Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life*, 26.

³⁰ Hird, *The Origins of Sociable Life*, 84.

³¹ Hird frequently cites the statistic that only 10% of the cells in the human body are eukaryotic animal cells and the other 90% are bacteria, a statistic mobilized by many feminist science studies and other "post-humanist" thinkers to provincialize conceptions of "the human." See *The Origins of Sociable Life*, 134.

infinitesimally small amount of living matter at the most “fundamental” level is sexed, what *basis* is there for an ontology of sexual difference? Is this not to ground the ontology of sexual difference in the gametes, which are the only truly sexuate cells? Because of this, and because even most of the processes of *reproduction* in animal bodies are nonsexual (e.g., recombination, mitosis), Hird reminds us that “human bodies, like those of other living organisms, are only ‘sexed’ from a particularly narrow perspective.” This is what she calls “our bodily state of sexual *indifference*.”³²

In some of her most recent work, Hird has placed even more critical pressure on the ontology of sexual difference. In a 2012 essay, Hird turns her attention to Elizabeth Grosz’s formulation of a bio-ontology of sexual difference derived from a reading of Irigaray with Charles Darwin’s theory of sexual selection.³³ In her essay, Hird identifies six problems with an ontology of sexual difference from a biological perspective:

1. It installs a humanist hierarchization of life that sees life moving from “simple” bacteria to “complex” organisms (especially humans).
2. It disproportionately privileges sexually differentiated organisms (e.g., plants and animals) when the *vast* majority—e.g., “5 million-trillion-trillion” bacteria—of life on earth is not sexually differentiated.

³² Hird, “Naturally Queer,” 85, 86.

³³ Hird, “Digesting Difference.” For the most definitive formulation of Grosz’s project, see “Sexual Difference as Sexual Selection: Irigarayan Reflections on Darwin,” in *Becoming Undone*, 143-68. While Grosz, rather than Irigaray, is Hird’s main target in this essay, Hird (and other feminist science studies scholars) frequently name Grosz and Irigaray together in reference to an “ontology of sexual difference.” An analysis of the differences between Grosz’s and Irigaray’s philosophy is beyond the scope of the discussion here and I therefore restrict my comments above to the aspects of Hird’s critique of Grosz that are also often directed toward Irigaray as well.

3. It ultimately normalizes and privileges sexual reproduction and is therefore heterosexist and reliant upon a “gene-centric” view of evolution in which heterosexual reproduction is the only source of generativity and differentiation.
4. It reinforces a false conception of organisms as bounded, autonomous individuals, ignoring the symbiotic “entanglement” that is constitutive of the natural world.
5. It is incompatible with a “deep time” perspective, which recognizes that sexual differentiation and reproduction are relatively recent and accidental phenomena and that “life’s most vital and prolific novelty” occurred among nonsexually reproducing bacteria.
6. It assumes that the difference in kind *between* “the sexes” is greater than the difference in degree among them.

From the microontological perspective, which accounts for the symbiotic constitution of the human body, the deep time of evolution, and destabilizes the “big like us” point of view, it is clear that sexual difference cannot pass muster as a fundamental ontology. In light of this, Hird searches for something that can serve as a new microontology, which she finds in metabolism:

I introduce metabolism as sexual difference’s foil. Metabolism, including intake, digestion, and transport, is a primary and defining feature of life and an activity that all life forms, from cells to whole organisms, must engage in to maintain themselves. Metabolism...may even be deployed to collapse the life/nonlife bifurcation. Given its immanence to the origins of life on earth and its centrality to *all* life, we might propose metabolism as ontology—an “ontology of metabolic difference” if you will. In other words, perhaps a substitution is in order: namely, metabolism for sexual difference.³⁴

³⁴ Hird, “Digesting Difference,” 216.

According to Hird, it is actually *metabolism* that demonstrates all of the characteristics attributed to sexual difference by Irigaray and Grosz: irreducibility, universality, and fundamentality, which makes it a more appropriate ontology for a post-humanist queer feminism.

Hird's feminist and queer reading of some of the most radical insights in contemporary biology therefore offers a profound set of challenges to the ontology of sexual difference. Hird, like Butler, de-ontologizes sexual difference. She does so, however, not through a political critique of all ontology, but rather by attempting to take ontology to the most fundamental level of life: the microbial. In many ways, the projects of Hird, and other feminist new materialists such as Luciana Parisi and Jami Weinstein, take off from Irigaray's work: they each acknowledge Irigaray as having moved the thinking of ontology beyond the phallogocentric model of the One and as having offered a feminist rethinking of the fluidity of matter beyond the metaphysics of solid substance. In this sense, they attempt to take Irigaray's ontological project to its limits: taking Irigaray's terms such as "irreducible" and "fundamental" as well as her reconceptualization of matter seriously, they suggest, entails an encounter with the truly fundamental and irreducible levels of material life. And this, no doubt, calls into question the centrality of sexual difference. As Parisi, who also turns her attention to the technological transmutations of sex, puts it, "all forms of sex—bacterial sex, endosymbiosis, sexual reproduction, parthenogenesis, algorithmic sexes, engineered cloning, nano and synthetic sexes—are events that expose sexual difference to a

multiplicity of actual sexes, irreducible to the model of the two.”³⁵ If Irigaray opened a certain path for the feminist reconceptualization of the ontology and materiality of sex, her inability (or unwillingness) to move beyond sexual difference and into the actually existing multiplicity of sex diversity is deeply limiting. Indeed, if it is Irigaray who insisted on a feminist rethinking of ontology and matter, the cost of taking up her project is high: if one wants a materially grounded ontology of sex, it seems one has no choice but to give up sexual difference itself. And having lost sexual difference to multiplicity, must one not lose Irigaray too? This is why Weinstein, drawing on Hird and Parisi, has suggested that the time has come to “honor[] the legacy and importance of sexual difference as a philosophical concept, even as we pronounce it ontologically dead and thrust into the preaccelerated, unbounded, inhuman future of neomaterialist and radical empiricist accounts of matter and sex.”³⁶

Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference

Against these de-ontologizations of sexual difference, either through a political critique that reveals that “sex” will always have been dissimulated heterosexist gender norms all along or through a scientifically engaged materialism that exposes nature’s sexual multiplicity, Irigaray’s insistence on the ontology of sexual difference likely seems outdated and conservative, if not heterosexist and essentialist. From a Butlerian approach to gender as a grid of intelligibility that (at least theoretically) could always be expanded

³⁵ Luciana Parisi, “Event and Evolution,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, Spindel Supplement (2010), 163. See also Parisi’s *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-Technology, and the Mutations of Desire* (London: Continuum, 2004), which draws extensively on Irigaray’s theorization of fluidity and femininity.

³⁶ Jami Weinstein, “A Requiem to Sexual Difference: A Response to Luciana Parisi’s ‘Evolution and Event,’” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 48, Spindel Supplement (2010), 187.

to encompass a wider range of gender and sexual diversity or from a “microontological” approach to the nearly infinite forms of sex diversity in the living world, it is not surprising that Irigaray’s work—replete as it is with the rhetoric of “irreducibility” and “the two” of sexual difference—is often read as the ontologization of a rigid gender binary that is inherently oppressive to queer, trans, and other non-conforming subjects (not to mention, hopelessly anthropocentric and focused on the “big like us”). But is Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference less “fluid” than gender performativity or new materialism? Does her ontology imply a static and dimorphic conception of sex? Does irreducible sexual difference entail the foreclosure of bodily plasticity or multiplicity? Does it necessarily yoke Being to heterosexuality? To address these questions, it is necessary to understand in what sense(s) sexual difference acquires its ontological status in Irigaray’s work. In presenting this, I will also distinguish it from the projects previously detailed.

Generally speaking, there are two meanings of the phrase “sexual difference” (*la différence sexuelle*) in Irigaray’s work. The first, derived from psychoanalysis, refers to the *symbolic representation* of sexuation. Such a terminology was introduced by Freud in theorizing the “psychic consequences” of “sex differences” (*Geschlechtsunterschieds*) and significantly elaborated in the work of Jacques Lacan. Yet because, as I will discuss momentarily, the reigning Symbolic order of sexual difference is structured according to the Phallus in which the feminine position is merely the negation of the masculine, it is actually an order of “sexual *indifference*” (CS 141/146). The other way in which Irigaray uses “sexual difference” is to refer to a “difference of (the) sexes” (*différence des sexes*), a difference in “sexuate identity” (*identité sexuée*), a difference that she suggests is

ultimately given by nature and could serve as the basis for a future “sexuate culture” (*culture sexuée*). For Irigaray, sexual difference is therefore both something that is real and something that could be: it is real in the sense that nature already generates it and it could be in the sense that this natural difference has not yet been given proper symbolic representation. This differs, then, from the sense in which the phrase “sexual difference” is utilized by Lacanians and most other feminist theorists (both those sympathetic to and those critical of sexual difference theory). For these thinkers, by and large, “sexual difference” still refers to the symbolic order of sexuation outlined by Lacan. However, because “phallogocentrism” is a more precise name for the present symbolic system of “sexual (in)difference,” I will use that term instead, while reserving “sexual difference” to refer to Irigaray’s difference of (the) sexes (differences that could, and must, be given symbolic expression), for it is in this latter sense and not the former that Irigaray develops her ontology of sexual difference.³⁷ I will now chart Irigaray’s move from the Lacanian formulation of “sexual difference,” or *indifference*, within phallogocentrism to her ontology of sexual difference (without scare quotes).

³⁷ In her later work, translations in which she is generally involved, Irigaray often prefers the term “sexuate difference” (*la différence sexuée*) to refer to the “difference of (the) sexes” (*la différence des sexes*) in order to distinguish it from the erotic implications that the term “sexual” seems to carry. Sexuate difference, in other words, is not necessarily erotic or “sexual” in the sense that the term is used in daily language, although they are not unrelated for her, for erotic (or “sexual”) relations happen only between *sexuate* bodies. However, a distinction between “sexuate difference” and “sexual difference” is not systematized in her published work and in the interest of simplicity and convention within the secondary literature, I use “sexual difference” throughout to refer to the difference of (the) sexes. It is also important to remember that in French, Irigaray does not make a sex/gender distinction. While in her late work she occasionally uses the French word “*genre*” (“gender”), she does so synonymously with *sexe* and *identité sexué*. She therefore uses the terms “*masculin*” and “*féminin*” to refer both to symbolic subject positions (which might in English be called “gender”) and to the natural difference of (the) sexes, while rarely uses “*mâle*” or “*femelle*” (which in French have a very restricted biological usage). By “*sexe*,” Irigaray therefore does not mean the same limited “anatomical” or “biological” sex (i.e., male and female) that the term implies in English. In French, the biological distinction between *mâle* and *femelle* in medicine and science is referred to as “*le dimorphisme sexuel*” and “*la différence entre les sexes*,” expressions that Irigaray does not use.

In *Speculum* (1974) and *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977), Irigaray's thinking of sexual difference in the phallogocentric Symbolic is, more or less, consonant with the Lacanian theory of sexuation, even as she turns Freud's and Lacan's thought back on psychoanalysis and the whole history of European philosophy. As Lacan formulates it, "*la différenciation des sexes*" is produced by a subject's position vis-à-vis the phallic signifier and the threat of castration. Severing the axiomatic link to anatomy or biology, Lacanian sexual "difference" is relative: it is an economy in which the Phallus must always be in circulation in order for any individual to become a sexed subject within the Symbolic order.³⁸ In his attempt at the "mathematical" formalization of sexual difference, Lacan argues that the masculine position is a closed set in which all members have acceded to the Law of castration and therefore have been given a place within the Symbolic as a speaking subject. The feminine position, on the other hand, is "not-all" (*pas-toute*) and thus retains a relation to the Real and *jouissance* that is not totalizable or fully representable within the phallic structures of symbolic representation. Thus, in Lacan's formulation, whether or not Lacan himself is actually endorsing it so much as describing it, there exists only one sex (i.e., the masculine) and its lack, or negation (i.e., the feminine sex "which is not one"). "There is no Woman," as Lacan notoriously contends.³⁹ While obviously finding much in this schema to object to, Irigaray also locates within the feminine, in its very abjection from the phallogocentric Symbolic, a

³⁸ See Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, eds., *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École freudienne*, trans. Jacqueline Rose (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1982) and Elizabeth Grosz, *Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

³⁹ It is important to note that, in French, Lacan's phrase is "*Il n'y a pas la femme*" and his emphasis is on the definite article "*la*." Because the feminine is not a closed set (*n'est pas toute*), there can be no such thing as *the woman*, as a unified essence. See Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire livre XX, Encore* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 13 (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX, Encore, On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink [W. W. Norton & Co., 1998], 7).

site for the future affirmation of sexual difference *qua* difference, rather than as opposition or negation:

...what I want, in fact, is not to create a theory of woman, but to secure a place for the feminine within sexual difference. That difference—masculine/feminine—has always operated ‘within’ systems that are representative, self-representative, of the (masculine) subject. Moreover, these systems have produced many other differences that appear articulated to compensate for an operative sexual indifference. For one sex and its lack, its atrophy, its negative, still does not add up to two. In other words, the feminine has never been defined except as the inverse, indeed the underside, of the masculine. So for woman it is not a matter of installing herself within this lack, this negative, even by denouncing it, nor of reversing the economy of sameness by turning the feminine into the *standard for ‘sexual difference’*; it is rather a matter of trying to practice that difference (CS 154/159).⁴⁰

This early work on the whole therefore seems more focused on the *representation* of sexual difference, or, more accurately, the lack thereof within phallogocentrism, rather than on the elaboration of sexual difference as an ontology.

By the 1984 publication of *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, it becomes clear that sexual difference has taken on a more fundamental status in Irigaray’s thought.⁴¹ While in this work she is still engaged in rigorous readings of the history of philosophy, her approach largely shifts from a critique of the oblivion of sexual difference within the phallogocentric ontology of the One to the precipitation of an affirmative ontology of the more-than-One, or the “(at least) two,” of sexual difference. In a sense, this can be read as a “turn,” so to speak, from Lacan to Heidegger. As Lacan demonstrates, the “phallic function” operates on a binary logic in which “difference” is marked only in terms of One

⁴⁰ This line of Irigaray’s thought has been developed extensively in the work of Drucilla Cornell. See, for example, *Beyond Accommodation: Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁴¹ In an essay on Irigaray’s ontology, Elizabeth Grosz writes that “sexual difference, the concept that remains consistent in all of [Irigaray’s] writings, from beginning to end, is an ontological and not just empirical concept, a mode of being, rather than a found or discovered object in the world” (*Becoming Undone*, 102). I agree with this, but want to signal that it increasingly takes on its explicit ontological status, a status that was at least implicit from the start.

or not-One.⁴² The “sexual relation” (*rapport sexuel*) is therefore “impossible” because the One cannot relate to the “Other,” whose “difference” does not register as anything but an absence:

How then can we situate the function of the Other? How—if, up to a certain point, what remains of any language when it is written is based simply on knots of the One—are we to posit a difference? For it is clear that the Other cannot be added to the One. The Other can only be differentiated from it. If there is something by which it participates in the One, it is not by being added. For the Other...is the One-minus [*l’Un-en-moins*]. That’s why, in any relation [*rapport*] of a man with a woman—she who is in question—it is from the perspective of the feminine-One-minus [*l’Une-en-moins*].⁴³

In the linguistically structured and symbolically governed “human world,” as described by Lacan, “sexuate Being [*l’être sexué*]...results from a logical exigency in *speech*.”⁴⁴ Because sexuation is a *cut* effected by the phallic signifier upon entry into the Symbolic (i.e., “castration”), sexuation cannot be said to apply to Being “itself,” which, for Lacan, is associated with an “asexual” (because not-*cut*) *jouissance* of the Real.⁴⁵ Lacan’s theory of sexuation, then, is the opposite of an ontology of sexual difference, for Being remains an “asexuate” One; instead, sexual “difference” is an *effect* of signification, marking the subject’s relation to the phallic function which severs the sexed subject from any relation

⁴² As analyst and theorist Suzanne Barnard describes it, “...the phallic signifier functions as an empty signifier that effects a ‘difference.’ This difference is not a difference between the sexes as such but the difference between the One and the not-one” (“Introduction,” in *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan’s Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality*, eds. Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink [Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002], 10). The degree to which the phallic signifier is actually “empty” has been debated by feminist critics of Lacan. See Grosz, *Jacques Lacan* and Drucilla Cornell, “Rethinking the Beyond of the Real,” *Cardozo Law Review*, vol. 16, no. 3-4, 1995, 729-92.

⁴³ Lacan, *Séminaire XX*, 116/129. Translation modified.

⁴⁴ Lacan, *Séminaire XX*, 15/10. “I don’t want to begin developing a theory of knowledge here, but it is obvious that the things of the human world are things in a universe structured by words, that language, symbolic processes, dominate and govern all” (Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*, trans. Denis Porter [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1992], 45).

⁴⁵ “...Being [*l’être*] is the *jouissance* of the body as such, that is, as asexual [*asexué*], because what is known as sexual *jouissance* is marked, dominated, by the impossibility of establishing as such, anywhere in the enunciable, the...sexual relation [*rapport sexuel*]” (Lacan, *Séminaire XX*, 12-3/6-7).

to Being, to the *jouissance* of the body, and to the Other.⁴⁶ Any “Reality” of sex or sexual difference beyond the phallogocentric Symbolic therefore persists only as a radical inassimilability to sense, which can only be experienced as a traumatic *threat* to sense—a traumatic irruption of the Real.⁴⁷ While Irigaray does not dispute that this accurately describes phallogocentrism, she suggests that to overcome it would require shifting from a cut imposed by the castration of the phallic signifier to a limit inscribed in Being “itself.” It is in order to develop this that she turns to Heidegger’s rethinking of traditional ontology.

So, in what sense is sexual difference “ontological” for Irigaray? In a famous dialogue between leading interpreters of Irigaray’s work, Judith Butler strongly objects to this ontological turn (as it were) in Irigaray’s work:

Elizabeth Grosz: ...it seems to me that when [Irigaray] is talking about sexual difference as ontological difference, she is not specifying in any way, nor can she possibly specify what it might consist in. She is claiming that each has its other and that they are irreducible and that any notion of Being that denies that thereby falls into one of those categories, i.e., the masculine.

Judith Butler: Yes, but that is just to make it so *fundamental*...⁴⁸

Irigaray would no doubt agree with Butler on this point. But how are we to understand the word “fundamental” here? For it is precisely around this question that the misunderstanding of Irigaray’s ontological project in much Anglophone feminist and queer theory turns, including those by Butler and Hird as discussed above. For Butler, like many others who continue to read Irigaray’s later work primarily in terms of

⁴⁶ “As for Being [*Ce qui est de l’être*], a Being that would be posited as absolute, is never anything but the fracture, break, or interruption of the formulation *sexed Being* [*être sexué*], insofar as sexed Being is involved in *jouissance*” (Lacan, *Séminaire XX*, 16/11). For more on the ontology of the One and sexual difference in Lacan, see Joan Copjec, “The Sexual Compact,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 17, no. 2 (2012): 31-48.

⁴⁷ Slavoj Žižek develops this argument in many texts. See, for example, “The Real of Sexual Difference,” in Barnard and Fink, *Reading Seminar XX*, 57-76.

⁴⁸ Cheah & Grosz, “The Future of Sexual Difference,” 34.

psychoanalysis rather than Heidegger, the postulation of sexual difference as “fundamental” amounts to situating it as *the* foundational structure of psychic and social life. In this, Irigaray is read like more “orthodox” Lacanian theorists who view “sexual difference” (i.e., Lacan’s theory of sexualization) as the primary axis of difference.⁴⁹ In so doing, critics contend that Irigaray ignores the way in which sexual life is constituted in a matrix of power that is also structured by class, race, ability, and so on. A good example of this misunderstanding occurs when Butler cites Irigaray’s claim—a claim made with explicit reference to *Heidegger*—that sexual difference is the “philosophical issue of our age” in order to critique the “privileging” of sexual difference over racial difference within *psychoanalytic* theory:

The philosopher Luce Irigaray has claimed that the question of sexual difference is *the* question for our time. This privileging of sexual difference implies not only that sexual difference should be understood as *more fundamental* than other forms of difference, but that other forms of difference might be *derived* from sexual difference. This view also presumes that sexual difference constitutes an *autonomous sphere* of relations or disjunctions, and is not to be understood as articulated through or *as* other vectors of power.⁵⁰

In Hird, and other feminist new materialists, “fundamental” is interpreted scientifically, as if Irigaray is speaking of the “most fundamental,” i.e., the *smallest*, “unit” of materiality. But does Irigaray actually claim any of this? In fact, to understand the “fundamental” status of sexual difference in light of Heidegger’s “fundamental ontology,” as Irigaray does, is to challenge the quantitative interpretation, either Butler’s interpretation that one difference can be “*more fundamental*” than another or Hird’s

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Joan Copjec, “Sex and the Euthanasia of Reason,” in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (New York: Verso, 1994), 16-44.

⁵⁰ Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 167. Emphasis modified. This is the opening paragraph to an essay that does not offer any reading of Irigaray but rather goes on to offer a reading of Nella Larsen’s *Passing* in order to argue for a consideration within psychoanalytic theory of the mutual constitution of sexual and racial difference in psychic life.

assumption that one can be smaller or greater than another, as well as the idea that sexual difference as fundamental ontology is to make it an “autonomous sphere.” A clarification of these misunderstandings will therefore seriously limit the power of these theorists’ challenges to Irigaray’s work.

Heidegger famously outlined the project of *Fundamentalontologie* in *Sein und Zeit* (1927), in which he also specified the “ontological difference” of Being and being(s) or entities (*das Sein/l’être* and *die Seiendes/les étants*). According to Heidegger, “...ontological inquiry is more original than the ontic inquiry of the positive sciences. But it remains naïve and opaque if its investigations into the Being of beings leave the *sense* [*Sinn*] of *Being* in general undiscussed” (GA2 11/10. Emphasis modified). While the so-called positive sciences are oriented in their research toward beings, philosophy’s question is the Being of beings. And yet, as Heidegger reveals, the history of ontology in western metaphysics has ignored this question, thereby reducing, like the sciences do, Being to the presence of beings. Heidegger therefore calls for a “*fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can originate” (GA2 13/12). By raising the “*question of Being*” (*Seinsfrage*), a *fundamental ontology* would ground not only the ontic inquiries of the sciences, but also the “regional” ontologies that give rise to and hold sway within the different sciences themselves:

The question of Being thus aims not only at an a priori condition of possibility of the sciences [i.e., the question of Kantian critical philosophy], which investigate beings as this or that kind of being and which thus *always already move within an understanding of Being* [*Seinsverständnis*], but also at the conditions of the possibility of the ontologies which precede the ontic sciences and found them. *All ontology...remains fundamentally blind and perverts its innermost intent if it has not previously clarified the sense of Being sufficiently and grasped this clarification as its fundamental task* (GA2 11/10).

It is from this that Irigaray takes off in her development of an ontology of sexual difference: sexual difference is not an empirical description of *beings*, but is a way of *questioning the sense of Being as such*. To help unpack what this means, I will consider it vis-à-vis the work of Butler and Hird as outlined above, both of whom, to my mind, misunderstand Irigaray's project.

The first misunderstanding involves reading the ontologization of sexual difference as an ontologization of gender categories, such as "man" and "woman," making them into fundamental, pseudo-Aristotelian categories of Being. Butler therefore rejects Irigaray's ontology because for her, and the gender and queer theorists who follow her, gender is a performative production: gender categories, such as "man" and "woman" are regulatory psychosocial formations that only congeal into the *illusion* of Being. Yet, for Irigaray, the "gender" opposition between "man" and "woman" would constitute an *ontic*—namely an anthropological or sociological—distinction (as it did for Heidegger), produced within the phallogocentric metaphysics of the One. Butler and Irigaray would thus be in agreement that this distinction—that between "man" and "woman"—is not inscribed at the level of Being. However when, in the process of deconstructing this binary, Butler moves to posit any ontology of sexual difference as the retroactive effect of materialized gender norms, she participates in the same neutralization of Being that, according to Irigaray, characterizes the history of western metaphysics. For Butler, in other words, the *sense of Being* remains neutral or empty, and "sexual difference" is reduced to the effect of a performance by ontologically neutral or empty subjects—what amounts to a purely existential (or as the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit* might have specified

“*Existenziell*”) question.⁵¹ In their respective approaches to the question of ontology and sexual difference, then, Irigaray and Butler effectively reproduce the disagreement Heidegger expressed with Sartre in his 1947 “Letter on Humanism” (GA9). Namely, the causal reversal between “essence” and “existence” in existentialism—i.e., “existence precedes essence,” or to state it in the idiom of Butler’s theory of performativity: “gender performances precede (the illusion of) a sexed essence”—remains a metaphysical proposition, fully ensnared in the history of western philosophy, that enacts the annihilation of Being as that which precedes the division between essence and existence and makes it possible.⁵² Not only does Butler’s rejection of an ontology of sexual difference not problematize Being and “its” oblivion, but by effectively *neutralizing* Being, her theory moves within a metaphysics of the One and as such is a form of nihilism and phallogocentrism.⁵³

For Irigaray, to be sure, Being as such is sexuate—which is to say, sexual difference is ontological—but this cannot take place within the oppositional

⁵¹ For Heidegger, an “*Existenziell*” understanding of oneself concerns the circumstances one finds oneself in, the possibilities chosen or not chosen. It is arrived at only through existence itself and is ontic. An “*Existenzial*” understanding, on the other hand, concerns the “*ontological* structure of existence,” or one’s relation to Being (GA2 12/11).

⁵² To quote Heidegger: “Sartre expresses the basic tenet of existentialism in this way: Existence precedes essence. In this statement he is taking *existentia* and *essentia* according to their metaphysical meaning, which from Plato’s time on has said *essentia* precedes *existentia*. Sartre reverses this statement. But the reversal of a metaphysical statement remains a metaphysical statement. With it he stays within metaphysics in oblivion of the truth of Being...it still remains to ask first of all from what sent-destining of Being this differentiation in Being as *esse essentiae* and *esse existentiae* comes to appear to thinking....Concealed in its official provenance, the differentiation of *essentia* (essentiality) and *existentia* (actuality) completely dominates the destiny of Western history and all history determined by Europe” (GA9 328-9/250). In reading the difference in Butler’s and Irigaray’s thinking about sexual difference in light of Heidegger’s disagreement with Sartre, the debt of Butler’s theorization of gender to the existentialist thought of Sartre and Beauvoir becomes especially clear.

⁵³ As Heidegger defines it, “The essence of nihilism is the history in which there is nothing to Being itself” (GA6.2 338/210). Butler is thus, in a sense, aligned with Lacan who posits sexual difference as an effect of signification, but for her, *Being* is not only “asexual” as it is for Lacan, it is merely the retroactively posited “constitutive outside” of the Phallic Symbolic itself. See Butler’s arguments against the Lacanian Real in *Bodies that Matter*, 187-222.

anthropological or sociological (i.e., ontic) terms of “man” and “woman.” But what does this possibly mean? In fact, this is precisely the impasse faced by Heidegger in the existential analytic of *Dasein*: in order not to be reducible to a form of *ego* or *cogito*, *Dasein* must be factually embodied; however, as the inquiry of *fundamental ontology*, the existential analytic must “transcend” the research of any ontical investigation into the human being as a present-at-hand entity such as anthropology, psychology, or biology (see GA2 §10). In his 1928 lecture series at the University of Marburg, Heidegger addresses some of the problems raised by this argument in *Being and Time* and turns immediately to the question of sexual difference, arguing that *Dasein*, and thus fundamental ontology, therefore cannot be referred to the sexual dualities of the positive sciences—man/woman (anthropology), masculine/feminine (psychology), male/female (biology): “*Dasein*,” as he says, “is neither of the two sexes [*beiden Geschlechtern*]” (GA26 172/136). For Heidegger, this means that *Dasein* must be “metaphysically neutral” with respect to “sexedliness”:

In the first place *Dasein* involves the internal possibility of factual dispersal in bodiliness [*faktische Zerstreuung in die Lieblichkeit*], and thus, of sexedliness [*Geschlechtlichkeit*]. The metaphysical neutrality of the innermost isolated human as *Dasein* is not an empty abstraction from the ontic, a neither-nor [*Weder-noch*], but rather the authentic concreteness of the origin [*das eigentlich Konkrete des Ursprunges*], the *not-yet* [*Noch-nicht*] of factual dispersedness (GA26 173/136).

Here, Heidegger implies that sexual difference (“sexedliness”) *follows* a prior metaphysical neutrality which is the “authentic concreteness of the origin”—*Dasein* would thus be separated from sexuation by a suspense or hiatus. As such, “it is as if,” Derrida remarks, “sexual difference did not rise to the height of ontological difference” (G 396/8). If *Dasein* is “metaphysically neutral” in terms of sexuation, then this would imply that the “*there*” (*Da*) of Being (*Sein*) would not be marked by sexual difference.

And if this is so, then sexual difference does not pertain to the *sense of Being* since, as Heidegger argues in *Being and Time*, the understanding of the sense Being belongs essentially to *Dasein* (G 397/10). In Derrida's reading of the question of sexual difference in these lectures, however, he suggests that "a suspicion continues to weigh on [Heidegger]:...What if the *Da* of *Dasein* were already 'sexual'? And what if sexual difference were already marked in the opening to the question of the sense of Being and to ontological difference? And what if neutralization, which does not happen all by itself, were a violent operation?" (G 403/17). In fact, this is a suspicion that Heidegger never shakes, for decades later, when the question of Being has been rephrased from the *sense of Being* to the *topos of Being*, Heidegger notes that the *there (Da)* of Being cannot be rigorously separated from the living body that "sustains" it (GA15 233/H 145).

It is precisely on this question that Irigaray intervenes in characteristic fashion. In *L'oubli de l'air chez Martin Heidegger*, she reminds him that "This *there* is not made in a single go. On a single occasion....In forgetting the air that is breathed, the air that is occupied, forgetting the livable place where the entity *man* [*l'étant homme*] appears and is encountered—these forgettings together become the *possibility* for remembering a nonexistent permanence. A *Dasein* [*un être-là*]" (OA 145/164. Emphasis modified). As Irigaray shows, the neutering of *Dasein*, and therefore the safeguarding of the question of Being from the mark of sexual difference, can only occur if the *there (Da)*, the *topos*, of Being is an empty, abstract space detached from the living body. This is why, for Irigaray, the "functional *partes extra partes* of Cartesian space," a mathematization of space that Heidegger himself wrote vociferously against, in the end "still seems to rule the world for *Dasein*" (OA 78/83). For if the project of fundamental ontology sets out to

recover Being from its oblivion via an existential analytic of *Dasein* which has “*Neutralität*” as one of its “guiding principles,” then this project begins from an abstraction from and forgetting of the living body that is the very *there* of Being (or at least is inseparable from it). Irigaray thus discloses that Heidegger’s own uncovering of the oblivion of Being conceals an even *prior oblivion* (or even an active *concealment*) of sexual difference:

She, nature, thus remains in oblivion. The double forgetting: forgetting of she who has always already given him life and has become his living body, and forgetting of she who gives life back to him by helping him with the destiny of his Being. But this forgetting of her, or these hers, [*cet oubli d’elle(s)*] is covered over by the forgetting of his own destiny as Being. By the forgetting of the sexuate character of Being? (OA 85/92).⁵⁴

This is, for Irigaray, the meaning of Heidegger’s insistence on the ontological difference of Being and being(s) as *the* operative difference of a fundamental ontology. In detailing the ways in which western metaphysics has gotten lost among beings detached from what *gives* Being, which leads ultimately to a destruction of the Earth, Heidegger reveals an intuition of the forgetting of life, nature, the maternal-feminine, and sexual difference. In order not to acknowledge this, however, Heidegger then turns to, if not imagines, the forgetting of “*Being* itself,” as that which we must “get over” in a project of fundamental ontology. To the degree that the Heideggerian questioning of Being safeguards the ontological difference from sexual difference and proceeds from a neutered conception of being-*there* (*Dasein*), it is here disclosed as an alibi for the continued oblivion of sexual difference. If sexual difference is deferred to Being as One, “from then on, difference

⁵⁴ In *L’oubli de l’air*, and several other texts, Irigaray plays on multiple resonances of the French word “*elle*.” While, in French, “Being” is a masculine noun, “mother,” “nature,” “life,” and “woman” are feminine. Thus, throughout this poetic text, the referent of “she/her” (*elle*) or “feminine they” (*elles*) is purposefully ambiguous.

such as it will arise again later between being and Being will already be a difference that masks the first difference” (WL 106).

For Irigaray, had Heidegger taken the question of sexual difference seriously as ontological when he raised the question in 1928, not only would he have moved immediately from the question of the *sense* of Being as understood by *Dasein* to the *topos* of Being, but he would have been able to think the questions of life and the body—questions that, in his own words, remained the “most difficult problem” until his last writings (GA15 234/H 146). In her elaboration of a fundamental ontology of sexual difference, Irigaray therefore seeks to bring an end to Heidegger’s infinite deferral of these questions, *beginning* from the living body as the *topos* of Being and life as that which gives “Being” (and not the contrary). Because, as Irigaray argues (building on Heidegger), western metaphysics commences with a reduction of *phusis* to “Being,” a radical rethinking of “nature” (*phusis*) is central to this task. I will elaborate Irigaray’s philosophy of *phusis* more extensively in the subsequent chapters. For now, given that my purpose is still to clarify in what sense sexual difference is ontological for her, suffice it to say that Irigaray endeavors to revive a certain Pre-Socratic thinking of “Being” *as phusis*. Therefore, in many of her works after the Heidegger book (1983), Irigaray’s claims about the ontological status of sexual difference take the form of claims about nature “itself.” In *Sexes et parentés* (1987), for instance, she claims “Nature is sexuate, always and everywhere” (108/122), and in *J’aime à toi* (1990), she writes, “Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal” (84/47).

Yet, here is where the second misinterpretation of Irigaray's ontological project can understandably occur: in deriving a *natural* ontology of sexual difference, several readers assume that Irigaray is ontologizing the *biological* categories of "male" and "female." Indeed, she does go so far as to insist that "The natural is at least two: masculine and feminine" (JAT 65/35). There are, of course, a number of problems with this from the perspective of the critiques outlined above. First, Irigaray's suggestion of nature's sexuation is demonstrably scientifically false and would be laughable to anyone with even the most elementary understanding of biology. Not only, as Myra Hird reminds us, is *most* of the natural world not even animal or plant and therefore "most organisms are not differentiated by sexual difference," but most of the natural world is not even organic.⁵⁵ And even in the case of humans, as Hird, Butler, and many other gender studies scholars frequently point out, at least two percent of the population is intersex, thereby empirically disproving Irigaray's claims.⁵⁶ This, then, leads to the even more troubling problem with Irigaray's ontology than its scientific falsity: its inherent exclusion of, or even hostility toward, intersex, trans, and other persons who do not "conform" to a dimorphic conception of biological sex. And yet, such empirical "facts" (if that indeed they are) about "biological sex" would once again constitute *ontic* problems for Irigaray, as they would for Heidegger. Irigaray's claims about nature and sexual difference are therefore of a different order than the claims made by physics, chemistry, or biology. As ontological, Irigaray's thinking of sexual difference does not take the form of propositional statements or hypotheses that can be proven true or false according to truth criteria such as correspondence or falsifiability. As Heidegger shows,

⁵⁵ Hird, "Digesting Difference," 224.

⁵⁶ Hird, *Sex, Gender and Science*, 15.

these understandings of truth themselves belong to particular epochs of the history of metaphysics that reduces Being to present entities. From the perspective of Irigaray's philosophy, then, the instrumentalist use of intersex and trans persons as empirical "examples" that supposedly confound her ontology of sexual difference reduces them to present-at-hand entities of empirical (e.g., medical, scientific, juridical, even "queer") investigation.⁵⁷ As fundamental ontology, Irigaray's thinking of sexual difference does not aim, *nor can it*, to be "verified" by the sciences; it would be, rather, the condition of possibility of the ontic inquiries of the sciences as well as of the "regional" ontologies that ground each science and would therefore open new approaches to the sciences altogether. In Irigaray's project, then, sexual difference becomes what Heidegger calls the "grounding question" (*Grundfrage*) of ontological and ontic inquiry—the question for which "Being is not the *answer* or even the *domain* of the answer. Rather Being is what is most *question-worthy*" (GA65 76/61). As such, the question concerning sexual difference is not a question that can be answered within the domain of Being (let alone *beings*) as if we can somehow use ontological (let alone ontic) inquiry to somehow determine what

⁵⁷ To my knowledge, Irigaray has never commented, in print, on questions of trans or intersex, and in my estimation, there is nothing in her philosophy that is *prima facie* exclusionary or even problematic in this regard. If anything, her ontology of sexual difference provides a new understanding of *Being* in which to understand one's *existence* as trans or intersex. Indeed, at a public event at the University of Bristol in 2013, Irigaray was asked by an audience member "What does your philosophy offer to transgender or intersex people?" to which she replied simply "I provide them with a frame in which to live their sexuate Being as something other than medical or scientific curiosities." In personal conversation, Irigaray has acknowledged that she is aware that she is interpreted in the U.S. as being "against transsexuals but it is absolutely false." Again this is why it is extremely important to distinguish Irigaray's use of "sexual difference" from that of Lacanians, many of whom *do* argue that transsexuality is a form of "psychosis" that attempts to bring the Symbolic into the Real by inscribing sexuation on the body (See, e.g., Catherine Millot, *Horsexe: Essay on Transsexuality*, trans. Kenneth Hylton [New York: Autonomedia, 1990]). What Irigaray is virulently opposed to is "gender neutrality" and the idea that a multiplication of individual differences entails the negation of sexual difference as an ontology; in this regard, she would be opposed to the embrace of "gender neutral" pronouns in certain forms of trans language politics.

sexual difference “*is*,” rather, it is a way of putting *Being, beings, and the difference(s) between them into question*.

Sexual Différance?

The central point of Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference is that, despite the best efforts of the western metaphysics of the One, Being is always (at least) two. Her ontology, however, does not ontologize either the “gender” or the “sex” binaries, both of which are ontic productions from within the same phallogocentric metaphysics of the One. About these ontic entities, in fact, Irigaray has relatively little to say. And indeed, it is certainly curious that some of Irigaray’s readers have been so quick to assume that the same figure so celebrated for her early critiques of the western modes of representing sexual difference in simple binary oppositional terms would turn around in her later works so drastically as to make those same (phallogocentric) oppositional categories the foundations of her ontology. As an ontological inquiry, Irigaray’s central concern is not the difference between sexuate *beings* or entities, but rather concerns the question of *Being*.⁵⁸ But if her ontology of sexual difference is not grounded in sexuate entities, in what is it grounded? The answer is in fact *nothing*. For Heidegger, the ontological difference between Being and beings is not, properly speaking, a difference “*between*,” for “between” (*zwischen*) Being and beings is *nothing*: “The ontological difference,” he

⁵⁸ In her explicitly political writings, however, Irigaray is concerned with how to cultivate relations between sexuate *beings* (such as sexuate rights), but only on the basis of her rethinking of sexuate *Being* and not in terms of the reigning phallogocentric ontology. This is why her two Italian volumes, *La democrazia comincia a due* (1994) and *Essere due* (1994), which contain the most sustained formulations of her political and ontological projects, respectively, can only be read together.

writes, “is the Nothing [*das Nichts*] between beings and Being” (GA9 123/97).⁵⁹ And yet, as Heidegger says, because Being “is” not a being, Being “*is*” the Nothing (see GA65 §145-6). The ontological difference is not a difference between entities because Being is irreducible to any being and there is no entity (such as a “gap”) between Being and beings that could be thought representationally. Rather, the Nothing, as Gilles Deleuze puts it, “*is*” Being as the ontological difference, Being as the “differentiator of difference.”⁶⁰ The Nothing is the groundlessness (*Abgrund*) of Being; however, this “abyss” is not a chasm but a *fold*—what Heidegger later calls the “twofoldness” (*Zwiefalt*) of Being and beings (GA7 74/OM 91)—“that which separates as much as that which unites.”⁶¹ In Irigaray’s ontology, then, it is therefore not the “sexes” which serve as the positive ground for the ontology, with “sexual difference” naming the differences “between” these entities. Such an understanding continues to presuppose a phallogocentric metaphysics of the One, within which “difference” is produced in a specular economy of the Same that represents difference only in quantitative and

⁵⁹ “*Das Nichts*,” can mean “the Nothing” and “the Not” and creates a noun out of a pronoun. In French, it is often translated as “*le ne pas*” or “*le rien*,” which similarly turn adverbs and pronouns into nouns. It is therefore distinct from “nothingness” or “*le néant*” which is an entity.

⁶⁰ As both Heidegger and Deleuze point out, Heidegger’s claim that the Not “is” Being as the ontological difference is not the same as Hegel’s claim that *das Sein* and *das Nichts* are the same. For Heidegger, the Not does not function like the negative does in Hegel to bring determinations to “indeterminate immediacy” of “pure Being” (see Heidegger GA65 §145).

⁶¹ Deleuze writes in his “Note on Heidegger’s Philosophy of Difference”: “the Heideggerian Not refers not to the negative in Being but to *Being as difference*...the *not* expresses not the negative but the difference between Being and being.... This difference is not ‘between’ in the ordinary sense of the word. It is the Fold, *Zwiefalt*. It is constitutive of Being and of the manner in which Being constitutes being, in the double movement of ‘clearing’ and ‘veiling.’ Being is truly the differentiator of difference...Understood in this manner, difference is not an object of representation. As the element of metaphysics, representation subordinates difference to identity, if only in relating it to a third term as the centre of a comparison *between* two supposedly different terms (Being and being)...But metaphysics is unable to think difference in itself, or the importance of that which separates as much as of that which unites (the differentiator)” (DR 89-90/64-5). In French, Heidegger’s *Zwiefalt*, which literally means “twofoldness” but colloquially means “duality,” is translated as *pli* (“fold”). Deleuze later suggests that “the fold [*pli*]...is arguably the key to the whole of Heidegger’s philosophy” (*Negotiations, 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin [New York: Columbia University Press, 1995], 112).

comparative terms. This is why Irigaray says that “these terms [the sexes] cannot fittingly be designated by the number ‘two’ and the adjective ‘different,’ if only because they are not susceptible to com-parison. To use such terms serves only to... speak of the ‘other’ in a language already systematized by/for the Same” (S 172/139). In rethinking sexual difference as ontological difference, in claiming that Being as such is sexuate, Irigaray is not saying that there are two separate Beings, for this is to turn Being into an entity that can be duplicated. The ontology of the two is not a “binary” (i.e., a zero or not-One and a One), nor an ontology of two Ones, but rather of “Being-Two” (*Être-Deux*), of the two-*fold*-ness of Being.⁶²

In her ontology of sexual difference, then, Irigaray effectively rewrites Heidegger’s “Nothing” of the ontological difference with a generative “interval” (*intervalle*). Building on Nietzsche and Heidegger, Irigaray argues that western metaphysics since Parmenides has sought to safeguard Being against nothingness through the projection of an entity—some kind of Absolute—that can close the horizon of Being. To be One, Being must separate itself from nothingness and in closing itself up as a circle an entity must be placed outside of the horizon. This entity then becomes the transcendent Absolute which serves a mediating function. The monotheistic God, for example, is projected as a transcendent entity that safeguards Being from nothingness, and through whom the unity of beings coheres. In Lacan, similarly, the Phallus secures the Symbolic by cutting off (“castrating”) the senselessness of the Real, the Phallus then becoming the transcendental signifier that enables all signification. As a result of this, all difference subsequently becomes reducible, comparable, and quantitatively defined vis-à-

⁶² I thus disagree with Irigaray’s readers who read her reference to “the two” as a purely strategic intervention into the One or as a transitional point between the metaphysics of the One and multiplicity.

vis the Absolute entity (e.g., we are more or less like God, we either have the Phallus or we do not, and so on), and Being is understood on the model of the One. For Irigaray, this fear of “nothingness” ultimately arises from the denial of the *irreducible* difference inscribed in Being which means that “it” is never One: instead of thinking of Being as Being-Two, in which the horizon of Being is *Being-as-Other*, the metaphysics of phallogocentrism has thought of Being as One in *opposition* to *non-Being*. Irigaray therefore thinks Being as Being-Two, “between” which is “nothing in common” (*rien en commun*) or the “interval.” For lack of cultivating this interval into something shared, thereby keeping “it” open, it has been rendered as an entity—nothingness (*le néant*)—that must be guarded against or subsumed so that the One can be restored as the All of Being.

Irigaray’s thinking of the interval appears in its most direct and realized form as part of her reading of Aristotle’s *Physics* Book IV in the essay “Le lieu, l’intervalle.” Here, she opposes Aristotle’s dismissal of the interval (*diastema*) in his definition of place (*topos*), arguing that it is in fact the interval that is the very “possibility of place” (E 54/49).⁶³ Where Aristotle contends that place is defined by the “first unchangeable boundary” of a thing, and therefore that two things could not be in one place while retaining their difference from one another, Irigaray insists instead that it is the interval between things that enables them to take place. Proper attention to the interval would require a complete reconceptualization of the relations between form, matter, space, and time, for without the interval, two objects could not be differentiated from one another in

⁶³ For a sustained treatment of Irigaray’s concept of the interval see Rebecca Hill, *The Interval: Relation and Becoming in Irigaray, Aristotle, and Bergson* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012). Emanuela Bianchi also offers an Irigaray-inspired reading of sexual difference in Aristotle’s physics in *The Feminine Symptom: Aleatory Matter and the Aristotelian Cosmos* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).

the first place, nor maintain their difference from one another. It is thus the interval, or the in-between (*metaxy*) that makes difference itself possible and this in-between has been neglected within a physics that focuses only on already differentiated objects.⁶⁴ Irigaray applies this same reading to the metaphysics of the One, centralizing the interval in her ontology of Being-Two. In *Être Deux*, she writes, “Apart from one another, we are kept alive by means of this insuperable interval. Nothing can ever fill it. But from such a nothing is born a source of Being for us [*d’un tel rien naît une source d’être pour nous*]” (ED 9). In Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference, the interval, which is no-thing, like Heidegger’s Nothing, “is” Being as the differentiator: as the ontological difference “is” the Nothing between Being and beings, sexual difference “is” the interval. For Irigaray, the interval functions as a sort of “negative” in Being: “Being sexuelle [*être sexué*] implies a negative, a ‘not-being-the-other [*un «ne pas être l’autre»*],’ a ‘not-being-the-whole’ [*un «ne pas être le tout»*],’ and a particular mode of Being, connected to the body and in relation to the other, including in the return to self” (ED 34). In the Being-Two of sexual difference, however, the negative is neither a mere act of the intellect nor does it have the power to subsume the difference of the Other into a unity. Neither is it the cut of castration that severs the originary asexuation of Being. Rather, because this negative is the interval in Being as such, “immediacy” is *always already differentiated* and the negative *preserves* the difference of the Other by maintaining “its” irreducibility.⁶⁵ This

⁶⁴ Simondon offers a similar critique of Aristotelian hylemorphism which takes individuated beings as *a priori* without considering the process of individuation that generates them. I return to this in Chapter Four.

⁶⁵ “The negative in sexual difference means an acceptance of the limits of my gender and recognition of the irreducibility of the other. It cannot be overcome, but it gives a positive access—neither instinctual nor drive-related—to the other” (JAT 32-3/13). This rethinking of the negative therefore enables Irigaray also to rethink “recognition.” As she writes, “I recognize you means that I cannot know you in thought or in flesh. The power of the negative prevails between us. I recognize you goes hand in hand with: you are irreducible to me, just as I am to you.... You are transcendent to me, inaccessible in a way, not only as an ontic being, but also as *ontological Being*” (JAT 161/103).

is not to turn the Other into a *pre*-ontological transcendence, as in Levinas, such that ethics would *precede* ontology.⁶⁶ Instead, the interval of sexual difference means that Being is always already Being-Two and therefore ontology *is* the relation to the Other. The interval is what Irigaray calls a “sensible transcendental”—not a vertically transcendent Absolute which secures the horizon of Being-One against nothingness, but a horizontal irreducibility of the Other wherein it is the *Other* that constitutes the *horizon* of Being-Two.⁶⁷ The interval is therefore the “source” of Being-Two, the fold of Being: “Being par excellence,” she calls it in *The Way of Love*, “*matter* of the transcendental” (WL 19). And if Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference is a *fundamental* ontology, insofar as it seeks to think the question of the sense, truth, and place of Being as such, it is a fundamental ontology that does not seek to give Being a positive ground—a fundamental ontology without fundament—since, as Irigaray says, it “results from an act of grounding which does not end in any ground” (WL 72). The interval, which “is” sexual difference, is Being as the differentiator, the “ground without ground of communication, the generative and creative place, which is natural and spiritual, passive and active, at the same time” (JAT 82/46).

⁶⁶ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979), I.A. For Levinas, “Heideggerian ontology...subordinates the relationship with the Other to the relation with Being in general” (46). In Irigaray’s Being-Two, which in *Être Deux* is developed in dialogue with both Heidegger and Levinas, the relation to Being *is* a relation to the Other because Being “itself” is not One and *never* general or neutral.

⁶⁷ Irigaray refers to the interval variably as a “sensible transcendental,” a “horizontal transcendence,” or the “between-us” as distinct from a form of “vertical transcendence” which positions the Other as an ineffable Absolute: “Now the other is the one who can hold open the closure of the world, while providing it with limits: the other here close to me but different from myself. The relations with him, or her, keep the world, each of the worlds, both open and structured if I respect the other as irreducible to me, transcendent to me. This does not mean that the other is vertically higher than myself, as an absolute or an ideal of which I would be only one embodiment amongst others, imperfect like others. Transcendent here signifies irreducible to myself: to I, to me, to mine” (IBSW 16). For Irigaray, this horizontal transcendence is “incarnated,” or made sensible, in relation with the other, and could serve as the basis for non-hierarchical exchange and a new “cultivation of touch” (see PCT).

In Irigaray's formulation of the interval as the spacing that produces differences, the specter of Derrida's thinking of *différance* is no doubt sensible.⁶⁸ Indeed, as Derrida describes it in *Positions*, *différance* is "the systematic play of differences, the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other. This spacing is the simultaneously active and passive...production of intervals..." (P 38/27). It is this action of spacing, this production of intervals, that is the condition of differences themselves, for without the movement of *différance*, there would be no difference between entities and thus no possibility of relation between them. Moreover, neither Irigaray's interval nor Derrida's *différance* is merely spatial—both are equally temporal. For Derrida, the "production of intervals" is a spacing of time "itself." For anything to constitute itself as such it must be separated from what it is not by the production of an interval; this interval, however, marks the element itself and prevents full self-identity, self-presence, or self-enclosure. As Derrida puts it, "In constituting itself, in dividing itself dynamically, this interval is what might be called *spacing*, the becoming-space of time or the becoming-time of space (*temporization*)" (D 14/13). The present, for Derrida, is an opening, an interval, between the past and the future that is marked, *haunted*, by both of them and so is never completely "itself." And for Irigaray, the ontology of sexual

⁶⁸ This is not to suggest that Irigaray and her ontology of sexual difference are "Derridean." While Irigaray and Derrida rarely mention one another directly, there are undeniably a number of resonances between their work, particularly the breadth and precision of their readings of the history of western philosophy and their relation to Heidegger's thought. Indeed, if, as Derrida states, "the two major questions of 'deconstruction'" are "the question of the history of concepts and (trivially) so-called 'textual' hegemony, history *tout court*; and the question of phallogocentrism," then there is clearly a great deal of affinity between their projects (*The Politics of Friendship*, trans. George Collins [New York: Verso, 1997], 278). Irigaray, for her part, defined herself as "absolutely deconstructive from within the most affirmative gesture possible" during her seminar at the University of Bristol in June 2013. Still, the two thinkers rarely mention one another explicitly, and thus the degree of their influence on one another is a matter of speculation at best: Irigaray's most sustained commentary on Derrida is in the essay she delivered at the conference on his work at Cerisy-la-Salle, France in 1980, entitled "La croyance même." Derrida's remarks on Irigaray, as one might expect, are far less substantial, amounting to a handful of lengthy footnotes in his volume *Touching—Jean Luc Nancy*.

difference pivots on a reconfiguration of an aleatory space-time that preserves the interval as the condition of differentiation and relation: “weaving the veil of time, the fabric of time, time with space, time in space. Between past and future, future and past, place in place” (E 57/53). Like Irigaray’s interval, *différance* is in a certain sense Derrida’s attempt to rewrite the Heideggerian Nothing, for as Derrida writes, “*différance* is not [*la différence n’est pas*]” (D 22/21). In this sense, then, *différance* is another name for the ontological difference—the movement of spacing and temporization between Being and beings. But if the ontological difference was opened, and yet forgotten, by a metaphysical thinking of Being, then there is a sense in which the ontological difference is itself an epoch in the “unfolding of *différance*”: “*différance*, in a certain and very strange way (is) ‘older’ than the ontological difference or than the truth of Being” (D 23/22). Like Irigaray’s thinking of sexual difference, Derrida’s *différance* exposes the ontological difference as a veiling of a more “originary” difference.

We then here arrive at what Derrida called the “enormous problem” of the relationship between sexual difference and ontological difference. What comes “first”: ontological difference, sexual difference, or *différance*? “Must one think ‘*différance*’ ‘before’ sexual difference or taking off ‘from’ it?” Derrida asks (Ch 103/70). As multiple commenters have noted, Derrida does not provide a definitive answer one way or another to this question, though he was perhaps the only male philosopher to take the question so seriously and he continued to be haunted by it even at his last lecture series, *La bête et le souverain* (2001-2002). (Derrida’s “equivocation” in the face of this “enormous problem” is obviously not unrelated to Heidegger’s own haunting by the “most difficult problem” of the living body.) Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference, however, provides a more

direct answer to this question. In “*Différance*,” Derrida writes: “Could not this (active) movement of (the production of) *différance* without origin be called simply, and without neographism, *differentiation*? Such a word...would have left open the possibility of an organic, original, and homogenous unity that eventually would come to be divided, to receive difference as an event” (D 14/13). Derrida’s caution is well-taken within the phallogocentric metaphysics of the One, for as Irigaray clearly shows, all “differentiation” within such a metaphysics is ultimately produced within a specular economy of the Same which represents “difference” only in comparative terms. But if Being is not *One* from the “beginning”? By rewriting the Not of the ontological difference with the generative interval of sexual difference, Being-Two is the always already differing and relation of Being *from and with “its(elf)” (as) Other*. This ontological-sexual difference is therefore the condition of any sexuate differences and relations between entities. As Jean-Luc Nancy writes:

The difference of the sexes is not the difference between two or several things, each one existing for itself as ‘one’ (*a sex*): it is not like a difference between species or between individuals, or a difference of nature or degree. It is the difference *of sex* from itself....for there is nothing—no generality or indifference or asexuality—that could ever underlie sex....That is to say, ontological difference is sexual (and vice versa, which no doubt affects Being in its very beingness). Therefore, Being is sexed and/or sexing.⁶⁹

If Being is always already more-than-one, or “at least two,” then the ontological difference of Being and beings must itself be (at least) doubled. And if *différance* is the differing and deferral of Being and beings, and Being as such is sexuate, then, as Nancy

⁶⁹ Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus II: Writings on Sexuality*, trans. Anne O’Byrne (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 11, 12, 109n6. This quote comes in the context of a critique of Lacan’s dictum “there is no sexual relation.” It is worth noting that Nancy does not mention Irigaray in this text, although she has been making a similar argument, in similar terms, for decades. The degree to which Nancy’s and other male French philosophers’ thinking of sexual difference is indebted to Irigaray, while she remains unacknowledged, is a question well worth asking.

says, “Derrida’s *différance* must therefore be sexual”:⁷⁰ there is therefore *différance* “of” ontological and sexual difference—a doubling of the ontological-sexual difference that we might call “sexual *différance*.” Or, to put it differently, *différance* is (at least) *two*. Sexual *différance* is therefore the spacing and temporization of Being-Two into sexuate beings, the condition of differentiation and relation. This is why, as Irigaray insists, sexual difference is “*difference itself*” (WL 106).

Some of the most controversial aspects of Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference can now be clarified. First, the notion that a fundamental ontology of sexual difference entails a negation all other differences in the universalism of sexual difference. In fact, it is the contrary: rather than subsuming particularities into universal categories of Being—in other words, rather than seeking to fit the multiplicity of gender performances described by Butler or the “sex diversity” of the natural world described by Hird into the supposedly universal categories of man/woman or male/female—Irigaray’s ontology takes off *from* sexual difference to multiply differences. A similar point was made by Derrida in his response to Levinas’s critique of Heidegger’s ostensible privileging of “ontology”:

Being [for Heidegger] is not the concept of a rather indeterminate and abstract predicate, seeking to cover the totality of beings in its extreme universality: (1) because it is not a predicate, and authorizes all predication; (2) because it is ‘older’ than the concrete *presence* of the *ens*; (3) because belonging to Being does not cancel any predicative difference, but, on the contrary, permits the emergence of every possible difference. Being is therefore trans-categorical...(WD 205/140)

On this point, Derrida draws on Aristotle’s argument in his *Metaphysics* (B.3) that Being is neither a “genus” (*genre*) nor a “principle,” because every “differentiae” always already “has” Being. In Irigaray’s ontology in which Being is always already sexuate,

⁷⁰ Nancy, *Corpus II*, 109n6.

every entity is always already sexuate, while these entities can also always be “further” differentiated by genus, genre, species, kind, family, and so on. Sexuation is therefore not a predicate added to neutral beings; rather, *Being-Sexuate* is what authorizes all predication, is “older” than the concrete presence of entities, and permits the emergence of every possible difference. In this sense, some of Irigaray’s critics are partially correct: sexual difference in her ontology *is* trans-categorical, traversing *all other differences*; however, given that it is of a different order than all other differences, it multiplies differences rather than reducing them. Still, this is in no way to claim that sexuation is “more important” than race, class, or other differences in a particular person’s life—Irigaray is adamant that there is no quantification of difference (C 133)—but it does mean that such differences are always already sexuate at an *ontological* rather than an *ontic* level.⁷¹ Irigaray therefore does not dismiss other differences out of ignorance; instead, she suggests that a fundamental ontology of sexual difference could *alleviate* the ontological burden that is unduly placed on other differences (particularly race and ethnicity), which is why she repeatedly, and notoriously, insists that a cultivation of sexual difference and Being-Two is essential to eliminating racism, ethnocentrism, and xenophobia.⁷²

⁷¹ As Irigaray says, “I think the most important aim is to make visible the exploitation common to all women and to discover the struggles which every woman should engage in, wherever she is: i.e., depending on her country, her occupation, her class, her sexual estate—i.e., *the most immediately unbearable of her modes of oppression*” (WE 69. Emphasis added).

⁷² Sylvia Wynter’s work, also drawing substantively on Heidegger, demonstrates how the European monotheistic philosophy of the One produced a model of the singular “human” (i.e., “Eurocentric Man”) into which “race” was introduced as a structure of difference necessary to uphold colonial hierarchies—a structure that is then *ontologized* in philosophy and science. Both Irigaray and Wynter, then, argue that we have never been *human* because humanity has always been conflated with Eurocentric Man. Although Wynter is critical of Irigaray because she, like most of Irigaray’s critics, reads Irigaray as suggesting that sexual difference is more *significant* than race, or that sexism is the primary modality of oppression, Irigaray’s argument that an ontology of sexual difference is necessary in order to avoid such racializing ontologies *within* a metaphysics of the One because Being-Two “grounds” Being in *real* difference from the start—is quite consonant with Wynter’s. In other words, the “new praxis of being human” beyond White Eurocentric Man that Wynter calls for must also be a sexuate praxis. See “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.” For Wynter’s critique of Irigaray, see “Afterword: ‘Beyond Miranda’s

This brings us to the ethical question: in rewriting sexual difference as ontological difference and Being as Being-Two, Irigaray is often accused of “grounding” ethics in the heterosexual “couple.” Yet, the “sexes” *belong-together* (in the sense of Heidegger’s *Zusammengehören*)⁷³ not because of “compulsory heterosexuality”—which is, in any case, as Irigaray described it in her early work, an alibi and compensation for the constitutive *hom(m)o-sexualité* of the phallogocentric metaphysics of the One⁷⁴—but rather because *sexual difference separates as much as it unites*. This “belonging-together” does not at all imply “sexuality,” as I will argue with Foucault later in the dissertation. Rather, it means that if Being is Being-Two, and if this Being-Two is cultivated rather than reduced to One, then to *be* is simultaneously to be in differentiation and relation to the Other-Being. If, as Heidegger says, the unconcealment of Being takes *place* only where Being is *let be* then for Irigaray, to *be-sexuate* (*être sexué*) *essentially entails* letting the sexuate Other(s) *be*. But if, as Derrida remarks, “one can have to let be only that which one is *not*” (ED 207/141), then one can only let the *Other* be, and only the *Other* can let one be. Thus, even though sexual difference is, for Irigaray, an “immediate natural given,” the interval must be individually and collectively *cultivated*, which is why her ontology is simultaneously ethical and political: to rephrase one of

Meanings: Un/silencing the ‘Demonic Ground’ of Caliban’s ‘Woman,’” in *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*, ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1990), 355-70.

⁷³ Heidegger says that the belonging-together (*Zusammengehören*) of humanity and Being cannot be thought *either* in terms of the “belonging,” in which case the two remain separate but held together in the Same, *or* of the “together,” in which case there is a metaphysical unity but only in the *belonging-together* (see GA11).

⁷⁴ “The use of and traffic in women subtend and uphold the reign of masculine hom(m)o-sexuality, even while they maintain that hom(m)o-sexuality in speculations, mirror games, identifications, and more or less rivalrous appropriations, which defer its real practice. Reigning everywhere, although prohibited in practice, hom(m)o-sexuality is played out through the bodies of women, matter, or sign and heterosexuality has been up to now just an alibi for the smooth workings of man’s relations with himself, of relations among men” (CS 168/172).

Heidegger's statements in the language of Irigaray's ontology of sexual difference, "Being-Two can open out...the sexual difference preserved in itself only when the difference *takes place*" (GA7 76/OM 91). This is why a "transition to a new age" of sexual difference "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*" (E 15/7). In what follows, I will address these reconceptualizations as I go on to outline Irigaray's elemental philosophy of life and her "philosophy of the limit." In this chapter, my goal was to work through the question of sexual difference and ontological difference and Irigaray's thinking of sexual difference as the foundation of a new thinking of Being. For now, in spite of all the ends and requiems that have been offered in its name, sexual difference, like Heidegger said of Being, "is still waiting for the time when 'It' itself will become worthy of thought for man [sic?]" (GA9 322/246).

Two

ELEMENTS OF A PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

IRIGARAY, HEIDEGGER, AND THE META/PHYSICS OF TECHNOLOGY

“Thinking comes to an end when it slips out of its element. The element is what properly enables: it is the enabling. It embraces thinking and so brings it into its essence.”

– MARTIN HEIDEGGER, “Letter on Humanism”

“As we move farther away from our condition as living beings, we tend to forget the most indispensable element in life: *air*. The air we breathe, in which we live, speak, appear; the air in which everything ‘presences’ and can come into being. The air that we never think has been borrowed from a birth, a growth, a *phusis* and a *phuein* that the philosopher forgets.”

– LUCE IRIGARAY, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*

In the previous chapter, I argued for an understanding of sexual difference as ontological difference through Irigaray’s rethinking of Being “itself” as sexuate. As I suggested there, Irigaray’s rethinking of ontology beyond western metaphysics takes place through her development of an original philosophy of nature. In this endeavor, Irigaray partially follows Heidegger, whose own critique of metaphysics led him to approach the question of nature repeatedly and extensively. For Heidegger, as I will detail shortly, the conception of “nature” central to modern philosophy and science originates in the shift from a Pre-Socratic thinking of *phusis* to a metaphysics that has structured western philosophy since Plato. As such, Heidegger seeks to open a new path for (western) thought by returning to this Pre-Socratic thinking of Being as *phusis*—a path that Irigaray, in part, takes up. Indeed, for both Irigaray and Heidegger, western metaphysics consists in a certain enframing of the dynamic and generative powers of *phusis*, and for both thinkers, this enframing culminates in a technical-scientific mastery of nature that presents a grave danger to the future of the planet and its inhabitants. And for each of them, moreover, this situation calls for a return to the beginning of western philosophy

and science, when the path of metaphysics was first opened, in order to begin anew with a different thinking and approach to “nature” than that offered by the modern sciences and the metaphysics that grounds them. And yet, while Heidegger brought western thought to the threshold of this “other beginning,” his own attempt to “leap over” metaphysics was stalled by his inability to think the questions of life and sexual difference. For Irigaray, to go beyond metaphysics would entail not only the recovery of Being, nor even a recovery of Pre-Socratic *phusis*, but more significantly, a recovery of their *sexuate* dimension from its oblivion in the phallogocentric One. This is because, as Irigaray suggests, even prior to the metaphysical oblivion of Being detailed by Heidegger was a de-sexuation of *phusis*. Therefore if Heidegger returns to what he calls the “first beginning” in search of the *phusis* that was forgotten by the history of western metaphysics, for Irigaray such a return must first remember that “in the beginning, *she* was.”

This chapter, then, extends the elaboration of an ontology of sexual difference by way of Irigaray’s philosophy of nature. I begin with an exposition of Heidegger’s analysis of the shift from *phusis* to metaphysics and the subsequent development of the modern technical-scientific theory of “nature.” I then turn to Irigaray’s critique of Heidegger for his forgetting of life, air, and sexual difference, demonstrating how her approach offers both an original historical critique of western metaphysics that moves beyond the limitations of Heidegger’s as well as a new theory of nature. Here, I examine Irigaray’s reformulation of a Pre-Socratic philosophy of the elements—earth, fire, air, and water—as a way of thinking the materiality of nature beyond the terms of physics. In her elemental philosophy, Irigaray “returns” not only to a thinking of Being as *phusis*, but

of *phusis* as both *vital* and *sexuate*. In Irigaray's thought, *phusis* is therefore a force of differentiation and relation, of generation and (pro)creation. By rethinking Being as *phusis*, and by rethinking *phusis* as a sexuate vital energy, I thus argue that Irigaray's elemental philosophy offers a shift from *meta*-physics to *dia*-physics in which beings are no longer cut off from the conditions that generate and sustain them. And if metaphysics has served as the basis for the modern technical-scientific approach to nature, then as a *dia*-physics, I contend that Irigaray's elemental ontology of sexual difference could serve as the basis for new approaches to science, approaches that take off from a sexuate understanding of Being, or "nature." Irigaray's thought, I argue, overcomes the metaphysical bifurcation of nature and culture, as well as its attendant domination and destruction of nature, and enables us to enter a different constellation of Being, living, and thinking.

***Phusis*, Meta/physics, and the Modern Technical-Scientific Theory of "Nature"**

In his 1935 lecture series at the University of Freiburg, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger locates the origin of western metaphysics in a series of reductions in the Ancient Greek thinking of *phusis*. While *phusis* is often translated as "nature," after its Latinization "*natura*," Heidegger argues that the Greek understanding was much more capacious than any subsequent interpretation of "nature":

Phusis originally means both heaven and earth, both the stone and the plant, both the animal and the human, and human history as the work of humans and gods; and finally and first of all, it means the gods who themselves stand under destiny. *Phusis* means the emerging sway, and the enduring over which it thoroughly holds sway. This emerging, abiding sway includes both 'becoming' as well as 'Being' in the narrower sense of fixed continuity. *Phusis* is the event of *standing-forth*, arising from the concealed and thus enabling the concealed to take its stand for the first time (GA40 11-12/16).

Indeed, according to Heidegger, the ancient thinking of *phusis* also included “life” (*zoe*), as that which “rises into the open” and was in no way limited to so-called “organic” beings (GA7 281/EGT 116). In standard accounts of the history of philosophy, what set the “first” *philosophers*, the Milesians (sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E.), apart from the reigning “mythological” thinking is that they sought to understand the world without recourse to the gods, or what we might now call the “super-natural.”¹ When these thinkers began to ask about *phusis* as such, then, they did so by way of “physical beings” (*ta phusei onta*) or “the physical” (*ta phusika*). In questioning after *phusis as such*, however, their thinking had to pass over these *particular* physical beings, and even the physical itself; hence, meta-physics: *meta ta phusika*, “beyond the physical.” This thinking then opens the essential belonging-together of physics (i.e., the study of “the physical”) and philosophy or metaphysics (i.e., the study of *the Being of “the physical” as such*), which is why these first philosophers are often also referred to as the first physicists. Thus, if, as Heidegger says, *phusis* was once “Being itself” for the Ancient Greeks, then we see here the beginning of approaching the question of Being (or *phusis*) by way of *beings* (*ta phusei onta* or *ta phusika*). This is, then, the threshold of the oblivion of Being (and *phusis*) *as such* that, according to Heidegger, will characterize the destiny of western metaphysics:

According to our explanation of *phusis*, the word means the Being of beings. If one is asking *peri phuseos*, about the Being of beings, then the discussion of *phusis*, ‘physics’ in the ancient sense, is in itself already beyond *ta phusika*, on beyond beings, and is concerned with Being. ‘Physics’ determines the essence and the history of metaphysics from the inception onward. Even in the doctrine of Being as *actus purus* (Thomas Aquinas), as absolute concept (Hegel), as eternal

¹ See Kirk and Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 8-72.

recurrence of the same will to power (Nietzsche), metaphysics steadfastly remains ‘physics’” (GA40 14/19).²

This is why, for Heidegger, *phusis* is “the fundamental word of western metaphysics” (GA9 /185).

This reduction of the originary meaning of *phusis* opens a path leading directly toward the modern technical-scientific theory of “nature.” For Heidegger, the most decisive figure in this path is Aristotle. In the *Physics*, Aristotle defines *phusis* by motion (*kinesis*).³ This motion, however, is not necessarily locomotion, as in movement from one place to another, for Aristotle attributes *phusis* to plants and the elements: “Of beings, some are from *phusis*, whereas other are by other causes. By *phusis*...are the animals and their parts, and the plants and the simple elements of bodies like earth, fire, water, and air.”⁴ The growth of a tree, the blowing of the wind, the flight of a bird, and a falling rock all have *kinesis*. This is, for Aristotle, what distinguishes “natural beings” (*phusei onta*) from technical artifacts: “Each of the beings [from *phusis*] has *in itself* the *principle* [*arkhe*] of motion and stationariness (in respect of place, or of growth and decrease, or by way of alteration). On the other hand, a bed and a robe and anything else of that sort...insofar as they are products of know-how/art [*tekhnē*] have no impulse to change arising from themselves.”⁵ For Heidegger, Aristotle’s thinking of *phusis* essentially transforms the pre-Socratic thinking insofar as the general process of the emerging and abiding sway is now limited to “pure movement in space” (GA41 84/83). However, this

² “*Peri phuseos*” (“On Nature”) is the title given to many of the writings by the Pre-Socratics: including Anaximander, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Empedocles.

³ “We...must take for granted that the things that exist by *phusis* are, either all or some of them, in motion—which is made plain by induction” (*Physics* I.2.185a12).

⁴ *Physics* II.1.192b8-10.

⁵ *Physics* II.1.192b13-18.

movement is still essential and internal to the (“natural”) body itself. In this sense, *phusis* and *tekhne* are two different *arkhe*, two different sources of emergence and governing principles: *phusis* is the source and principle of motion, the *arkhe kiniseos*, internal to certain beings. For Aristotle, the *arkhe*, moreover, is also the *telos*, or the final cause, of the being. In other words, the how, the for what end, and the where of a “natural” being are determined by the *phusis* (or Being) of the being itself. Thus, while Aristotle reduces *phusis* from an understanding of Being as such to the Being of a *particular kind of beings* (i.e., “natural” or “physical” beings [*phusei onta*], which are now distinct from “technical” beings [*tekhne onta*]), Heidegger nevertheless sees a remnant of the earlier thinking of *phusis* here insofar as *phusis*, now as a particular mode of Being, is still understood as emergence into presence. As Heidegger puts it, “According to Aristotle, the basis for natural motion lies in the nature [*phusis*] of the body itself, in its essence, in its most proper Being...The kind of motion follows from the kind of Being” (GA41 86/85).

While this thinking of *phusis* more or less held sway throughout the Scholastics, it was fundamentally transformed with the birth of the modern theory of nature, which Heidegger sees as having its “systematic and creative culmination” in Isaac Newton’s *Principia* (1687). According to Heidegger, Newton’s principles lay the “foundation for the succeeding natural science” (GA41 76/77). For Heidegger, the Newtonian doctrine of motion constitutes an essentially different “experience of nature” (*Naturerfahrung*) from the Aristotelian, and the Ancient Greek more generally. In his 1935-6 lectures on the “thing,” Heidegger juxtaposes these two doctrines through a reading of Newton’s law of

inertia.⁶ While “nature” here is still thought in terms of motion, this law introduces a number of profound shifts. First, Newton’s use of the phrase “every body” (*corpus omne*) renders all natural bodies as essentially of the same kind. Second, the place of a body no longer has anything to do with its nature or Being, but any body can, in principle, be anywhere: space is empty and place is no longer where a body belongs, but a position in relation to other positions. Third, a particular kind of movement is no longer determined according to different natures, capacities, forces, or elements belonging to a body; rather, all movement is nothing but change of position and force is external to bodies. Fourth, motion is quantitative, measurable by distance between positions. Fifth, any distinction between “natural” or “just” (*dike*) and “unnatural” or “violent” (*bía*) movement is eliminated. Finally, the concept of nature in general changes such that

Nature is no longer the *inner* principle out of which the motion of the body follows; rather, nature is the mode of the variety of the changing relative positions, of bodies, the manner in which they are present in space and time, which themselves are domains of possible positional orders and determinations of order and have no special traits anywhere (GA41 89/88).

As Trish Glazebrook succinctly captures these transformations: “If Aristotle’s cosmos is analogous to an accelerated film of a flower’s bursting open, then Newton’s is analogous to billiard balls tracked against graph paper.”⁷

For Heidegger, Newton’s doctrines capture the “mathematical” essence of modern science. “The mathematical,” as Heidegger defines it, is the “fundamental position we take toward things by which we take up things as already given to us, and as they must

⁶ In the *Principia*, Newton’s first law reads: “Every body persists in its state of being at rest or of moving uniformly straight forward, except insofar as it is compelled to change its state by force impressed” (*The Principia*, trans. I. B. Cohen and A. Whitman [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999]).

⁷ Trish Glazebrook, “From *Phusis* to Nature, *Tekhne* to Technology: Heidegger on Aristotle, Galileo, and Newton,” *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 38 (2000), 112.

and should be given. The mathematical is thus the fundamental presupposition of the knowledge of things” (GA41 76/75). While Newton provides the codification of the mathematical essence of modern science, Heidegger locates its origin in Galileo’s experiments with free fall. Before his experiments on the Torre di Pisa, Galileo first engaged in a *thought*-experiment about a body in a situation that does not exist in experience: “I think in my mind,” he wrote in the *Discorsi* (1638), “something moveable that is left entirely to itself.” This is, for Heidegger, a form of idealism that is possible only by abstracting beings from what Aristotle associated with their very Being (*phusis*): their actual place, their form of movement, and their purpose—their *arkhe* and *telos*, the source and principle of their emergence and abiding. Rather than being derived *from* observation of things, then, the mathematical *brings to* things a set of mentally pre-conceived determinations. The mathematical is therefore a mentally conceived “project” (*Entwurf*) that opens a domain in which things reveal themselves in a predetermined way.⁸ Mathematical science is therefore axiomatic in that it operates on *a priori* fundamental propositions about what things are and how they are to be evaluated and these axioms sketch the “basic blueprint” (*Grundriß*) of things and their possible relations in advance. Modern science is “experimental,” then, *because* of the mathematical projection that has originally skipped over the things themselves: things now have to be demonstrated in the real in accordance with the project. The mathematical therefore enables *and* requires uniform and universal modes of numerical measurement, which is

⁸ Heidegger distinguishes “the mathematical” from its narrow connotation as “numerical” via an interpretation of the etymology of the Greek *mathesis*, or “learning.” For Heidegger, *mathesis* describes a specific form of learning as a becoming-aware of what we already know: “this ‘taking cognizance’ is the genuine essence of learning, the *mathesis*. The *mathemata* are the things insofar as we take cognizance of them as what we already know them to be in advance, the body as the bodily, the plant-like of the plant, the animal-like of the animal, the thingness of the thing, and so on” (GA41 74/73).

why modern science is “mathematical” in the narrow sense of the term (GA41 83-4/82-3). In modern mathematical science, then, “nature is no longer an inner capacity of a body, determining its form of motion and its place. Nature is now the realm of the uniform space-time context of motion, which is outlined in the axiomatic project and in which alone bodies can be bodies as a part of it and anchored in it” (GA41 93/92).

The mathematization of *phusis* in modern science, for Heidegger, finds its correspondence in metaphysics in the form of Descartes. For Heidegger, against the “bad novel” of the history of philosophy, Descartes is not at all an “epistemologist” concerned with elaborating a theory of knowledge, but rather an ontologist, or a metaphysician, whose task is to rethink Being in accordance with the mathematical reformulation of beings. Because mathematical science is an axiomatic science, its axioms must be absolutely certain and they must establish in advance what Being means. This, for Heidegger, is the reason for Descartes’s methodological skepticism in the *Meditations* (1641): because the mathematical project takes the form of Galileo’s “I think in my mind...” we must be certain about the “I think.” “Only where thinking thinks itself is it absolutely mathematical,” as Heidegger puts it, “i.e., a taking cognizance of that which we already have” (GA41 105/104). Thus, for Descartes, the only thing that can be posited as certain is the positing itself, that is, the *cogito*, because no matter what is asserted, it always takes the form of an “I think.” As such, the “I” becomes the ground or *fundamentum* of thinking, that is, of the determination of the Being of beings. Because the “I” *underlies* the positing, it becomes the material substrate, or *subjectum*, and beings become “objects.” To quote Heidegger:

Until Descartes, every thing at hand for itself was a ‘subject’; but, now the ‘I’ becomes the special subject, that with regard to which all the remaining things

first determine themselves as such. Because—mathematically—they first receive their thingness only through the founding relation to the highest principle and its ‘subject’ (I), they are essentially such as stand as something else in relation to the ‘subject,’ which lie over against it as *objectum*. The things themselves become ‘objects.’ (GA41 106/105).

The subject/object dichotomy is thus *essential* to modern science and philosophy: “the subject” is the determination of *Dasein* that corresponds (*entsprechen*) to the determination of Being as objectivity, and so-called modern philosophy consists in the progressive attempt to metaphysically ground the mathematical by securing subjectivity as the ontological ground for the presencing of objects (i.e., “objectivity). In the modern era, beings therefore become “objects” and Being as such withdraws into oblivion. For Heidegger, this mathematical reinterpretation of *physis* as a calculable coherence of motion and material bodies remains even in quantum physics even though in the latter, the coherence becomes only probabilistic rather than certain (GA7 54-55/QCT 171-2).

In his post-war writings, Heidegger’s critical stance toward science becomes more forceful, as he uncovers the integral link between modern science and technology. As is well-known, the later Heidegger saw the question of technology as the definitive question of the modern “epoch.” In what is said to be his last text, a two-page address to the participants in the Heidegger Conference at DePaul University written two weeks before his death in 1976, Heidegger explicitly foregrounds the link between science and technology as central to the question of Being:

The question with which I send my greetings to you is that single question which I have tried to ask in a more questioning manner. It is known as the ‘question of Being.’ ... In the age of a world civilization stamped by technology, oblivion of Being is oppressive in a special way for the asking of the question of Being. From the many questions that are necessary in this regard, the following may be mentioned: Is modern natural science [*neuzeitliche Naturwissenschaft*] the foundation [*Grundlage*] of modern [*modernen*] technology—as is supposed—or is it already the *basic form* [*Grundform*] of *technological thinking*, the

determining fore-conception [*Vorgriff*] and incessant incursion of technological representation into the realized and organized machinations of modern technics? (NNT 3).⁹

In other words, is modern technology the application of the modern scientific theory of nature? Or is it, on the contrary, the very essence of that science? To address such a question, it is necessary to look at the precise way in which Heidegger defines “technology.” In his famous essay on technics from 1953, Heidegger argued that the *essence* (*Wesen*) of technology “is by no means anything techn(ological) [*Technisches*]” (GA7 7/QCT 4). That is to say, the essence of technics cannot be revealed by anything that is commonly designated as belonging to the “complex [*Einrichtung*] of technology”—that is, any specific apparatus, form, or technique. This is why both the “instrumental” (i.e., technology is a means to an ends) and the “anthropological” (i.e., technology is specifically human activity) definitions fail to apprehend the essence of technics and, therefore, only more thoroughly “chain” us to technology as we become ensnared in an calculative instrumental rationality that believes it can “master” it (GA7 8/QCT 5). Heidegger, as is well remarked, ultimately locates technology’s essence in “bringing-forth,” or the Greek *poiesis* (translated by Heidegger into German as “*Her-vor-bringen*”), as an unconcealing or presencing of Being (GA7 12/QCT 10). All instrumentality, causality, and the entire “complex” of technologies/techniques, both ancient and modern, belong to this mode of revealing and unconcealment: *poiesis*. According to Heidegger, even *phusis*, as originally understood by the ancient Greeks, was a form of *poiesis*—“indeed *poiesis* in the highest sense”—although the *arkhe* and

⁹ In German, *Neuzeit* is a name for the “modern era” as distinct from *Antike* (Antiquity) and the *Mittlealter* (Middle Ages). It is considered to begin with the Renaissance (roughly 1500) and therefore has a more precise meaning than *moderne* which is a more general adjective.

telos of natural beings is internal to them (i.e., *phusis*), while that of artifacts is internal to the *tekhne* (know-how) of the fabricator.¹⁰

Yet, is “modern” technology not different in essence from the “simple” handicraft described so tenderly by Heidegger in his example of the silver chalice? Has the essence of technics not fundamentally changed in light of the immense developments in the modern sciences? For Heidegger, yes and no. On the one hand, modern technology remains as much a mode of revealing as it was for the ancient Greeks: this is to say, *tekhne* remains a mode of the revealing or presencing of Being. On the other hand, in the modern *epoch*, this mode of revealing (i.e., *tekhne*) no longer belongs to *poiesis*, or *bringing-forth*. Instead, the “revealing that holds sway throughout modern technology has the character of a positioning in the sense of a *challenging-forth* [*Herausfordern*]” (GA7 15/QCT 14). For Heidegger, this “positioning” is the essential feature of the modern scientific theory of nature. In “Science and Reflection” (1953), Heidegger thus revises some of his formulations regarding the mathematical essence of modern science in the language of his updated thinking about technics. Here, while Heidegger still emphasizes the objectivizing essence of modern science, the axiomatic “projection” (*Entwurf*) onto beings (exemplified in Galileo’s “*mente concipio*”) is now described in terms of a more violent “securing” and “processing” of nature:

Science positions [*stellt*] the real. It orders it into place to the end that at any given time the real will exhibit itself as an interacting network, i.e., in surveyable series of related causes. The real thus becomes surveyable and capable of being followed out in its sequences....The real becomes secured [*sichergestellt*] in its objectness. From this there result spheres or object-areas that scientific

¹⁰ “*Phusis* is indeed *poiesis* in the highest sense. For what presences by means of *phusis* has the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth, e.g., the bursting of a blossom into bloom, in itself (*en heautoi*). In contrast, what is brought forth by the artisan or artist, e.g., the silver chalice, has the bursting open belonging to bringing-forth not in itself, but in another (*en alloi*), in the craftsman or artist” (GA7 12-3/QCT 10-1).

observation can entrap after its fashion. *Entrapping representation* [*nachstellende Vorstellen*], which secures [*sicherstellt*] everything in that objectness which is thus capable of being followed out, is the fundamental characteristic of representing [*Grundzug des Vorstellens*] through which modern science corresponds to the real.... Theory makes secure at any given time a region of the real as its object-area. The area-character of objectness is shown in the fact that it specifically maps out in advance the possibilities for the posing of questions [*Fragestellung*]. Every new phenomenon emerging within an area of science is refined to such a point that it fits into the normative objective coherence of the theory. That normative coherence itself is thereby challenged from time to time. But objectness as such remains unchanged in its fundamental characteristics.... Were objectness to be surrendered, the essence of science would be denied. This is the meaning, for example, of the assertion that modern atomic physics by no means invalidates the classical physics of Galileo and Newton but only narrows its realm of validity. But this narrowing is simultaneously a confirmation of the objectness normative for the theory of nature, in accordance with which nature presents itself for representation [*Vorstellen darstellt*] as a spatio-temporal coherence of motion calculable in some way or other in advance (GA7 49-51/QCT 167-9. Emphasis modified.).

In this description of the modern scientific theory of nature, Heidegger emphasizes the essence of modern science as a *positioning* or even *setting-upon* (*Stellen*), which is also the root of a number of German words for “representation” (e.g., *Darstellen*: to position-there, *Vorstellen*: to position-before), in order to point out that representational thinking *essentially corresponds* to the revealing of Being in modern science (and philosophy).¹¹ It is also in this *positioning* that Heidegger locates the specific essence of modern

¹¹ “What presences can offer itself as what is posed in human representation, for it and across from it. What presences is thus an oppositional object for representation; representation, as *percipere*, is the *cogitare* of the *ego cogito*, of the *conscientia*, of consciousness, of the self-consciousness of the subject. What stands over against [*der Gegenstand*] is the object [*das Objekt*] for the subject” (GA79 40/37). In “The Age of the World-Picture” (1939), Heidegger famously writes that “the grounding event of modernity is the conquest of the world as picture. From now on ‘picture’ means: the collective image of representing production [*das Gebild des vorstellenden Herstellens*]” (GA5 94/71). In the “age of the world-picture,” for anything to *be* it must *be in the picture*. As Heidegger writes, “The interweaving of...two processes—that the world becomes picture and man the subject—...is decisive for the essence of modernity...the process, namely, whereby the more completely and comprehensively the world, as conquered, stands at man’s disposal, and the more objectively the object appears, all the more subjectively (i.e., peremptorily) does the *subjectum* rise up, and all the more inexorably, too, do observations and teachings about the world transform themselves into a doctrine of man, into an anthropology” (GA5 93/70).

technology in his famous term *Ge-stell* or “positionality.”¹² As Heidegger defines it, *Ge-stell* is “the gathering together of that positioning which positions man, i.e., challenges him forth to reveal the real in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve [*Bestand*]. *Ge-stell* means that way of revealing which holds sway in the essence of modern technology and which is itself nothing technical” (GA7 21/QCT 20). This mode of revealing Being or “nature” takes the form of “unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing...regulating and securing” (GA7 17/QCT 16).

The increasing objectification, and thus *onticization*, of Being in modern metaphysics and science is therefore essentially linked to the *Ge-stell* of modern technology. Indeed, “the modern physical theory of nature prepares the way first not simply for technology but for the *essence* of modern technology. For already in physics the challenging gathering-together into ordering revealing holds sway....Modern physics is the herald of *Ge-stell*” (GA7 23/QCT 22). For Heidegger, the essence of modern technology, *Ge-stell*, began with the challenging-forth of nature as a standing-reserve for experimentation, measurement, and calculation in the mathematical sciences but only becomes fully recognizable as such when modern industrial technology instrumentalizes and exploits the standing-reserve. Thus, if positionality, the essence of modern

¹² While “*Ge-stell*” has long been translated into English as “Enframing,” in his recent translation of the *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, Andrew Mitchell translates it as “positionality.” The root of *Ge-stell* is *Stellen* (lit. to position or place), while the prefix *Ge-* means both a gathering (e.g., *Berg* is mountain while *Gebirge* is mountain range) and a past participle. *Ge-stell*, then, might literally be rendered as “all that has been positioned.” As Mitchell explains, “[*Ge-stell*] is the gathering of all *Stellen*, of all positioning, placing, putting as this basic movement has shown itself in the technologically dominated world of today as well as across the history of Western philosophy from its inception with the Greeks.” Heidegger explicitly distinguishes *Ge-stell* from its everyday use as “frame” or “rack” (e.g., a bookcase) and from *Gestelle* as “framework.” Again, as Mitchell describes it, “The spread of positionality [*Ge-stell*] is thus not a framework that surrounds from without, but, in part, a process of conscription [*Gestellung*] that adopts and compels whatever it encounters into the order of standing reserve” (“Translator’s Foreword,” *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, by Martin Heidegger [Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press, 2012], xi).

technology, already holds sway in the positioning of nature in the axiomatic projections of the mathematical theory of nature (i.e., modern physics), as industrial technology comes increasingly to dominate science, the positioning of Being or nature as a standing-reserve shifts from a complete *objectification* of all beings to a complete “*objectlessness*” (*Gegenstandlösen*). As Heidegger puts it:

In the world age of technology, nature is no limit to technology. There, nature is much more the *fundamental piece of inventory* of the technological standing-reserve—and nothing else. Nature is no longer even an object that stands-against [*Gegenstand*]. As the fundamental piece of the standing-reserve in *Ge-stell*, it is something constant whose standing and steadiness is determined solely by requisitioning (GA79 43/41).

In *Ge-stell*, “nature” is therefore positioned as constantly present before us in the form of a complex of cause-effect relations—orderable, observable, predictable and/or calculable at all scales. In this constancy of nature as standing-reserve, the object disappears into the uniformity of matter and energy, formulized by Einstein’s mass-energy equivalence. “The constancy of the...standing-reserve,” Heidegger writes, “is characterized by uniformity....A constantly exchangeable equivalence holds equally in everything constantIn the standing reserve everything stands in equal value” (GA79 44/42). As such, in the modern technical-scientific world-picture, nothing stands against or escapes the subject (i.e., there are no empirical *or* transcendental objects), as everything becomes a mere reserve of matter and energy available for technical (and capitalist) exploitation—including humans (who themselves become “human resources”).

This dissolution of objects in *Ge-stell* is what Heidegger calls the “highest danger.” For Heidegger, it is not technological objects themselves that are dangerous, even though the advent of the atomic age unleashed an unparalleled power of destruction into human hands. Rather, the danger is that in the standing-reserve of *Ge-stell*, in which

Being is equated with what is constantly available, the very process of revealing itself threatens to disappear. As he explains: “As soon as what is unconcealed no longer concerns man even as object, but exclusively as standing-reserve, and man in the midst of objectlessness is nothing but the orderer of the standing-reserve, then he comes to the very brink of a precipitous fall; that is, he comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve” (GA7 27-8/QCT 27). If everything is already present-at-hand in the standing-reserve, which according to Heidegger is literally universal in its reach, then there is nothing to be revealed—everything becomes a process of *ordering* and *positioning*, and all other modes of revealing such as *poiesis* and *phusis* are “blocked.” As such, the Being, or the *arche*, of beings—the source and governing principle of their emergence and abidance—is no longer *phusis* but *tekhne*, the know-how of humans.¹³ In this, the process of revealing and presencing that has been associated with Being since what Heidegger names the “first beginning” of western metaphysics threatens to completely disappear and therefore Being as such could “withdraw” into total oblivion. And yet, insofar as modern technology and science remain modes of the revealing of Being, their “destining” (*Geschick*) is beyond human mastery, for indeed the

¹³ This is why Heidegger specifically endorses physicist Werner Heisenberg’s famous claim that within twentieth century science (i.e., quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity) and technology, when “man” interacts with “nature,” “he confronts only himself.” While Heidegger’s theorization of science and technology has often been dismissed as out of touch with science (by, e.g., Bruno Latour, Isabelle Stengers, and Adrian Johnson), his account is remarkably consonant with Heisenberg’s own history of the concept of “nature” in classical and modern physics and the role of technology therein. See Heisenberg, *The Physicist’s Conception of Nature*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (London: Hutchison & Co., 1958). Indeed, Heidegger and Heisenberg had mutually sought a meeting with one another as early as 1935 and remained in contact for many years: Heidegger remained the only non-scientist on Heisenberg’s list of people who received courtesy copies of all his essays, both thinkers gave lectures at the famous 1953 event in Munich when Heidegger presented the essay on technics, and Heisenberg contributed to the *Martin Heidegger Festschrift* in 1959 (see Cathryn Carson, *Heisenberg in the Atomic Age: Science in the Public Sphere* [Cambridge University Press, 2010]. Trish Glazebrook has given the most comprehensive presentation and convincing defense of Heidegger’s philosophy of science in *Heidegger’s Philosophy of Science* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000).

very idea of rational mastery is itself born of the *Ge-stell* of modern technology. We cannot therefore simply will ourselves out of our enframing in order to create a new relationship with Being or “nature” through more ethical or ecological deployments of science and technology. But, as Heidegger says (drawing on Hölderlin’s poem “Patmos”), the “saving power” is held in reserve where the danger grows. The saving power, here, is that within the very essence of *tekhne* lies its concealed belonging to *poiesis* as the revealing of Being as *bringing-forth* (rather than *challenging-forth* and *positioning*). If anywhere, Heidegger believes that this saving power can be found in art and poetry—what he refers to as “the poetical” (*das Dichterische*)—in which *tekhne* remains a mode of bringing-forth Being by creating a work in which Being can presence.¹⁴ The *tekhne* of the artist or poet exists alongside and in harmony with that which emerges of its own accord, i.e., *phusis*, enabling her to dwell on earth *poetically* (GA7 35-6/QCT 34-5).

This “poetic revealing,” moreover, might reawaken us to an awareness of that which enables, or “grants” the very possibility of the presencing of Being. In his last writings, Heidegger turns with increasing attention to the question of what *gives* Being. Pointing out that the phrase for “there is” in German (*Es gibt*) literally means “it gives,” Heidegger queries this “It”: what gives Being to presence and to thought in the first place? It is oblivion of *this* question that, for the final Heidegger, constitutes the history of western metaphysics: “In the beginning of Western thinking, Being is thought, but not the ‘It gives’ as such. The latter withdraws in favor of the gift which It gives. That gift is

¹⁴ For Heidegger, the essence of poetry (*Dichtung*) is “the saying of the unconcealedness of what is” (GA5 61/71); that is, it is a mode of revealing the presencing of Being in language. In this way, “poetry” or “the poetical” encompasses all thought, language, and art which set the “truth of beings” (in the sense of the ancient Greek *aletheia*, i.e., unconcealedness) into (a) “work.”

thought and conceptualized from then on exclusively as Being with regard to beings” (GA14 12/8). This forgetting of the “It” that gives Being thus set western thought on a path toward “Its” total annihilation in the positionality of modern technics and science, in which the gift of Being is constantly available at the disposal of human ordering. As such, the “triumph of the manipulable arrangement of a scientific-technical world,” signals the “end” of philosophy because it represents the “culmination” of the path of metaphysics in its oblivion of that which gives: the metaphysical quest for Being beyond *phusis*, which gives way to the modern theory of “nature,” finds its completion in the dissolution of both Being and nature (GA14 73/59). With the return to the question of that which gives, forgotten and yet held in reserve at the beginning of metaphysics, Heidegger then believed that he had come to the gateway of “another beginning”—a path for thinking beyond meta/physics. The task for thinking bequeathed by Heidegger at the end of philosophy is thus to ask: “where does the clearing [*die Lichtung*] [in which Being comes to presence] come from and how is it given? What speaks in the ‘It gives’ [*Es gibt*]?” (GA14 90/73). Only by “surrendering” to this question does the possibility remain that we might one day be claimed by another “appropriative event” (*Ereignis*) in which we might be released from the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology and into another “constellation” in which humanity and Being belong together differently.¹⁵

¹⁵ “The event of appropriation [*Ereignis*] is that self-vibrating realm through which humanity and Being reach each other in their nature, achieve their active nature by losing those qualities with which metaphysics has endowed them” (GA11 46/37). For Heidegger, the belonging-together of humanity and Being essential to *Ge-Stell* is one of “mutual challenge.” But, again, there is a saving power in this danger: “In the *Ge-Stell*, we glimpse a first, oppressing flash of the event of appropriation [*Ereignis*]” (GA11 47/38). For Heidegger, this means that in our being seized by the positionality of technology we—perhaps for the first time—might become aware of the very fact that humanity and Being are “appropriated” to one another, that is, that the “destining” of humanity and Being both belong together essentially and are out of our control. Only by reflection on this fact might we enter another realm of belonging-together more *appropriate* than mutual challenge.

L'oubli d'elle: Irigaray's Reading of Metaphysics as Technophallogocentrism

In “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” (1964), Heidegger characterizes the history of western philosophy as one in which the “matter [*Sache*]” of thinking has always already been determined. Since Plato, Heidegger says, the matter of thinking has been the Being of being(s) understood as the “outward appearance” (e.g., *eidos*, *idea*) “in which beings show themselves.” Yet, within this history, that which makes such manifestation possible has remained unthought. This unthought is what Heidegger refers to as the “clearing [*Lichtung*],” or the “free space” in which Being comes to presence (GA14 82/67).¹⁶ With this, he suggests that the title of the task of thinking is no longer *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time) but rather *Lichtung und Anwesenheit* (Clearing and Presence). In designating the question of the clearing as the future task for thinking, Heidegger returns to the poem of Parmenides (5th cent. B.C.E.). Such a return is necessary because, according to Heidegger, this poem was “the first to reflect explicitly upon the Being of beings.” By first setting out the matter of philosophy, Parmenides stands at the doorway of the path of metaphysics in which Being “itself” will ultimately be obliterated in favor of being(s). Yet on the other hand, Heidegger also hears in this poem an evocation of the clearing that will go unheard for over 2,400 years until

¹⁶ *Die Lichtung*, is variably translated as “the Clearing,” “the Opening,” and “the Lighting” and, along with *das Ereignis*, is the central concept in Heidegger’s last writings. In many ways, it is a more developed version of his earlier notion of “the Open [*das Offene*].” In German, a *Lichtung* is a clearing, or opening, in the forest and is derived from the verb *lichten*, which means “to lighten” in the sense of making something less dense (“to thin out,” “to alleviate”). A second meaning of *lichten* is “to brighten” or “to illuminate.” Heidegger adamantly emphasizes the first sense, arguing that “No outward appearance without light—Plato already knew this. But there is no light and no brightness without the clearing” (GA14 82/67). Here, Heidegger is obviously distinguishing his concept from the metaphysical figuration of reason in terms of illumination or enlightenment (*lumen naturale*), which *presupposes* the clearing but does not think it as such. Moreover, given that Heidegger’s last writings consider the question of Being in terms of a “*topology* of Being,” he wants to stress the spatial qualities of the clearing (in the sense of the forest clearing): the clearing is the *topos* of the presencing of Being.

Heidegger picks up its echo at the end of philosophy and, in this sense, Parmenides' poem stands at the doorway to the "other beginning" as well. This evocation of the clearing, in Heidegger's interpretation, occurs in Fragment I of the poem, when Parmenides' Goddess names the "untrembling heart of unconcealment, well-rounded [*aletheies eukukleos atremes etor*]" as the "path" (*odos*) that leads thinking toward "Being" (*einai*).¹⁷ In this, Heidegger hears something that has been forgotten in the interpretations of Parmenides' famous claim that Being and thinking are "the same [*to auto*]"¹⁸—a claim that, according to Heidegger is the grounding theme of all of western thought: namely, Parmenides' implicit recognition that *something* must first offer Being and thinking a path toward one another. Heidegger thus interprets *aletheia* as Parmenides' intuition of the clearing that grants this path:

We must think *aletheia*, unconcealment, as the clearing that first grants Being and thinking and their presencing to and for each other. The quiet heart of the clearing is the place of stillness from which alone the possibility of the belonging together of Being and thinking...can arise at all (GA14 84/68).

By interpreting Parmenides' "the same" in terms of the *mutual belonging* of Being and thinking to the clearing rather than as the originary iteration of the law of identity, Heidegger would seem to have broken the fundamental tautology of western metaphysics for, here, thinking is no longer grounded *a priori* in the self-identity of Being (*A is A*). As the matter for thinking after metaphysics, the clearing does not serve as a new ground for Being or thinking but rather as the groundless condition of both.

¹⁷ The above is the English translation of Heidegger's translation of the Greek into German; the phrase is conventionally translated: "the unshaken heart of persuasive [or well-founded] truth." In the poem, two paths of thinking are contrasted by the Goddess: (1) the path of truth (or "unconcealment" [*aletheia*] in Heidegger's translation), Being, and *logos* and (2) the path of *doxa*, opinion, and appearance.

¹⁸ Fragment III of Parmenides' poem reads "...*to gar auto noein estin te kai einai*," literally "...the same thing is for thinking [*noein*] and for Being [*einai*]" (Kirk and Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 269).

This question of the *matter* of Being and thinking is precisely where Irigaray picks up in *L'oubli de l'air chez Martin Heidegger* (1983). She asks: “Of/in what [*en quoi*]” are Being and thinking? Of what *matter* are they made? What element? Is the “It gives” [*Es gibt*] the same for both?¹⁹ For Irigaray, this is not only a question that Heidegger does not answer. Rather, it is a question that he *could not* answer, for the question of the materiality of Being and thinking is inaccessible within the parameters of the tradition within which Heidegger continues to think. Thus, while Heidegger reopens the question of the matter [*Sache*] of thinking, the question of its materiality [*Materie*] remains presupposed in his thought. As such, his “recovery” of the clearing as the unthought of metaphysics conceals an even more originary unthought: This clearing, the condition of everything present and absent, *of what* can it be? And if the clearing has no material qualities then how can it be, as Heidegger claims, “the element [*das Element*] in which Being and thinking and their belonging-together are given [*erst gibt*]” (GA14 85/69)? For Irigaray, only if Being and thinking are nonliving, immaterial abstractions would they be able to presence in an “atmosphere” devoid of matter. Only if they are always already detached from any material generative conditions could they be “given” by a source with no material generative conditions of “Its” own. “The meeting that can take place in this clearing,” she writes, “is always already an experience ‘in a vacuum [*sous vide*]’: in a space determined and delimited by the forgetting, the privation, of a matter necessary for the existence of living beings. In a milieu where ‘things’ come

¹⁹ Heidegger’s *Sache* means “matter” in the sense of “subject matter” and in Heidegger’s French translations, it is translated as *affaire*. *Sache*, in German, is not really a synonym for “matter” in the sense of “materiality,” which is *Materie* in German and *matière* in French. The pun with which Irigaray opens her text—i.e., immediately following the quotation of Heidegger’s sentence on the “matter for thinking” (*Sache des Denkens*, or in her quotation from the French “*l’affaire de la pensée*”) with the question “Would Being and thinking be made of the same matter [*matière*]?”—is thus richest English.

together only after having been torn from their natural site. In a hollow, a hole, an excavation, a location, and a place that are opened up by breaking into nature” (OA 24/19). For Irigaray, when Heidegger went looking for what gives Being and thought in Parmenides’ poem, it was already too late, for in that text, the clearing—“well-circled unconcealment [*eukukleos aletheies*]”—is already enframed as a perfect sphere, without beginning or end.²⁰ Indeed, with Parmenides, for whom Being is “ungenerated [*ageneton*] and unperishable...entire, unmovable, and without end...a continuous one,” Being is already detached from *phusis* as the emerging and abiding force of generation and growth. With Parmenides, in other words, Being is already fully *meta-physical*. As such, while Heidegger seems to see Parmenides and himself as the liminal figures of the history of metaphysics, Irigaray sees this history as a circle where beginning and end coincide at every point. Since Parmenides, philosophers have ceaselessly traveled the perimeter of this circle in which the living materiality of *phusis* is always already proscribed to both thinking and Being as such. Making implicit reference to the pre-Parmenidean school of Miletus (6th cent. B.C.E.) who sought the *of what* (i.e., the *arkhe*) of *phusis*, Irigaray therefore remarks that the question of the *of what* is always already “too old” for western philosophy (OA 11/3). Without being able to pose this question, however, Heidegger’s “other beginning” is destined to be yet another go around the circle; his attempt to recover *phusis* from its metaphysical enframing will hit the wall erected by the closure of the fundamental tautology: *Being—thinking—same*.

Of what, is the clearing then? Such that it grants the presencing of Being and thinking? Such that it provides an “ecstatic dwelling” for *Dasein*? Such that it grants a

²⁰ Indeed, as Heidegger writes of Parmenides’ *aletheia*: “It is called well-rounded because it is turned in the perfect sphere of the circle in which beginning and end are everywhere the same” (GA14 83/67).

place (*topos*) for the gathering of the “Fourfold” (*Geviert*) of the sky, the earth, the divinities, and mortals? According to Heidegger, the “It” that ultimately gives the clearing is *Ereignis*, or “the event of appropriation” in which Being and thinking are appropriated to one another in their essential belonging together.²¹ And it is within language that such an event takes place: as the “Saying” (*die Sage*) and “Showing” (*die Zeige*) that allows something to be seen and heard, language is the “guardian of presencing” and the “mode” (*Weise*) of *Ereignis*. For Heidegger, all of this is contained within the pre-Socratic understanding of *logos*, which, like *phusis* he tells us, was once a synonym for Being. Derived from the verb *lego*, whose first meaning was “to gather,” *logos* for the early Greeks did not mean “speech” or “reason,” but rather “the constant gathering, the gatheredness of beings that stands in itself, that is, Being” (GA40 100/138). It is by dwelling in language, then, that we can experience our true belonging to Being. Once again, however, Heidegger’s attempt to question after what gives the clearing involves him in a fundamental tautology in which the material conditions of this giving are never interrogated. For if language gives the clearing, *of what* is language? Unless they are ideal, how do speech and phenomena manifest in the Saying and the Showing without any material mediation? How do the sky, the earth, the divinities, and mortals avoid collapsing into a void? Unless *Dasein* is dead or, what amounts to the same, disembodied *cogito*, then how does “it” (?) “dwell” in language? For Irigaray, the answer can only be *air*:

Is not air the whole of our habitation as mortals Is there a dwelling more vast,
more spacious, or even more generally peaceful than air? Can man live elsewhere
than in air? Neither in earth, nor in fire, nor in water is any habitation possible for

²¹ “The appropriating event [*Ereignis*] is not the outcome (result) of something else, but the giving yield whose giving reach alone is what gives us such things as an ‘*Es gibt*,’ an ‘*Es gibt*’ of which even Being itself stands in need in order to come into its own as presence” (GA12 247/127).

him. No other element can for him take the place of place. No other element carries with it—or lets itself be passed through by—light and shadow, voice or silence. No other element is to this extent opening itself—to one who would not have forgotten its nature there is no need for it to open or re-open. No other element is as light, as free, and as much in the ‘fundamental’ mode of a permanent, available, ‘it gives’ [*es gibt*]” (OA 15/8).

Air is thus the “forgotten *material mediation*” of the *logos*, thinking, and Being—the unthought “aerial matter” of metaphysics, the *of what* of the clearing (OA 17-8/11-2). By positing air as “irreducibly constitutive of the whole” it might appear that Irigaray is seeking to provide another metaphysical ground of Being. As she points out, however, “to recall that air is the groundless ground of metaphysics amounts to ruining metaphysics through and through”(OA 13/5), for the fluidity of air has always already disrupted all self-identity and deprived metaphysics of its solid onto-theological foundations. It is the transcendental condition of all Being and thinking—“the *a priori* condition of all...*a prioris*”—and yet it is material and sensible. It is an *arkhe* that does not permit itself to be constituted as a stable ground or origin. It pours through the shell of the Parmenidean circle and the walls of the House of Being and creates a breathable atmosphere for the dwelling of man. It is the self-giving “It” that gives beyond and before any speech and phenomena, clearing and presence, being and time.

Using air as a synecdoche for nature or *physis* in its entirety, Irigaray proceeds to recover an elemental materialism that was forgotten almost immediately in western philosophy. In so doing, she takes Heidegger at his word that to think after metaphysics requires a return to “the beginning,” but she returns to the *first* philosophers, the Milesians (i.e., Thales, Anaximander, and Anaximenes), who lived before those thinkers that Heidegger places at the beginning: Parmenides and Heraclitus. Rather than meditate on an eternal Being, the central question of philosophical investigation for the Milesians

was the *arkhe* proper to *phusis*: what is the “there is/it gives” of, or of *what* is, *phusis*? In her evocation of air, Irigaray draws especially on Anaximenes (without naming him as such). For Anaximenes, air was the *arkhe* of *phusis*, the fundamental matter of the *cosmos* at varying states of condensation and rarefaction, the basic element of both the universe and the psyche.²² If the matter of *phusis* is air, then in this philosophy, the process of generation and transformation, of both individuals and the whole, is a kind of *cosmic breathing*. Here, *phusis* bears little resemblance to the later concept of “Being,” but is instead a material and vital force that both gives and constitutes everything that is in its perpetual becoming.²³ By the time of Heraclitus and Parmenides a century later, however, Irigaray argues that the grounding question of Milesian philosophy—of what is *phusis*?—is already too old. In these thinkers, she points out, *phusis* is already gathered by the *logos*, cut off from its material generativity (*genesis*), its “it gives” then being given over to the language of man. Here, in other words, the foundational tautology of metaphysics in which Being (*phusis*) is “the same” as thinking (*logos*) is already in place for “the elementality of *phusis*—air, water, earth, fire—is always already nihilated by his own element: his language” (OA 70/74).²⁴ Moreover if, as according to Heidegger, it is this thinking of *phusis* in Parmenides and Heraclitus that constitutes the first thinking of

²² “...air is the material principle [*arkhe*] of existing things [*onton*]; for from it all things are generated [*gignesthai*] and into it they are again dissolved. As our *psukhe* being air holds us together and controls us, so does breath [*pneuma*] and air enclose the *cosmos*” (qtd. in Kirk and Raven, *The Presocratic Philosophers*, 158).

²³ In his authoritative work on the concept of nature in western philosophy, Pierre Hadot, while endorsing much of Heidegger’s history of metaphysics, argues that it is almost impossible that the early pre-Socratics understood *phusis* as “Being” as Heidegger claims. See *The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

²⁴ “...that something of an ‘it gives’ of *phusis* ensures the posing of man as man, without any recognition of this received provision—all this remains unthought already in the order of the world found in Heraclitus and Parmenides....*Cosmos* [in Heraclitus] should already be understood as a gathering-together and as a functional ordering of the whole by and for the power of man. *Cosmos* and *logos* being the same” (OA 20/15).

Being as such and, for both of them, Being is conceptualized as eternal, solitary, and without generation, then as Irigaray points out, Being “itself”—from the very beginning—constitutes a meta-physical oblivion of *phusis*. By detaching *phusis* from its material element and substituting the *logos* as the matrix of the *cosmos*, *phusis* no longer holds sway as the self-generating source of bringing-forth (*poiesis*) that coexists with *tekhne*. Rather, *tekhne*, the know-how of man, becomes the *arkhe* of all, positioning and ordering nature long before the rise of modern science and technology:

Tekhne is now the *arkhe* of the whole: the framing of the world is *tekhne* and it forgets the origin that is nature. *Phusis* is always already subjected to technics and science: that is, to the technics and science of the *logos*. In these, something of the manner in which physical beings grow is lost. Things, cut from their natural enrootedness, float about, wandering the propositional landscape. The *phuein* of physical beings is forgotten in the *phusis* of the *logos*. The physical constitution of beings is forgotten in the metaphysics of Being. Nature is re-created by the *logos* (OA 81/86).

The *logos* therefore constitutes what Irigaray calls the “*architechne*,” the originary technology by which man usurps the generative power of *phusis* for his own refashioning of the world—the very architectonics of metaphysics. And this therefore means that the *materiality* of *phusis*, especially the insensible air, is *always already enframed as a standing reserve by and for the positionality (Ge-stell) of the logos*. Thus, if the first thinking of Being emerges in the move from the Milesians to Parmenides and Heraclitus, and what constitutes Being in these texts is *phusis* stripped of its materiality, vitality, and generativity, then Being is *always already opposed to living*.

For Irigaray, then, what metaphysics “forgot” in the enframing of *phusis* was not, as Heidegger would have it, Being, but rather *vital materiality*. The “forgetting of Being” thus covers over an even prior forgetting. The fact that this living materiality was already forgotten by the first thinkers of Being explains why, when Heidegger looks to their

works to recover a thinking of Being after its metaphysical oblivion, he gets the impression that *phusis*, *logos*, and *aletheia* are all the same: the Being that he is looking for is already dead from the start. Such an understanding of Being, in Irigaray's opinion, severely limits Heidegger's ability to locate within the pre-Socratic thinking of *phusis* the possibility of "another beginning." For when Heidegger seeks the loss of *phusis* in the forgetting of Being and the *logos*, Irigaray points out that it is Being and the *logos* themselves that "account[] for the loss" and therefore that Heidegger is seeking the recovery of the loss in the very cause of the loss (OA 81/87). Heidegger's "hostility" to science and technology, and his notorious difficulty in grappling with the relation between life and Being, are for Irigaray indicative of his desire to preserve the *logos* as the exclusive site of the revealing of Being (i.e., the House of Being). And in this, he remains firmly within the architectonics of metaphysics. The *phusis* that Irigaray recovers in the thinking of the Milesians, on the other hand, is too material, too elemental, too windy, too *vital* to be gathered by the *logos* and Being and therefore Heidegger cannot see it. In this understanding, *phusis* cannot be dissociated from its *arkhe*, which is both the source or origin and the material element of *phusis*—both its *from what* and its *of what*. Indeed, *phusis*, here, is the process or force of emergence and growth "internal" to its material element. In Anaximenes, for instance, everything is from air and of air; all generation and transformation is attributable to the self-differentiation of air. For these Greeks, there is therefore no strict separation between living and nonliving matter: everything in the *cosmos* is made of the same material element and the same principle (*phusis*) explains the growth of a human and the movement of the celestial bodies. Life (*zoe*), then, is understood as a self-initiating, self-determining process of self-

differentiation internal to all matter, that is, as another name for *phusis*.²⁵ Anything is alive insofar as it is moving, growing, and changing. In the case of Anaximenes, living, or *phusis*, is synonymous with breathing—a process that keeps both living organisms and the entire *cosmos* going. While the Milesians are often designated as monist materialists, classicist Felix Cleve argues that it is more appropriate to understand them as “panzoists,” for, above all, it was this general *life of the cosmos* that interested them and the distinctions between body and soul/mind/spirit, organic and non, material and immaterial were not yet operative.²⁶ From this perspective, to detach physical beings (*ta phusei onta*) from their material element is to strip them of their source of life and growth, that is, from *phusis*. For Irigaray, then, meta-physics begins with the uprooting and gathering of beings in the *logos* of Being, an airless space that exists parallel to the “natural” world in which there is no birth, growth, or change except through their *mimesis* in the form of thinking and saying.

In her reading of the history of metaphysics, Irigaray connects this forgetting of the vital materiality of *phusis* to a forgetting of sexual difference. This occurs first, according to Irigaray, through the forgetting of birth and the role of the maternal-feminine. In the pre-philosophical cosmogonies, and even in the Milesians to a lesser extent, the general process(es) of emergence and transformation (*phusis* and *genesis*) are thought explicitly in terms of birth, as emphasized in the respective roots of these words

²⁵ Thomas Alexander, “*Arche, Dike, Phusis*: Anaximander’s Principle of Natural Justice,” *Southwest Philosophical Studies* vol. 10, no. 3 (1988): 11-20.

²⁶ Felix Cleve, *The Giants of Pre-Sophistic Greek Philosophy: An Attempt to Reconstruct Their Thoughts* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965). According to Cleve, there was not yet a distinction between “pure matter” and “pure spirit,” and thus, the term materialist is anachronistic. He also rejects the common designation of the pre-Socratics as “hylozoists” on similar grounds, writing that it is “misleading and inadequate” because “The notions of ‘matter *without* consciousness’ or ‘consciousness *without* a body’ did not yet exist for these men” (321).

(*phuein* and *gignomai*), which mean “to beget” and “to be born.” With Heraclitus and Parmenides, however, *phusis*-as-Being is understood precisely as *that which has no birth* (*ageneton*, Parmenides) or *that which always ways* (*aei esti*, Heraclitus). In this, however, the generative materiality of what Irigaray variably calls “mother-nature [*mère-nature*]” and “mother-matter [*mère-matière*]” has always already been appropriated, for it is no longer nature, matter or the mother that are the source (*arkhe*) of being(s), but rather the *logos*. It is within the *logos*, that is, that Being and beings emerge and abide. But without matter, without nature, without having been born, how does the philosopher speak? How do Being and beings appear? Is not birth the first, and in fact only, passage into Being and thinking? For Irigaray, mother-nature-matter is that which gives herself endlessly without return, but her ceaseless giving is replaced by the gift that has always already been given without a giver (except for the neutral “It” of *Es gibt*). As Irigaray used the recovery of air as a means of recovering a forgotten elemental materiality, she uses it also to recover the forgotten mother-nature-matter:

She gives [*Elle donne*]—first—air, and does so irrecoverably, with the exception of the unfolding, from and within her, of whoever takes air from her. While this air is—first—fluid matter carried by the blood she gives, it can also be understood as voice and phenomenon. These issue from it and are the possibility—*ever material*—of naming-demonstrating, of appearing in presence. She gives first. She gives the possibility of that beginning from which the whole of man will be constituted. This gift received with no possibility of a return. He cannot pay her back in kind (OA 31/28, Emphasis modified.).²⁷

For Irigaray, to recover the vital materiality of *phusis* means also to recover the “debt of life” to she who gave and gives it: mother-nature-matter. Within metaphysics, the reason

²⁷ The use of the singular pronoun *elle* throughout Irigaray’s later works signifies a sort of consubstantiality of the referents: mother, nature, matter, woman. Similar to Trinitarian theology, these are distinct yet are of the same “substance” (or lack thereof) as configured within metaphysics.

Being can exist on *logos* alone (without air) is because it was never born and, thus, never alive.

Beyond the forgetting of birth, the metaphysical oblivion of sexual difference is also a forgetting of *her* (*elle*), the sexuate other. In pre-philosophical Greece, as in many other cultures, the *cosmos* was divided in terms of sexual difference. Ancient Greek nouns, according to Cornelia Tsakiridou, are gendered not merely in a grammatical or logical sense (as in Latinate languages) but rather *ontologically*. It is not that certain nouns are *associated* with certain gendered norms but that they arise from and express a particular sexuate relationship to the world. Gender functions in ancient Greek, Tsakiridou writes, “as a sensual catalog of the human lifeworld.”²⁸ Thus, feminine words—e.g., *phusis*, *genesis*, *poiesis*, *arkhe*—express patterns and relationships that have “natural equivalents or analogs” with feminine morphology, sexuality, and life processes, such as internalization, fluidity, embodiment, birth, materiality (and the reciprocal for masculine words). In other words, the way that phenomena were designated in language—not just in the name, but in the experience and delimitation of the phenomena itself—reflects a specifically sexuate mode of being.²⁹ For example, the feminine word for “language,” *glossa*, emphasizes an embodied dimension of speech (i.e., the tongue),

²⁸ Cornelia A. Tsakiridou, “Philosophy Abandons Woman: Gender, Orality, and Some Literate Pre-Socratics,” in *Is Feminist Philosophy Philosophy?*, ed. Emanuela Bianchi (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 248.

²⁹ It is therefore telling that, in his reading of *phusis* in the pre-Socratics, Heidegger—incorrectly—associates *phusis* with both *phuein* (which means “to beget” or “to bring forth”) and *phainesthai* (which means “to show”). “The roots *phu-* and *pha-* name the same thing,” he claims (incorrectly) (GA40 77/106). *Phusis* and *phuein* do share the root *phu* meaning “to give birth, generate, grow” while *phainesthai* (along with *phainomenon*) derives from the root *phaino*, which means “to bring to light, appear.” To the degree that these terms were in fact both ways of thinking Being for the ancient Greeks, they clearly evince a sexuate relation to the process of Being, if one imagines the masculine versus the feminine perception of emergence or birth (*phusis*): *phuein*, or bringing-forth, begetting (feminine) versus *phainesthai*, or appearing (masculine).

while the masculine word *logos* is more abstract, placing the emphasis on the utterance itself. In pre-literate Greek, then, the feminine and the masculine are two *orientations* toward the world, arising from particular relational and morphological contexts, with each serving as the limit and horizon of the other, and the interaction between the two producing the total reality of the Greek *cosmos*. As such, dialogue is a relation of *desire* for a perspective on the whole.³⁰ According to Tsakiridou, the emergence of Greek literacy signals the collapse of this sexuete *cosmos*. Reading the earliest written texts in the philosophical tradition—the fragments of Anaximander, Parmenides, and Heraclitus—what Tsakiridou observes is not, as is commonly held, the first attempt at a “rational” understanding of the *cosmos* but rather the first description of the *cosmos* without sexual difference. When the philosopher becomes the *arkhe* of his own text, language becomes *monologic* and thus loses its embeddedness in the sensual (and sexuete) realities of life. A new experience of the world therefore becomes possible: like the text, the *cosmos* itself becomes represented as a singular totality, without birth (*genesis*), detached from the vital materiality of nature, mother, and the sexuete living body. And because the feminine no longer functions as a limit-horizon, the sexuete other is no longer necessary in order to have a perspective on the whole, for the *logos* can gather all. It is this neutered *cosmos*—i.e., “Being itself”—that will become the *cosmos* of metaphysics. As Irigaray writes:

³⁰ “[T]he feminine is not only a grammatical structure. It is also a certain intuition of world and a way of directing myself in it...In that context, it makes sense to say that the masculine becomes a limit, an encompassing intuition of otherness in things—similar to what the phenomenologists like to call a horizon. Within that horizon and its dynamics, a multiplicity of relations is possible which invokes but also challenges that limit. The same applies to the other side: the function of the feminine as a horizon for the masculine. The interaction of these two horizons produces the space delineated by the total reality of the Greek language—I can put this in a somewhat poetic way by calling that reality the Greek *cosmos*...[Greek] can speak from the body’s other and from the difference of its desire toward the whole world” (Tsakiridou, “Philosophy Abandons Woman,” 238, 248).

In order to definitively close the *logos* upon itself, in order for the *logos* to speak with itself, the traces of a relation with *her* are said in the neuter. For example, *On* in the singular is used to designate the totality of beings—there is *On*—and the beings are named *onta*—there are *onta*. Instead of saying: the world is born from her, and from my relation with her, the Western philosopher says: there is [it gives, *Es gibt*] Being, there are beings, which is, or are, without anyone who gives. There is, there are, without being born in a way, without any origin. There is, there are, mysteriously there. With the neutralization of his own being and of the whole of the universe, the Presocratic philosopher somehow prepares our tradition for nihilism (IBSW 4).

Once the feminine has been removed as a limit, the masculine perspective becomes the whole *cosmos* (i.e., “Being itself”) and yet to present itself as *neuter*, the feminine must be *annihilated*. Thus, the horizon of Being, what lies beyond the limits of the world of the philosopher-physicist, becomes, as Parmenides formulates it, *non-Being* or *Nothing*.³¹ Within this neutered *cosmos*, natural dualities are supplanted by logical dualisms that only *simulate* difference within a *logos* that can speak only of and to the Same. Without a birth and without *her*, without difference, this Being can only be a Being oriented toward *Nothing*: a “Being-toward-death.” Framed by death and by the Nothing, how could this neutered Being unfold as anything other than nihilism?

Of course, if there is any point that Irigaray has made clear in her oeuvre it is that so-called neutrality is nothing but an alibi for the reign of the masculine. While the written text enabled the neutralization of cosmology, the experience of the world codified there was not neutral, but distinctly masculine. As Tsakiridou notes, it is not that a new, neutral vocabulary was invented to express this new, neuter cosmology; rather what was new was that this cosmology was expressed in an entirely masculine vocabulary, with the feminine no longer being necessary to express the whole. In philosophical texts, words

³¹ Heidegger on Parmenides: “Inasmuch as Being has to be distinguished from an Other and reinforced as *phusis*, Being is distinguished from not-Being” (GA40 83/115).

that had once expressed a sexuate experience of the world became “asexual and asomatic beings” and this de-materialization and de-sexuation of language and experience thus enabled the masculine world to present itself as neutral truth or reality, while the feminine world was silenced. *Logos*, for instance, was no longer a distinctly masculine experience of language that coexisted with *glossa*, but rather became *language itself*. And because, as Irigaray argues, the *logos* is the architectonics of metaphysics, metaphysics is *isomorphic* with the masculine world. Metaphysics, that is to say, is *phal-logo-centric*: it is the reconstruction of the world in the image or form of man by the *logos*. “Language [*le langage*]” as Irigaray puts it, “would be the technology—the architechnology, the architectonics—for man’s fashioning the living according to his sexual project” (OA 85/91).³² And the material of this construction is *her (elle)*: mother-nature-matter-woman, the being of and from which Being is made while always remaining forgotten by “it.” *She (elle)* is thus always already positioned—having been plundered—as the standing-reserve out of which he draws the living matter to build his dwelling place (his “House of Being”).³³ And *she* is his lifeline, always sustaining his neglected yet unseverable relation to life after having been buried alive within his *logos*:

After having assimilated her into himself in that *Ge-Stell* that is his living body, he further appropriated her to himself so as to make of her the dwelling for his Being. Thereby eternally distancing her from himself. She is like a still-living tissue connected to the production of his language [*langue*]—to his tongue’s issue—and feeding this language, but herself being used in line with a project that is his own, and, by passing through his technology, losing the movement and breath of life. Joined to his shelter, as its still-material/matrical support, henceforth indistinguishable from this house of language [*langage*] in which he

³² Thus, as Claire Colebrook points out, it is not that Irigaray merely associates the history of metaphysics with “masculine values,” but that metaphysics signifies a sexually “*specific relation to Being*,” that of phallogocentrism (Claire Colebrook, “Feminist Philosophy and the Philosophy of Feminism: Irigaray and the History of Western Metaphysics,” *Hypatia* vol. 12, no. 1 [Winter 1997], 86).

³³ As Heidegger says, “Positionality [*Ge-Stell*] is a plundering” (GA79 32/31).

dwells, nature is indefinitely separated from herself and from him, through this assimilation of her to him in language [*langue*]" (OA 85/91-2)

By displacing (1) birth, (2) vital materiality, and (3) the sexuate other from his *cosmos*, "the world" (i.e., beings as a whole) becomes nothing more than the "collective image" of man's "representing productions" (GA9). In other words, the "conquest" of the world as man's picture is the "grounding event" not, as Heidegger would have it, of *modernity*, but of *metaphysics*. From then on, "nature" is nothing but the fundamental piece of inventory for the orderability of man within the *logos*. And if the hallmark of the "world age of technology" is, as Heidegger says, that "nature belongs in advance to the standing-reserve of the orderable within *Ge-Stell*" and if within this age, nature is no longer any limit to technology, then the age of technology is not a single epoch within the history of metaphysics but rather the entire history of western metaphysics is what Irigaray calls "the technocratic *epoch* of Being" (OA 84/90). While Heidegger long struggled to adequately formulate the essential relationship between metaphysics and technology, Irigaray's reinterpretation of metaphysics as phallogocentrism allows her to recognize that "*tekhne*, the mystery of the reign of *tekhne*, can be explained from the start by a masculine subjectivity that is unaware of itself" (ED 135/76). Like Heidegger, Irigaray therefore suggests that the task of thinking at the "end" of this epoch is to return to the beginning in order to reflect on what was forgotten and yet held in reserve within it. For her, however, what was forgotten was not the neutral "It" that gives, but rather *her*, the unthought living matter of Being and thinking. And in that case,

Through what transformations must the *logos* pass in order to think this unthought? Will it survive this operation? If the copula that ensures the *logos* as such is questioned with regard to its material properties, what will become of that truth that man has always believed he could grasp, even in its concealment from immediate perception? Is a fluid truth thinkable? What becomes of the essential

truths fashioned, until the present day, by man? What becomes of this very "man"? And is it not today the task of thinking to question itself about that reality that lives in it, and in which it lives as mortal? (OA 18/12).

THREE

**PROLOGOMENA TO ANY FUTURE DIAPHYSICS THAT WILL BE ABLE TO PRESENT
ITSELF AS A SCIENCE**

*NATURE AND SEXUAL DIFFERENCE BEYOND THE META/PHYSICS OF
TECHNOPHALLOGOCENTRISM*

“But what authority has decided that nature as such must forever *remain* the nature of modern physics...?”

– MARTIN HEIDEGGER, *Identity and Difference*

“Nature is *sexuate, always and everywhere*. All traditions that remain faithful to the cosmic are *sexuate* and take account of natural powers [*puissances*] in *sexuate* terms.”

– LUCE IRIGARAY, *Sexes and Genealogies*

In what is probably her most infamous paragraph, Irigaray avers that sexual difference “would bring us ‘salvation’ [*nous apporterait le «salut»*]” if we thought it through (E 13/5). This claim, I suggest, should be understood in reference to Heidegger’s invocation of the “saving power” in his essay on technics. There, Heidegger says that while we usually understand “to save” as “to seize hold of a thing threatened by ruin,” it also means “to fetch something home into its essence, in order to bring the essence for the first time into its genuine appearing” (GA9 29/QCT 28). This saving power, Heidegger says, grows where the danger is most extreme. Thus, alongside the danger that all other modes of the unconcealment of Being will withdraw in the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology lies the saving power that “lets man see and enter into the highest dignity of his essence. This dignity lies in keeping watch over the unconcealment...of all coming to presence on this earth” (GA9 33/QCT 32). Through this revelation of his true essence, man can assume a stance of “releasement [or letting-be, *Gelassenheit*]” toward technology and is thereby granted “a chance to live in the world in a completely different way” (GA16 528/DT 55). But, asks Irigaray, “Wouldn’t man be *essentially*

technocratic?” (OA 140/158). With the banishment of birth (*genesis*) and living material nature (*phusis*) from his *cosmos*, wouldn’t *tekhne* be the *only* mode of unconcealment available to him? By suppressing *her*—mother-nature-matter-woman—and appropriating her generative powers, has he not always already acted as the guardian of all coming-to-presence? And, then, hasn’t he always had to *challenge* her forth? Without any Being of her own, what other relationship could he have to her? With her always already reduced to Non-Being, how could this “relationship” be anything but deadly for them both? Indeed, for Irigaray, the Being of man is identical with his technocratic “conquest” of *her*:

This would be the “as such” [*soi-même*] of western man: the effect of a mastery, of a violent domination over the natural universe and not of a respect for, a contemplation of, a praise for, or an alliance with it. The history constructed by man resembles a history of enduring violence, of appropriation, of domination...Man has created, invented, and given to nature not so much because he was more than her, but because he wished to tame her. It this not, perhaps, because he was less than her?...The Being of man is constituted thanks to the limit of death: he has nothing which can overcome it. The fact remains that man places himself here on earth in a circle woven of violence and terror, thus closing every opening (ED 127-33/71-4).

For Irigaray, the unfolding of the technophallogocentric destining of Being as a Being-toward-death therefore reaches its essential culmination in the atomic age when man, having reached the limits of his self-encircled *cosmos*, has nothing left to give himself but the power to destroy it.¹ In this, she implicitly agrees with Heidegger that the “highest danger” of the technical epoch is the moment when man, as a last defense against falling into his own standing-reserve, positions himself instead as its supreme lord. And yet, his belief that the “highest dignity of his essence” lies in his role as the

¹ “Man’s technical prowess today allows him to blow up the world just as, at the dawn of our culture, he was able to establish a finite horizon to it” (E 128).

guardian of all unconcealment: is this not the very *source* of such danger? Isn't the delusion of modern man critiqued by Heidegger, i.e. that he is the "lord of beings," in fact a *result* of metaphysical man's traditional role as the "herdsman" (*Hirt*) of Being? For, as Irigaray points out, the reason that Being needs to be safeguarded in the first place is because "the dwelling of man is not built without a hatred of nature" (OA 71/75). How, then, could his (re?)discovery of this role bring salvation? Like Heidegger, however, Irigaray does believe that both the destructive power and the saving power belong essentially to the unfolding of the *epoch*. And thus, if that which was buried and forgotten in the technophallogocentric epoch is not man's shepherdship of Being but *her*, then it is only *she*—his concealed and forgotten relation to life, matter, nature, birth—who can bring him home to his "essence" (*Wesen*) as a limited part of a sexuate *cosmos*, who can return him to life and nature by giving him (back) his living, material, sexuate body. When Irigaray (in)famously claims that sexual difference "is the question to be thought through in our *epoch*," then, it is because, as Heidegger says, the possibility of another *epoch* lies in *questioning* the danger and the saving power.² As the Being of man hurtles toward its "ownmost possibility" (i.e., death writ large),³ for Irigaray the choice we are faced with is literally sexual difference or death. Speaking to a group of women after the Chernobyl disaster in 1986, she therefore names sexual difference a "chance for life":

This didn't happen all by itself. It is sexuate. But the technical epoch has given weapons of war a power [*puissance*] that goes beyond the conflicts and risks between patriarchs alone. Women, children, all that lives, including elementary

² As "The Question Concerning Technology" famously ends: "The closer we come to the danger, the more brightly do the ways into the saving power begin to shine and the more questioning we become. For questioning is the piety of thought" (GA7 44/QCT 35). Much later, Heidegger clarified that "'Piety' is meant...in this case [as] submitting to what thinking has to think about. One of the exciting experiences of thinking is that at times it does not fully comprehend the new insights it has just gained, and does not properly see them through" (GA12 165/72).

³ In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger famously writes that "With death, *Dasein* stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-of-being" (GA2 250/241).

matter, now find themselves enlisted, bodies and all [*s'y trouve embarqué corps et biens*]...Today, our only chance lies in a cultural and political ethics based on sexual difference (SP 200-1/186-7).

Everything, then, depends on overcoming the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism and finding a new ontology, that is to say a new thinking of Being as such, as the basis for this new culture.

This ontology is, of course, that of Being-sexuate or Being-two, as I argued in a preliminary way in the previous chapter. Further details of this ontology can now be clarified on the basis of Irigaray's rethinking of *phusis* and her critique of meta/physics. Because, in many ways, Irigaray follows Heidegger's analysis of the relationship between nature and metaphysics as outlined above, her ontology of sexual difference, which she begins to develop extensively after the Heidegger book, takes the form of a radical philosophy of nature. Thus, while Irigaray reframes Heidegger's question of Being as the question of sexual difference, this is done more in terms of a thinking of nature or life (*phusis*) than of "Being" (which, for Irigaray, is already an abstraction from *phusis*). Like her ontological claims, Irigaray's endeavor to rethink nature in terms of sexual difference has caused an enormous amount of confusion. First, it should be obvious that Irigaray rejects the modern physical theory of "nature" as the empty space-time of cause-effect relations or as the objective realm that stands against the subject. Nature, in Irigaray's philosophy, is not some-thing, "out there," external to us. Nor is it the unified "Nature" (with a capital "N") presented in so much modern thought as that which must be known by science, controlled by technology, and overcome by culture: "*Il n'y a pas la nature*," she writes (JAT 65/35). Thus, although she uses the word "nature" consistently throughout her later works, she means it in a sense much closer to the

original Greek understanding of *phusis*, as a process of emergence and growth.⁴ When she claims, then, that “the natural is at least two: masculine and feminine” (JAT 65/35), she is not taking “nature” as it is thought within modern science and dividing it in two, anthropomorphically designating half as “feminine” and half as “masculine.” What she means instead is that the process of birth and growth, of emergence and transformation—*phusis*—is *sexuate* as such. Following her recovery of a Milesian conception of *phusis*, one could reasonably understand Irigaray’s claim here to be that from a basic elemental materiality—whether this ultimately be *air* (as it would sometimes seem) or *fluids* more generally—a general process of emergence (*phusis*) generates either a continuum of differences (à la Anaximenes) or pairs of opposites (à la Anaximander) that could be called, more or less analogically, “masculine” and “feminine.” Alison Stone, for instance, understands Irigaray’s *phusis* as a “rhythmic” process that produces bi-polar differences within a general fluid materiality, with human sexual difference being only the most extreme poles. As such, she contends that Irigaray’s insistence that nature is *really* *sexuate* ultimately betrays the “elemental materialism” that Irigaray derives from her own reinterpretation of *phusis*.⁵ To my mind, however, Irigaray is actually claiming something much stronger than this. In Irigaray’s philosophy of *sexuate* nature, I argue, there is *no*

⁴ In an interview, Irigaray explains her problems with the word “nature” by juxtaposing it to *phusis*: “The word ‘nature’ is quite recent, abstract, and ambiguous term because it has so many meanings. It doesn’t exist for the Greeks, for whom it would rather correspond to: ‘coming-to-appear’—to be born in a certain sense—growing...terms which are far more concrete” (WD 95).

⁵ “Irigaray problematically claims that men and women...inhabit radically different *sexuate* worlds. I argue that this claim is undercut by her own elemental materialism, which implies that sexual difference colours our perception, but does not cleave it down to a radical difference in kind. We can accept Irigaray’s ecophenomenology without her insistence on radical *sexuate* duality” (Alison Stone, “Irigaray’s Ecological Phenomenology: Towards an Elemental Materialism,” *The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* vol. 46, no. 2 (2015), 117). Stone, along with Elizabeth Grosz, have given the most systematic presentations of Irigaray’s philosophy of nature: see *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*.

matter—fluid or not, living or not—and *no phusis* that is not always already sexuate. In other words, there is no substratum (whether it be “matter,” “energy,” or anything else) that underlies sexuation, or that is subsequently sexuated by some process (whether it be “*phusis*,” “life,” or anything else.). Indeed, Irigaray writes:

The natural, *aside from the diversity of its incarnations or ways of appearing*, is at least two, masculine and feminine. This division [*partition*] is *not secondary nor unique to human kind*. It traverses 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 and the condition* of production and reproduction (JAT 69/37. Emphasis modified).⁶

As seems evident here, in Irigaray’s view it is not matter or nature that subtend sexual difference, but *sexual difference that subtends and conditions all difference and even life itself*. In her philosophy of nature, then, it is not only that she recovers a pre-Socratic thinking of *phusis* or an “elemental materialism” as the basis of her concept of sexual difference; rather, “sexual difference,” for Irigaray, names a new way of thinking *phusis* and materiality (“nature”) *tout court*. Sexual difference is therefore not a way of differentiating or categorizing already present beings: it names the coming-to-presence, the emergence and abidance, of Being as such *in whatever its forms* (or, more accurately, it challenges the very metaphysical determination of Being as *presence*).

⁶ In the same passage, Irigaray also argues that because air is always already differentiated in terms of density, heat, etc. that “it is not...universal matter as such even though without it there can be no universal” (JAT 69/37). Stone is certainly correct about the importance of rhythm and natural bi-polarities in Irigaray’s philosophy of nature but to my mind sexual difference is irreducible to them. Indeed, the central passage from which Stone derives her interpretation of Irigaray’s philosophy of nature reads: “Nature is sexuate always and everywhere. All traditions that remain faithful to the cosmic are sexuate and take account of natural powers in sexuate terms. They are *also* regulated by alternations that are not really contradictory [*Elles sont aussi réglées sur l’alternance mais non vraiment les contradictoires*]” (SP 122/108. Emphasis modified.).

The Matricide of Meta/physics and the Science Fictions of Materialism and Realism

But why, for Irigaray, must this rethinking of nature necessarily be *sexuate*? For her, this ultimately comes down to the role of the maternal-feminine. While western philosophy (and physics) began with the search for the ultimate source and principle—the *arkhe*—of nature, reality, or Being, it has never, since the beginning, acknowledged the *arkhe* of every living person: the maternal body. The philosopher-physicist has always overlooked this, searching instead for an *arkhe* beyond this one. In this move, however, the maternal body becomes reduced to the silent ground or substrate of material reality. For Irigaray, it is “the becoming (of the) body of/within the mother [*le devenir (du) corps de/dans la mère*]” that is the matrix of every material relation, the *a priori* condition of possibility and actuality of all knowledge and experience of the world (S 201/161). Having no place of “its” own within the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism, the maternal body therefore becomes the constitutive outside of “matter,” “substance,” and “genesis” as figured by this metaphysics, which simultaneously buries its debt to the maternal-feminine while appropriating her material generativity. In a number of texts, Irigaray demonstrates how the repressed matrixial role played by the “shared co-corporeality with the mother” frequently resurfaces in projections, condensations, substitutions, displacements, and specul(ariz)ations that represent it as mysterious and unknowable, without form and qualities of its own, and often obliquely feminized: *apeiron*, *khôra*, *hypokeimenon*, *proto hyle*, *substantia*, *noumenon*, *Lichtung*. With the maternal function repressed, Being (or its proxies “God,” “Nature,” “Matter,” “The Real”) will be posited as always having been first: what Irigaray calls the “Unbegotten Origin [*Inengendré*]” beyond all origins. This way, Being will be given onto-theological foundations that “put

the brakes on an infinite regression” back to the womb of mother-matter by deferring the Origin to a suprasensible space-time beyond all possible experience (S 204/164).

Through her famous psychoanalysis of the unconscious of western philosophy, Irigaray therefore reveals that in the same way that the barring of the relation to the mother forms the unconscious ground upon which phallic subjectivity is erected, the barring of “mother-matter” forms the “mute soil” of meta-physics.⁷ Because of this, Irigaray says that any subsequent thinking of “materiality” is “always already rigged” against the maternal feminine:

Every utterance, every statement, will thus be developed and affirmed by covering over the fact that Being’s unseverable relation to mother-matter has been buried. Once Being has been constituted *a priori*, and matter has been sealed over again—as the *hupokeimenon* (sub-jectum) censored out of present existence—then man is free to wax eloquent about the struggles he has with *hyle* and *dynamis* though these fights are always already rigged. In fact, anything that is repeated so emphatically must always be suspected of being a kind of negation [*dénégation*] or mishandling [*mé-prise*].⁸ And a philosophical discourse that will (claim to) take matter as such into consideration deserves to be attended to with special care.

⁷ In *Speculum*, Irigaray reads the history of philosophy in specifically psychoanalytic terms, to which I refer with my choice of language here. In Lacan’s theorization of the phallic symbolic, the originary “fusion” (or so it is understood in psychoanalysis) with the mother must necessarily be severed and barred by the phallic signifier in order for the subject to constitute himself as such within the symbolic order. This barred relation to the mother cannot be given symbolic representation except through metaphoric substitutions and metonymic displacements. The maternal-feminine is therefore represented as the undifferentiated ground (i.e., “the Real” in Lacanian terms) against which the phallic barrier must be erected in order to prevent the subject from falling into the black hole of psychosis. Irigaray argues that this phallic imaginary subtends the entire history of metaphysics, which for lack of finding symbolic representation for the maternal function, has erected an onto-theological and phallic barrier against what it takes as undifferentiated materiality. This materiality can then only resurface in metaphors and metonymies, or as a traumatic return of the Real.

⁸ Irigaray’s choice of words here seems to have a highly significant psychoanalytic connotation that is missed in the published translation (as “denial or refusal of awareness”). *Dénégation* and *mé-prise* are the French translations of Freud’s terms *Verneinung* and *Vergreifen*. In “On Negation,” Freud defines *Verneinung* as the simultaneous intellectual admission and affective denial of repressed content. His leading example is extremely pertinent to Irigaray’s point: an analysand, when narrating his dream, says “Whoever the person in my dream was, it wasn’t my mother.” Here, the mother is intellectually acknowledged while being affectively disavowed. *Vergreifen* (literally “to mis-handle,” translated by James Strachey as “bungled action”) is one of the symptomatic acts analyzed in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in which unconscious motivations are expressed via an action that is contrary to one’s conscious intentions. To illustrate this, Freud uses rather bizarre examples, such as when seemingly clumsy movement—e.g., attempting to step aside for someone and continually stepping in the person’s way again—facilitates unconsciously desired “sexual” contact.

Somewhere it forgets or denies that its subject has always been disguised and travestied by a certain speculation. And the less we see and recognize the additional part played [*rajoute*] in *phusis* by the mirror, the more powerful and insidious is the fiction at work (S 202-3/162).

By failing to recognize and symbolize their real material genesis, the first philosophers created a vacuum at the origin—what Irigaray refers to as a “natal lacuna”—over which they laid *phusis* (or, later: Being, Nature, Matter) as the “fantasmatic material [*éttoffe fantasmatique*]” out of which the logical order will be made. As a screen for the projections of the philosopher’s Imaginary, nature, even at its most “fundamental” (i.e., “matter” itself) has therefore *never been neutral*. Nature, in other words, is *already* sexuate “all the way down”; however, it has always already been appropriated by the *masculine* under the aegis of “neutrality.” Within the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism, there is therefore no materiality that is not always already *phallomorphic* that could serve as the basis for Irigaray’s rethinking of nature: consequently, the only way around the *aporia* of sexual indifference that constitutes this metaphysics is an entirely new thinking of “nature” and “matter” that takes off from sexual difference.

Because the so-called natural sciences are today the beneficiaries and trustees of this understanding of nature and materiality, Irigaray’s intervention exceeds the history of philosophy and involves her in an explicit confrontation with science in which she extends and elaborates her critique of technophallogocentric metaphysics. Since the beginning, the “scientific” account of the natural world has skipped over the material conditions of life, starting from increasingly abstract axiomatic premises.⁹ In this sense,

⁹ Classicists Kirk and Raven trace this to the “second stage” of pre-Socratic thought, the Pythagorean and Eleatic schools. While the Milesians were directly preoccupied with the material world, “the Pythagoreans were only secondarily, and the Eleatics hardly at all, interested in the material aspect of the world,

as Heidegger had argued, physics has always been *meta*-physics. Irigaray's insight here is that in stepping over material reality, a space has been opened for the projection of the phallic sexual Imaginary onto nature itself. To Heidegger's critique of the subject/object dichotomy central to modern science, then, Irigaray adds a critique of the presumed *neutrality* of both the subject and object of scientific inquiry because for her, of course, this ostensible neutrality amounts to an "idiolect of men and a masculine imaginary, a sexuate world without neutrality" (E 117/121). In brief, she identifies ten fundamental characteristics of modern science that evince an "isomorphism with the sexual imaginary of man": (1) the positing of a single world that exists in front of the subject, (2) the projection of a suprasensible model onto the universe, (3) the claim that the observing subject is foreign to this model (which is therefore *objective*), (4) the demonstration of the insensibility of the model when it is in fact at least partially derived by an ocularcentric perspective on the world, (5) the mediation of the technical apparatus that enables an independence from the senses and an increasing distance between the subject and object of inquiry, (6) the passage through an ideal elaboration (i.e., deduction or induction) that is independent from the physical and psychical realities of the subject, (7) the proof of the model as universally valid (at least for a limited time), (8) the corroboration of the universality of the model through experimental protocol through which presumably identical subjects can agree on the results, (9) the validation of the

and...both groups therefore start from principles which in these days would be called abstract" (*The Presocratic Philosophers*, 217). The idea that the structure of the universe is fundamentally mathematical and that abstract principles are more reliable than sense-perception can be traced to Pythagoras, became canonized by Plato, and has remained central in physics to the present day (see, e.g., Max Tegmark, *Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality* [New York: Vintage Books, 2015]). In surprising consonance with Heidegger and Irigaray, physicist Lee Smolin has grown increasingly critical of the "substitution" of a timeless mathematical structure for temporal nature within physics, calling it a "metaphysical dream" (see *Time Reborn: From the Crisis in Physics to the Future of the Universe* [New York: Mariner Books, 2013]).

model through its efficacy (or profitability), (10) the necessary expression of the discovery in a purely formal language of numbers and symbols (SNN 250-2). While science justifies its preeminent position among knowledge practices on the basis of its unparalleled effects, Heidegger had already pointed out that these “triumphs” should not come as a surprise because they are built into the very essence of experimental science: the more precisely the mathematical projection onto nature corresponds to the pre-determined methods of measurement, the more exact the experiment will be.¹⁰ This is how Heidegger interprets Newton’s famous *hypothesis non fingo*—a hypothesis is never arbitrary—which could be stated in Irigaray’s words as “Man only asks (himself) questions that he can already answer using the supply of instruments he has available to assimilate even the underside [*les revers*] of his history” (S 170/137). Thus while science is often understood as taking us ever-closer to nature itself, what is happening is that gap originally opened between the subject and object is being closed, so that scientific discourse becomes a monologue: for Irigaray, the “world-picture” of science theorized by Heidegger is an increasingly clear mirror for the reflection of the masculine subject—the *speculum mundi*, “mirror of the world.”¹¹ For Irigaray, then, the representative figure of scientific subjectivity is less Copernicus than Narcissus, for in cutting himself off from his “empirical relationship to the matrixial” (including his own living body) he has

¹⁰ “Experiment begins with the laying down of a law [i.e., *hypo-thesis*, under-law]. To set up an experiment is to represent a condition under which a specific nexus of motions can become capable of being followed in its necessary course, i.e., of being controlled in advance by calculation. But the establishing of a law is accomplished with reference to the ground-plan of the object-sphere...[which] furnishes the measure and constrains the anticipatory representing of the conditions...[Hypotheses] are developed out of the ground-plan of nature and are sketched into it...The more exactly the ground plan of nature is projected, the more exact becomes the possibility of the experiment” (GA5 81/61-2).

¹¹ “[*Speculum*] is an allusion to those European works...that speak of the ‘speculum mundi’...It’s not simply a question of a mirror in which one sees oneself, but the way in which it’s possible to give an account of the world within a discourse: a mirror of the world” (JLI 98).

become the axis around which nature turns, “installed in a systematic that can be assimilated to the already dead” (E 125/121).¹²

Because the scientific method approaches nature’s materiality only via a circuitous detour through these abstract and ideal premises, “matter” is ultimately a sort of theoretical fiction and every so-called materialism is effectively an idealism.¹³ For Irigaray, then, the originary matricide that structures western philosophical, political, social, and psychic life has been no less operative in science. In fact, it is perhaps the neutered *cosmos* of modern science where mother-matter-nature has received her most fatal blow. The qualities attributed to matter in classical physics clearly attest to the erasure of the “*corps-à-corps*” with(in) the maternal body: passivity, homogeneity, atomism, extension, exclusion, solidity, hardness, closed systems, permanence, timelessness, locomotion, quantification.¹⁴ It is true that with developments such as quantum mechanics, far-from-equilibrium thermodynamics, and the theory of relativity these characterizations have given way almost entirely to understandings that resonate much more closely with Irigaray’s own thinking of matter in terms of generativity, difference, relationality, fluidity, openness, change, growth, irreversibility. For instance,

¹² “The Copernican revolution has yet to have its effects in the male imaginary...he cuts himself off from the bedrock, from his empirical relationship with the matrixial, which he claims to survey. To specularize and to speculate. Exiling himself ever further (toward) where the greatest power lies, he thus becomes the ‘sun’ if it is around him that things turn, a pole of attraction stronger than the ‘earth’” (S 165-6/133-4).

¹³ “[By] expressing himself in symbols or letters, substitutions for *proper names*, that refer only to intra-theoretical objects, and therefore never to any persons or objects from the real or from reality [t]he scientist enters into a fictional universe...” (SNN 251). “It is just as correct to interpret all discourse produced until the present day as neglectful of matter. To designate one part of matter—as theme, motif, referent, method...—while neglecting the whole of its domain remains, necessarily, within an exploitation that can be called ‘idealist.’ This remains ‘unthought’ by ‘materialists,’ at least by modern ones” (OA 17/11-2).

¹⁴ In addition to Newton’s “*corpus omne*” and Galileo’s “*corpus seclusio*” as discussed above, Descartes defines a material body as “that which can be confined in a certain place, and which can fill a given space in such a way that *every other body will be excluded from it*” (*Meditations on First Philosophy* [New York: Routledge, 1993], II). Newton describes the universal qualities of matter as “extension, hardness, impenetrability, and *vis inertia*” (*The Principia*, III.3).

given her famous pair of essays elaborating of a fluid theory of materiality—
 “L’incontournable volume” (1974) and “La ‘mécanique’ des fluides” (1977)—one could
 certainly imagine Irigaray’s satisfaction with recent experimental work in hydrodynamics
 that suggests new interpretations of quantum physics on the basis of a superfluid reality.¹⁵
 For Irigaray, however, despite the fact that modern physics has displaced the Newtonian
 conception of matter, “the Newtonian break” nevertheless “leads to the very annihilation
 of what is at stake in the enterprise of physics: the matter (however it is predicated) of the
 universe and the bodies constituting it” (E 118/123). In this sense, then, what has been
 called the “de-materialization of matter” in modern physics—in which “matter” no longer
 exists except as an operative term for whatever the “stuff” that physicists study is (which
 obviously depends entirely on the experimental context)—is the logical conclusion of the
 dead matter of the old mechanistic universe.¹⁶ Although “materialism” no longer holds
 sway within physics, many feminist and other political theorists have been working to
 develop a “new materialism.” Challenging a perceived anti-scientism and anti-

¹⁵ Experimental work led by physicist Yves Couder has recreated quantum phenomena, including the famous “double slit experiment,” using droplets of liquid on the surface of a vibrating bath. These experiments obtain via fluid dynamics the statistical predications of quantum mechanics, which are supposedly impossible to replicate in the terms of classical physics. The observations have led to a renewed interest in “pilot-wave theory,” which was largely rejected in the 1920s when the Copenhagen interpretation of the particle-wave duality was established as orthodoxy. While Niels Bohr interpreted the duality in terms of “complementarity” such that a quantum “entity” would exhibit either wave-like *or* particle-like behaviors only upon measurement, Louis de Broglie’s pilot-wave theory suggested that each particle is guided by a wave. While the Copenhagen interpretation accepts that this indeterminacy means that the best physics can provide is statistical predictions about the quantum entity, the pilot-wave theory is deterministic and realist. For a popular summation of these experiments and their implications within the history of quantum mechanics, see Natalie Wolchover, “Fluid Tests Hint at Concrete Quantum Reality,” *Quanta Magazine*, June 24, 2014, accessed February 5, 2017, <https://www.quantamagazine.org/20140624-fluid-tests-hint-at-concrete-quantum-reality/>. See also Clara Moskowitz, “If Spacetime Were a Superfluid, Would It Unify Physics?,” *Scientific American*, June 18, 2014, accessed February 5, 2017, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/superfluid-spacetime-relativity-quantum-physics/>.

¹⁶ See N. R. Hanson, “The Dematerialization of Matter,” *Philosophy of Science* vol. 29, no. 1 (1962), 27-38. In modern physics, “matter” is therefore more epistemological than ontological: that is to say, physicists are less (if at all) concerned with what matter *is* than the most precise ways to study and observe it.

materialism within the humanities (one that is often said to include both Heidegger and Irigaray), these thinkers draw on scientific research in order to reconceptualize matter as “vital,” “agential,” “self-organizing,” and “self-creative.”¹⁷ By decentralizing the humanities’ focus on practices of signification and bringing concepts of matter’s generativity to the fore of feminist thought, this work might also seem to be similar to Irigaray’s in many respects. Yet, in its reliance on science, this literature inadvertently adopts the same meta/physical stance as physics, often ontologizing its epistemological ambiguities with regard to “matter.”¹⁸ Throughout this work, moreover, “matter” is still thought as *essentially* neutral, without beginning from the matrixial-material conditions of life: birth, sexual difference, the fluid elements (air and water). Already in 1986, however, Irigaray critiqued the very notion of self-organizing matter that would come to be *de rigueur* in new materialist theory:

The theory that the mere force of matter (what force? and what are we calling matter?) engenders organized beings remains a pressing issue, especially with respect to the origin of life. The research being done to prove this hypothesis is deep and extensive and often neglects our most elemental realities and needs. But so far no one can claim to belong to a monosexual or asexual universe. Except in fiction, perhaps? And in certain formal truths of science that have been abstracted from life and called neuter? (SP 192/178).

¹⁷ See, respectively, Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*; Manuel De Landa, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 1997); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, Politics* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

¹⁸ Indeed, while (nearly) all of this work explicitly claims itself as “ontological,” it never seeks to address the Being of “matter.” Yet, because “matter” in modern physics is primarily an epistemological question, the ontology of new materialism is ultimately *whatever physics says*. As such, it is perhaps more accurately described as “physicalism,” which has long been the name used in analytic philosophy to describe ontology in the wake of the dematerialization of matter in physics: “Physicalists believe that everything is physical: more precisely, that all entities, properties, relations, and facts are those which are studied by physics or other physical sciences....they all grant physical science a unique ontological authority: the authority to tell us what there is.... the empirical world, they claim, contains just what a true complete physical science would say it contains” (Tim Crane and D. H. Mellor, “There Is No Question of Physicalism,” *Mind* vol. 99, no. 39 [1990], 185-6).

The abundance of lively adjectives notwithstanding, then, from Irigaray's point of view, this work is neither new nor materialist, but is rather part of the *matri-cide* constitutive of western meta/physics.

Irigaray's thinking of sexual difference and *phusis* thus entails a radical reconceptualization of the very nature of materiality and the materiality of nature. For her, this necessitates a move away from what Alfred North Whitehead called the "scientific materialism" that characterizes the modern physical theory of nature, which posits the underlying substance of the cosmos to be matter that is extended throughout space, in a "flux of configurations," in itself "senseless, valueless, purposeless," "just do[ing] what it does" in relations that "do not spring from the nature of its being."¹⁹ Like Irigaray, Whitehead sees this theory as the result of a poor abstraction that has made a secondary problem of the most basic fact of our existence: the fact that we are living. Within the materialist universe, the origin of life is an inexplicable mystery, attributable either to chance or to God. Renouncing the abstract premises of both physico-chemical reductionism and a vitalism that would introduce a metaphysical dualism between organic and inorganic matter, Whitehead proposes to rethink the entirety of the cosmos on the basis of what he calls the "concrete fact [of] the organism." Instead of mindless matter (or fields and particles), nature is composed of "organisms," or enduring "structures of activity" with increasing degrees of sentience.²⁰ Life in the narrower biological sense, then, is not a mystery, but something toward which the cosmos tends in

¹⁹ Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1925), 18. For Whitehead, this applies to the "physicists' energy" too (33).

²⁰ Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, 38, 110.

its general organicity.²¹ Through her invocation of the pre-Socratic panzoist conception of *phusis*, Irigaray too thinks of nature in terms of life, rather than “matter.” For her, nature is defined by its morphogenic capacities and thus in nature, “matter is living, and it already has form(s) and aim(s)” of its own (VB 76). But if nature, or life, is always morphologically defined, then sexual difference must be implicated in nature itself: “Organisms [*vivants*], insofar as they are alive, are a becoming. They produce form. No becoming is morphologically undifferentiated, even if its source is chaotic. And the problem of sexual difference weighs heavily, no doubt, on the side of the primary matter of nature...” (SNN 4). To think of “life” as neuter is, for Irigaray, a bad abstraction, for if sexuation is not thought as essential to life from the start, then the same problems that the materialist theory encounters with respect to life will inevitably arise here: sexuation becomes an accidental property of the organism (which is itself neuter), a form that is imposed from the outside rather than something that springs from the nature of its being. If sexuation is not a dimension of living matter itself, then there are two options: (1) “sexuation” is ultimately reducible to the flux of configurations of *asexuate* physico-chemical phenomena (matter and/or energy) or (2) there is a substantial dualism between sexuate and asexuate matter. In the first case, one would have to explain how random asexuate micro-phenomena, which can only be *externally related* because they are nonessential to matter itself, can be coordinated into a livable whole in the sexuate organism or can “sync” up to evolve in the same direction. In the second case, it would be necessary to both define what makes sexuate matter *sexuate* and explain the causal

²¹ Similar arguments have been made more recently by working scientists, see: Christian de Duve, *Vital Dust: The Origin and Evolution of Life on Earth* (New York: Vintage, 1995) and Lee Smolin, *Life of the Cosmos* (Oxford University Press, 1997).

connection between sexuate and asexuate matter. Irigaray thus rejects both of these theses in favor of a third: “sexuation is an *essential characteristic* of living matter” (SP 188/202). While this claim might initially appear extreme, it is by far the most parsimonious option: it eliminates the ambiguities involved in the other two theses by simply denying the existence of asexuate matter. Nature evolves toward increasingly complex and divergent forms of sexual difference because its most basic “structures of activity” are already sexuate: sexuation has always been part of matter, although it has evolved in complexity. Just as life cannot modify or predicate dead matter, sexuation is not a mode or predicate of neutral matter or life. Indeed, life and sexuation only seem to be exceptional rather than essential to nature because the basic premise of dead and neutral matter is a reflection of man’s own perception of his living, sexuate body (precisely as nonliving and neutral). Thus, unlike materialist or physicalist theories in which life and sexuation can always be reduced to some underlying nonvital or asexuate material-energetic occurrence—“mattering,” “matter’s self-organization,” “*clinamen*,” “assemblage” (to name a few of the most common locutions in new materialist literature)—Irigaray’s philosophy is *radically irreducible*. For her, nature is comprised of morphogenic living matter and sexuation is an indissociable dimension of this process of morphogenesis. Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference is therefore a process philosophy in which sexual difference is an *incorporeal process of corporeal differentiation, vital generativity, and morphological creativity*—a sort of *élan sexué*, or principle of individuation as I will elaborate extensively in the following chapter. As a theory of nature’s own morphogenesis, moreover, it is rigorously non-anthropomorphic: “Plants,

animals, gods, the elements of the universe, all are sexuate” (SP 178/192).²² Sexual difference, then, must be thought beyond and before all metaphysical bifurcations of living and nonliving, the material and the spiritual, form and matter, physical and biological. This is why throughout her philosophy of nature Irigaray blends terms from science and philosophy (matter, energy, life) with those of theology and alchemy (flesh, carnality, the elemental). Her philosophy is therefore neither, properly speaking, a materialism nor a vitalism, but rather replaces all concepts of matter, life, and nature (including *phusis* and *zoe*).

This ontology of sexuate-nature both requires and constitutes a corresponding natural-sexuate epistemology. For Irigaray, the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism is premised on an increasing devaluation of sense-perception: rather than encounter the real as it presences itself, man has gathered the real into a whole (i.e., the *logos*) that *re-*presents the real in a way that he can master:

The logic of Western culture ends in a substitution of representation for perception. The logos intends to create a sort of *analogon* of the living world. In order to succeed in that, nearness and distance have to be merged into a sole perception or representation through a ceaseless comparative evaluation, and also through naming everything encountered. Such a denomination will substitute for a sensory and emotional meeting with the real [a real that is] structured into the whole of a world that man brings under control. Like Being in the work of Parmenides or even Heidegger, the names given to the real keep it, while taking it away from its status of living being. In this way, the things of the universe, and we ourselves, enter into a same world thanks to a system of denominations that governs representation, and even perception (IBSW 15).

²² Indeed, Irigaray’s theory of sexuation as natural morphogenesis allows her to distinguish between natural (or living) and technical beings without a humanist nature/culture divide. For her, natural beings are characterized by internal generation (and regeneration) of form and are thus living and sexuate, while the form of technical beings is produced from the outside and they are therefore not living and not sexuate: “The machine has no sex. Nature itself is always sexuate....The machine, asexuate or monosexuate in its production, sometimes protects or assists life but it never creates or engenders it...To remain alive and regenerate ourselves as living beings, sexual difference is necessary” (SP 121/107).

In this, “thinking” (i.e., the re-presentation of the real) becomes equivalent to Being and, ironically, perception is downgraded to the status of a “representation” of the real. The real is thus either bifurcated in a way that all sensible qualities become subjective (“secondary”) representations of underlying physical processes and mathematical qualities that are real (“primary”), or there is a bifurcation of the subject and the real such that *all qualities* are subjective representations.²³ For Irigaray this has cut both nature and the subject off from their living reality, making our world into a sort of “museum of inanimate objects” (VB 85). Instead of finding ourselves within nature in its elemental vitality, we find ourselves within a fabricated world populated by objects of man’s own making (words, concepts, axioms, categories, schemas, models). And in this, we only ever encounter or communicate with the real *techno-logically*: either through the increasingly complex apparatuses necessary to observe nature’s “real” qualities or through the mental faculties of the subject that give form to the formless manifold of sense-perception. Consequently, “we have lost the perception of the difference between meeting living beings and meeting things, be they material or spiritual, that we have made” (VB 85). To understand the real as a constant process of *morphogenic* becoming, however, requires the recognition that *living nature* has its *own* forms and qualities beyond the formal structures of language, logic, or reason. Irigaray’s philosophy thus calls for a return to a “living perception of the real” through the “cultivation” of sensory perception in which re-presentational thinking can no longer claim an isomorphism with

²³ The first is most extensively formulated by John Locke in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (II.8), while the second is formulated in Kant’s critique of Locke (e.g., *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Present Itself as Science*, trans. Gary Hatfield [Cambridge University Press, 2004], §13).

Being. Central to Irigaray's later work, then, is a realist theory of perception that is very different from "realism" in recent continental and analytic philosophy. As it has been formulated in modern philosophy, the debate over realism centers on the question of whether reality exists independently of the mind and, then, in what ways our mental representations correspond to this reality. For Irigaray this is what Henri Bergson would call a "badly stated question" for two reasons: first, it fails to acknowledge the *qualitative* difference between living (or natural) beings and fabricated objects. The question of whether an object exists independently of the human mind, she suggests, fundamentally depends on whether the "object" is living or not: "In reality, a tree—as any living being—is not only seen by us, as is the case with most fabricated objects; it also gives us to see *because it lives by itself*" (VB 46). Secondly, the "mind" is abstracted from its living corporeal participation in the world and its morphological specificity, being reduced either to a universal form of subjectivity or to underlying neurological processes. Without considering these points, the "reality" in question in realism debates is the represented, fabricated world of objects rather than the living real while the "mind" is the neuter (i.e., masculine) subject and thus the question of whether reality exists independently of the mind is a tautology or solipsism—what Irigaray has called the "old dream of symmetry" that characterizes the history of western philosophy.

The realism central to Irigaray's philosophy of nature, on the contrary, is a *vital sexuate realism*. Thus, a return to the living real, for Irigaray, can only occur through a return to the living body from which we have been cut off as thinking subjects.²⁴ For her,

²⁴ Here, Irigaray further departs from the inherent occularcentrism of realism debates. While these debates often cursorily mention smell, taste, and sound, they generally privilege vision. Irigaray's realist philosophy of perception, on the contrary, is based in a cultivation of the long-disparaged "secondary" qualities: e.g.,

this means that “a certain recourse, or return, to the phenomenological method seems necessary in order to make enter into the universe of the rational some natural, corporeal, sensible realities which until now had been removed from it” (WD 156). Here, Irigaray partly follows the late work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty which developed his earlier phenomenology of embodied perception into an ontology of the “flesh,” in which all beings are part of the general flesh of Being or nature.²⁵ Through the notion of the flesh, Merleau-Ponty displaces the dualism of dead matter and sentient mind: the flesh is the elemental matrix out of which both “subjects” and “objects” provisionally emerge and the “ontological tissue” that binds them.²⁶ Because the perceiver and the perceived are of the same flesh, the act of perception is nature or Being becoming sensible to, indeed *touching*, itself. While Merleau-Ponty refers to this as the “reversibility” of the flesh, this does not imply a *coincidence* of Being and thinking. Rather, like the gap that remains when one touches one palm with the other, perception takes place as a “*dehiscence*” between the perceiver and the perceived.²⁷ Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the flesh, then, is both an “ontology” and an “epistemology”: participation in the world is both to be in and of the world and to “know” or sense the world. Irigaray’s philosophy of nature is deeply influenced by Merleau-Ponty’s; however, she also criticizes him for his erasure of

color and sound (in “Flesh Colors”), sensing the invisible (in “Being Two, How Many Eyes Have We?”), and, especially touch (in “Perhaps Cultivating Touch Can Still Save Us”).

²⁵ See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968). Throughout this text, Merleau-Ponty uses both terms, “Being” and “Nature,” to refer to the flesh.

²⁶ Merleau-Ponty explicitly distinguishes the flesh from all concepts of matter, invoking the pre-Socratic philosophy of the elements as its only analogue in the history of philosophy: “The flesh is not matter, is not mind, is not substance. To designate it, we should need the old term ‘element,’ in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of Being. The flesh is in this sense an ‘element’ of Being” (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 139).

²⁷ “The *Rotempfindung* [finding of red, i.e., the “subjective” sensation] is part of the *Rotempfundene* [red that is found, i.e., the “objective” component]—this is not a *coincidence*, but a dehiscence that knows itself as such” (*The Visible and the Invisible*, 267).

sexual difference. In Irigaray's reading, Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the flesh amounts to a sort of intrauterine fantasy in which nature assumes a sort of maternal role and the "subject" is a kind of fetus. In this, perception takes place only as a relation between a perceiver and a perceived, and never between two *different* perceivers, which, for Irigaray, amounts to a form of "solipsism with respect to the maternal" that places Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of nature within the metaphysics of phallogocentrism.²⁸ As such, the "reversibility" that for Merleau-Ponty constitutes the "ultimate truth" of the flesh becomes a kind of *mise en abyme*, the "gap" between the subject and world becoming a kind of folding back on itself (*repli*) *ad infinitum*: "a sort of *mille-feuilles* represents the archeology of the subject, the world, and their exchanges" (E 168/181). In order for this circuit to be opened, the subject would have to recognize mother-nature as *different* from himself, and not existing merely as the matrix of his own perception. For Irigaray, this starts with an autonomy from the actual mother gained through the recognition of her as a *sexuate* being who had a perception of him in utero that is fundamentally irreversible with his. This incommensurability would then lead to a perception capable of "encounter[ing]...in the world a sex which is *irreducible* to his, and with which it is impossible to have relations of reversibility without remainder" (E 171/184). This irreducibility marks the limit at which one's perceptual reversibility with nature is impossible because what is perceived is *another nature*, that is, a perceiver *irreducibly different* from the self. Because this irreducibility breaks up the symmetry or

²⁸ "This reversibility of the *world* and the *me*...suggests some repetition of a prenatal sojourn where the universe and me form a closed economy, which is partly reversible...His universe represents, or re-creates, a vast intertwining of umbilical cords or passages. Perception would take place at each crossing of placental tissue with an embryo-infant that is always in direct connection with it (her)" (E 161-2/173). Indeed, in the "working notes" compiled at the end of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty writes "Do a psychoanalysis of Nature: it is the flesh, the mother" (267), which is only the most explicit of the many allusions to pregnancy and fecundity throughout the text.

mise en abyme of man's perceptual world, making difference and relation possible, it is *this* limit—the generative interval of sexual difference—and not, as Merleau-Ponty would have it, the “gap” (*écart*) between perceiver and perceived that constitutes the “fecund negative that is instituted by the flesh.”²⁹

It is therefore *irreducibility* and not *reversibility* that characterizes the flesh of nature in Irigaray's interpretation. In other words, nature is *at least two*, which means that “limit is therefore inscribed in *nature itself*” (JAT 65/35). Such a limitation within nature means that no subject can claim access to the whole; to do so is to mask the interval with an “imaginary positivity” (JAT 36/66) that makes thought into a dogmatism. Irigaray is here in implicit dialogue with Kant, whose revolutionary critical philosophy sought to definitively demonstrate the limits of reason such that no subject could claim absolute knowledge of nature “in itself.” By delimiting the bounds of the rational subject, Kant believed that he had ensured the objectivity of science, thus, in his estimation, effecting a shift in philosophy as profound as that of Copernicus in cosmology. In Irigaray's reading, because Kant is only able to limit the subject by cleaving it from the “empirical matrix” of nature, his move paradoxically repositions the subject as the center of the universe. Thus, on the one hand Irigaray recognizes that, against the auto-constitution of the infinite Cartesian *res cogitans*, Kant inscribes finitude into knowledge by positing the subject as co-constitutive with the external object. Yet, because for Kant the chaos of the real only receives its form from the *a priori* forms of intuition (i.e., space and time) and the categories of the understanding, this originary “co-birth [*co-nassaince*]” is collapsed and it is ultimately the *subject* who becomes the matrix that gives birth to the external

²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 263.

world.³⁰ In this, for Irigaray, Kant's registration of finitude amounts to an autological *closure* of the subject's world such that it ultimately collapses into a solipsism from which modern philosophy has struggled to escape. Indeed, this is precisely what is called the "correlationsist circle" by number of thinkers who have been working to develop a post-critical realism over the past decade.³¹ While these thinkers seek to overcome this problem through overcoming the idea of finitude itself (usually via some recourse to science), Irigaray does so by resituating finitude in the real in the form of birth and sexual difference.³² First, because within the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism, we are originally cut from the real due to a lack of symbolization of the maternal origin—something that Lacan dramatizes in vivid detail and that *Speculum* traces from Plato to Freud and back again—the first condition of any return to the real is the elaboration of a symbolic universe in which we are able to cut the umbilical ties to the mother while finding our limit in her as a sexuate being who while being our world had a world of her own beyond us. Without this, the mother is reduced to the undifferentiated nature-matter-matrix that conditions our living perception but that is constitutively excluded from it and, thus, we can only relate to nature vampirically.³³ Thus, when Quentin Meillassoux,

³⁰ "This is not to say that man will not have had to draw on reserves still in nature in order to build his construction [i.e., Kant's architectonics], that a detour through the external world will not have been indispensable, that "I" will not have had a relation to "things" before being conscious of itself. But this first period of co-birth [*co-naissance*] is forgotten in an arrogant claim to sovereignly determine the whole" (S 254/204).

³¹ This term was coined by Quentin Meillassoux, who defines it as "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being and never to either term considered apart from the other" (*After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier [New York: Continuum, 2008], 5). This concept is central in most of the "new" realisms and materialism in continental thought (see Bryant et al, eds., *The Speculative Turn*).

³² For Irigaray, birth and the maternal body constitute a sort of "vertical" limit, while sexual difference constitutes a "horizontal" limit (see, e.g., SW, KW).

³³ "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 living in the world. But the philosopher has not yet considered this. He pays no attention and even forgets this original determination of our being in the world. He thus cannot take into account the in-finite involved in the relation with the mother. And his

the leading figure of the new realism, argues that mathematical science overcomes the finitude of the human subject by finally enabling us to think a reality anterior to the very possibility of any thought (e.g., Earth before the emergence of life), is this not an example of “man’s attempt to reconstruct, by means of theoretical elaborations and impossible metaphorizations, the matrix and the path that would lead (back) to it” (S 169/137)? In fact, the only reality anterior to the subject’s thought that he can *really* be certain of is that within his mother’s body in which he was already held in finitude; any other so-called “ancestrality” is a speculation.³⁴ Structured by the same “natal lacuna,” the same *horror mater*, as the rest of phallogocentric metaphysics, Meillassoux’s “speculative materialism” is yet another *specularization* (“*Spéculer, speculariser*” as Irigaray wrote in *Speculum*). And thus, the difference between Kantian finitude and Meillassoux’s “after finitude”—an “after” that Meillassoux sees as yet another Copernican revolution—is a difference that is not one, for either way, thinking is a reflection *ad infinitum*: “By wishing to reverse the anxiety of incarceration in the other, of intromission in the other, in making space itself his own, man becomes a prisoner of the effects of a symmetry that knows no limits” (S 169/137). While, for Kant, the cost of finitude is the renunciation of knowing the absolute, and for Meillassoux thinking the absolute entails the overcoming of finitude through mathematicization, for Irigaray it is

apprehension of the world requires an a priori reversal: the relation with the other will be included in the relation with the world, and not the contrary. From then on, subjectivity will be deprived of an origin and singularity—it will correspond to a ‘whoever, a some ‘one’ or ‘anybody’ defined by a world that existed before it. The priority given to an idea of the world (even a concrete world) [over] respect to the relation with the other, the first other, exiles subjectivity from its being in the real world. It enters an anonymous, impersonal, indefinite world: a world of ‘one(s),’ or ‘there is [*Es gibt*].’ The relation with the other is imposed by a common belonging to a world that is already there” (SW 123-4).

³⁴ “Ancestrality” is the name Meillassoux gives to scientific claims about a world prior to any possible “correlation” between Being and thought, made possible by mathematical analysis of the “arche-fossils” that are incontrovertible evidence of that world (e.g., radioactive isotopes in asteroid fragments that can date the Earth as present billions of years before any thinking subject) (see chapter one of *After Finitude*).

finitude that *enables* the experience of the absolute: in other words, *realism depends on finitude because the real contains its own insuperable morphological limits*. If, as Irigaray argues, finitude is inscribed in nature itself in the form of birth and sexual difference, then *no* thinking can ever correspond to Being, for the horizon of sexual difference is necessary to achieve any sort of real universal. Thus, while the interval inscribes finite limits into nature, “it” “itself” provides an in-finite space and time for the collaborative building of an absolute or universal that is shared between-us (see SW). Here, then, we would be returned to something like the *cosmos* of pre-philosophical Greece as described above: to perceive the real would be to perceive from within the world of one sex toward the horizon of the other(s) with a *desire* for the whole. It is only this, for Irigaray, that can truly effectuate the Copernican Revolution that dislocates man from the center of the *cosmos* and frees him from his “palace of mirrors” to enter the “great outdoors.”³⁵

Re-membering the Mother: Toward a Diaphysics of Sexual Difference

As a new theory of the real and a new realism, Irigaray’s philosophy of sexual difference would seem to constitute a new metaphysics. Indeed, as Elizabeth Grosz argues, “it is precisely a new metaphysics, a new account of the forces of the real and the irreducibility of a real that is fundamentally dynamic, that Irigaray proposes in her writings.”³⁶ While I agree entirely with this description, I have argued throughout this chapter that Irigaray’s

³⁵ The phrase “palace of mirrors” is from *Speculum* (169/137), while “the Great Outdoors [*le Grand Dehors*]” is from Meillassoux’s *After Finitude* and refers to the “*absolute* outside of pre-critical thinkers: that outside which was not relative to us [i.e., neutral, general “humans”]...existing in itself regardless of whether we are thinking of it or not” (7).

³⁶ Grosz, *Becoming Undone*, 100

project follows a Heideggerian overcoming of metaphysics. It is therefore more appropriate, at least in this sense, to call her thinking a *diaphysics*, which would operate “thanks to,” “through,” “by means of,” or “at intervals of” (*dia*) *phusis* rather than going “beyond” (*meta*) *phusis*.³⁷ In this, Irigaray’s thought clearly places more emphasis on *relationality* than any metaphysics. Within a diaphysics, beings would not be cut off from their material and vital generative conditions, from the living real, from what gives (*Es gibt*): diaphysics would neither erect another plane (e.g., the *logos*, “culture”) over and above or parallel to the natural, nor would it be a conceptual abstraction or subjective representation beyond living nature. Being, or rather, living, as well as thinking would “both”—to the degree that a separation would still be maintained here—take place *by means of phusis*. And yet, Irigaray’s diaphysics is not a total immersion in nature, for she argues that living nature must be “cultivated” into a shareable world.³⁸ Instead, it is a mediation between transcendence and immanence.³⁹ For Irigaray, pure immanence is a lack of cutting the cord with mother-matter and an appropriation of the maternal

³⁷ The term “diaphysics” was proposed as an alternative to “metaphysics” by Irigaray during her International Summer Seminar at the University of Bristol in 2013 (which I attended). She has yet to develop this concept anywhere in print.

³⁸ Throughout her later work, Irigaray uses the phrase “*la culture de la nature*” in contradistinction to the traditional “division” between nature and culture. Irigaray’s phrase means both the *cultivation* of nature and the *culture* of nature. In the first instance, she refers to the facilitation of growth of natural forms (including that of our own bodies)—a tending to and caring for living beings. This, for Irigaray, requires a movement between continuity and discontinuity with nature. By “culture,” she refers to geo-historical processes of collective cultivation. Thus, “culture” in the usual sense, for Irigaray, is not separated from nature but grows out of nature in a constant process of individuation and relation.

³⁹ “The rupture between immanence and transcendence is due, it seems to me, to 1. The constitution of the divine as *logos* having all power over the natural universe, although it is produced by only one part of this universe, at a moment of its history, 2. The release of each man and each woman from concern for realizing each day the passage from the microcosm to the macrocosm, from the mortal to the immortal, from tearing apart to unity, 3. The substitution of the creation of a totality potentially completed by a God referred to as belonging to the masculine gender for a continuous generation of the world in its material and spiritual dimension” (BEW 43-4).

conditions in which the “subject” is able to live without individuation and autonomy, while pure transcendence blocks off mother-matter-nature with suprasensible Absolute.

Diaphysics, on the contrary, is a sort of *placental model* in which there is a mediation, an *interval*, that allows one to be connected to the generative conditions of life while also enabling individuation, growth, and relation-in-difference: in a diaphysics, living-thinking is embedded in material nature, but must move out toward the horizon of the other-nature. Meta/physics has displaced this interval, deferring relation-in-difference to a “difference” between Being and Non-Being (or Being and beings, perceiver and perceived, phenomenal and noumenal, matter and spirit,...etc.). Like immanentist thinkers, Irigaray thus denies the existence of any transcendent suprasensible realm, but she also insists on a transcendence of/toward the other.⁴⁰ Hence her elaboration of a “sensible transcendental” that gives an absolute privilege to neither the sensible nor the transcendental but rather “recognize[s] the ways in which the sexuate, material aspects of our being give pattern and meaning to the world by actively shaping and taking shape within our bodily encounters—our contiguous relations with others.”⁴¹ In her diaphysics of sexual difference, then, sexual difference is neither transcendent(al) nor immanent to the living, material real; rather, *living nature differentiates and relates (with) “itself” thanks to, by means of, or at intervals of sexual difference in the form of “both” being and thinking*. This therefore entails both a complete deconstruction of the meta/physics of technophallogocentrism as well as a rethinking of the real based on sexual difference and our relation to the maternal-material. As such, it offers an alternative to the (supposed)

⁴⁰ For the most sustained elaboration of what she means by transcendence and its difference from the metaphysical tradition (especially Heidegger), see *Sharing the World*.

⁴¹ Rachel Jones, *Irigaray: Towards a Sexuate Philosophy*, 126.

opposition between the Heideggerian *Destruktion* of metaphysics and the critique of the technical-scientific ordering of nature on the one hand, and those other thinkers (Bergson, Whitehead, Deleuze) who were interested in a reformulation of metaphysics based on the breakthroughs of twentieth century science on the other. Within the meta/physics of technophallogocentrism, which is *constitutively rigged against sexual difference*, sexual difference can only come to presence in a “roundabout fashion,” in the form of present-at-hand objects brought forth by the always already neutered *techno-logical* sciences: “through animal ecology, the sexuation of plants, the more or less pathological language of cells, the sex of chromosomes, of our brain, etc.” (SP 193/179). In Irigaray’s diaphysics, on the contrary, sexual difference (as *phusis*) is “itself” a mode of the revealing of Being and beings that would call for entirely new “scientific” approaches. Here, sexual difference is not an *object* of knowledge in itself but rather, to borrow from Isabelle Stengers’s description of Whitehead’s philosophy of the organism, “it is what obliges us to think about the divergence of the questions of the different sciences as a reflection of the ‘living values’ that constitute the order of nature.”⁴²

Indeed, it was Whitehead who famously said, “No science can be more secure than the unconscious metaphysics which tacitly it presupposes....All reasoning apart from some metaphysical reference is vicious.”⁴³ For Irigaray, as we have seen, the meta/physics of technophallogocentrism constitutes a vicious circle of the Same in which the reality of living nature can only be revealed via the neutered forms externally imposed on it by the *tekhne* and *logos* of science. While the nature given to us by the

⁴² Isabelle Stengers, *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts*, trans. Michael Chase (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), 130.

⁴³ Alfred North Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas* (New York: The Free Press, 1933), 154.

sciences is said to be “objective” in its neutrality, Irigaray argues it has always already been molded in the image of the masculine and thus, far from providing us with the most reliable and transparent access to the real, the neutralized scientific method is the tain applied to nature so that when man looks through his instruments he sees his own Imaginary. For Irigaray, this means that science is actually impoverished to the degree that its subjects, objects, and methods of inquiry are assumed to be neuter. Indeed, Irigaray argues that “the non-neutrality of science...can be extrapolated from what is, or is not, being discovered at any given moment in history, and from what science sets, or does not set, as goals for its research” and thus it is sexual difference that could “provoke a re-evaluation [*remise en cause*] of the scientific horizon” (E 118-21/122-5). By way of conclusion, I want to consider one example of this that might elucidate many of the issues raised in this chapter. For the last several decades, physics has been dominated by the so-called Standard Model, a highly intricate theory that works to combine quantum mechanics, particle theory, and relativity to classify the fundamental particles and forces of the universe. The theory has been so experimentally successful—especially with the confirmation of the Higgs (or “Higgs-like”) boson in 2013 after forty years, the involvement of 10,000 scientists, and \$13.5 billion⁴⁴—that it has been called the “theory of almost everything” and its orthodoxy is nearly impossible to challenge in mainstream physics. And yet, this “theory of almost everything” explains under five percent of the material universe as determined by cosmology, with the remaining ninety-five percent being mysterious “dark” matter and energy. As physicist Carlo Rovelli explains:

A striking limitation of the Standard Model has appeared in recent years. Around every galaxy astronomers observe a large cloud of material which reveals its

⁴⁴ See Sean Carroll, *The Particle at the End of the Universe: How the Hunt for the Higgs Boson Leads Us to the Edge of a New World* (New York: Plume, 2013).

existence via the gravitational pull that it exerts upon stars, and by the way it deflects light. But this great cloud, of which we observe the gravitational effects, cannot be seen directly and we do not know what it is made of. Numerous hypotheses have been proposed, none of which seem to work. It's clear that there is *something* there, but we don't know what. Nowadays it is called 'dark matter.' Evidence indicates that it is something *not* described by the Standard Model, otherwise we would see it. Something other than atoms, neutrinos, photons...⁴⁵

Because it emits no light, the "presence" of dark matter can only be inferred based on the way that it warps the matter adjacent to it. As described above, Irigaray has long critiqued the theory of matter in western meta/physics for being structured on a constitutive erasure of the maternal-material matrix that makes the concept of "matter" essentially a projection of the phallic Imaginary. While the understanding of matter in contemporary physics has been considered by scientists and philosophers alike as an almost total break with past conceptions, with the idea of dark matter being a recent discovery, consider Rovelli's description of dark matter above alongside Irigaray's description of Plato's cosmology as presented in the *Timaeus*:

A store of in(de)finite alterity, a multiplicity of not-yet-beings, would exist, and there he will draw the nourishment he needs to erect his sublime form. A dark reserve, still impenetrable to an intelligent eye. Improper matter [*matière inconvenante*] that cannot be made to fit any proper sense, which one can continue to speculate on provided one calculates the proportions involved according to an *other same*, or the *same model*. Otherwise there is a risk of becoming in(de)finitely big or small. Deformed, formless. Measureless. For that other is lacking a principle and moves without any foundation. It is inconstant and indeed inconsistent by nature. And though it is possible to submit it to a few laws, to subject it to a few propositions, it is quite essential not to ask it to fix its own rules or hope it can be resolved into movements, sizes, speeds, numbers...that have been established definitively (S 419/335).

Might dark matter in contemporary physics, then, be yet another displacement of the maternal-feminine in western metaphysics? That is to say, the necessary yet invisible

⁴⁵ Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*, trans. Simon Carnell and Erica Segre (New York: Riverhead, 2016), 35-6.

background that both contains the visible and enables it to stand out, the store of indefinite alterity and not-yet-beings? While a few physicists (mostly on the “fringes”) have suggested that the existence of dark matter calls for a major reconsideration of the laws of nature, including the theory of gravitation, the general consensus is that “the Standard Model remains the best that we have when speaking today about the world of things...apart from dark matter...it describes well every aspect of the perceived world” (all five percent that that is).⁴⁶

Another way to look at this, however, is that the existence of something like what the physicists now call dark matter has been a foundational exclusion in the thinking of materiality throughout the history of the meta/physics of phallogocentrism and that to overcome this would require another thinking of nature beyond *techno-logical* representation and ordering, indeed a *sexuate* thinking of material nature. For this we could take a cue from the Kogi, an indigenous people who live in the mountains of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta near the Caribbean coast in north Colombia. The Kogi are descendants of the Tairona cultures who had already moved from the coast into the mountains by the time of Spanish invasion and therefore escaped the total decimation that was the fate of so many other indigenous peoples, making them one of the most intact pre-Columbian cultures.⁴⁷ Although the Kogi live in accordance with their ancient practices (including choosing not to adopt writing or learning Spanish) and do not welcome outsiders, in the late 1980s they contacted BBC filmmaker Alan Ereira telling him they have a message for the western world, which they refer to as the “Little

⁴⁶ Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons*, 36.

⁴⁷ The other three descendants of the Tairona (who also live in the Santa Marta) are the Arhuaco, Kankuamo, and Wiwa.

Brother.” This message, offered at the same time that scientific hypotheses about climate change first began to be taken seriously in the global north, warned of impending ecological catastrophe, increasing geopolitical unrest, and serious health crises. According to them, this is happening because techno-industrial development, which they call the “death project,” has forgotten our common Mother and thus mutilates the Earth without understanding its essential interconnection. Given that we obviously did not heed their message and their predictions came true, they reached out to Ereira again to give their “final warning” in the documentary *Alúna* (2012). Because there is so little time left, in this film, unlike the first, they focus on actually teaching their cosmology and scientific practices so that we can better grasp their ecological message.

The Kogi cosmology is extremely complex and can be presented in both “philosophical-scientific” and “mythological-religious” forms, “both” of which are centered on the Great Mother. In her meta/physical form, the Mother is called *alúna*, which is the fundamental and incorporeal life-force of the universe, generative energy, concentrated thought, the intelligence of Being:

Alúna contains everything which is past and everything that may become. *Alúna* is intelligence; it is the concentrated thought and memory which forms a bridge between the human ‘spirit’ and the universe, but it also the hidden world of forces which govern the world’s fertility. *Alúna* makes possible growth, birth, and sexuality; it is the ‘spiritual’ energy that makes things happen. If it did not, the world would be sterile. It would never have begun. *Alúna* was and is the Mother.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Alan Ereira, *The Elder Brothers’ Warning* (Tairona Heritage Trust, 2008), 110-1. Ereira’s text is written in collaboration with Ramòn Gil, who as one of the few Kogi fluent in Spanish acts as a sort of spokesman. See also, “The Law of Sé: Linking the Spiritual and the Material,” which is Gil’s presentation of the Kogi cosmology translated by Ereira with an exegesis that situates it in relation to western concepts (in Barbara Hoffman ed., *Art and Cultural Heritage: Law, Policy, and Practice* [Cambridge University Press, 2006], 21-7). Ereira notes that although the Kogi have never been converted to Catholicism (it is in no way a “syncretic religion”), Colombian Spanish itself carries its own Catholic “baggage” and that Gil’s use of certain words like “spiritual” should be understood with this in mind.

By dividing herself between memory and possibility, the Mother ceaselessly gives birth to material reality, which exists only in the present, teetering on the threshold of the immaterial past and future in a constant process of creative (re)generation.⁴⁹ Unlike in western cosmology, ancient and modern alike, the origin was not an unruly and undifferentiated chaos that would need to be ordered by a God, a demiurge, a *logos*, or a rational subject who would cut us off from mother-nature. The Mother always was and, as in pregnancy, even before giving birth there is morphological differentiation within her. Based on this, the Kogi view the entire *cosmos* as living; indeed, they refer to the *cosmos* as the “fabric of life” (*alúna zakwa*) which is woven by the Mother on a cosmic loom using the thread of *alúna*. *Alúna* is thus the incorporeal tissue out of which the material flesh is made. This cosmic fabric, moreover, is sexuate: the warp threads are feminine (*Seynekun*), giving the fabric its structure, form, and strength, while the weft threads are masculine (*Serawka*) which give the fabric its pattern, appearance, and texture. In this fabric, every “point” in the *cosmos*, every pick in the weave, is a meeting between masculine and feminine and thus every being has a “mother” and a “father.”⁵⁰

For the Kogi, this macrocosmic ordering principle also structures microcosm, for every

⁴⁹ As they describe it, in order to give birth to the physical present, the mother split the past (“memory”) and the future (“possibility”), which are not physical and are not split in the non-physical realm (*Sé*). The physical present is thus situated in a sort of vaginal opening between the past and the future which remain in continuous contact like lips.

⁵⁰ Indeed, even their technical artefacts are sexuate: “The idea of the balance between the masculine and the feminine runs through the whole of Kogi life, not just their sexual mores. Thus you cannot build a bridge, a hut, a loom, or construct a path that winds through a village without the masculine/feminine principle being explicitly represented in some way” (“Women in Kogi Society,” accessed February 7, 2017, http://tairona.myzen.co.uk/index.php/culture/women_in_kogi_society). As in Irigaray, they see the technology of the western world as part of the death project because it is constructed without involving the generative principle of sexual difference and is therefore detached from life and meaningless: “The Kogi perceive life in many things which are in our understanding inanimate; any object which has meaning and purpose in the world...must be sustained by a balance of sexual forces, by its own Mother and Father” (*Elder Brothers’ Warning*, 84).

element of social life including language is “constructed out of the partnership of masculine and feminine, the dynamic process of weaving on the loom of life.”⁵¹

Again, however, the Kogis’ cosmology is not only mythological, and is not at all some form of “irrational superstition.” For them, on the contrary, material reality is underpinned by a complex yet ordered immaterial axiomatic infrastructure, *Sé*, which includes everything that exists (but much more than *materially* exists) and is bound to material reality by the thread of *alúna*. *Sé* is not a transcendent “realm,” but the *incorporeal sense and structure of Being*. Because *alúna* is both concentrated thought and life-force, and because material life and consciousness are therefore a sort of dilated *alúna*, humans can access *Sé* through concentrated thought.⁵² This, as one might guess, is no small feat and, indeed, can generally only be done by the Mamas, who are the Kogi’s scientists, philosophers, physicians, lawyers, and spiritual leaders—i.e., the keepers of the “Law of *Sé*”. The Mamas, both men and women, are selected in infancy and spend nine to eighteen years (representing birth cycles) in darkness (often in caves) in order to learn a completely different sensory relation to the material world. Through concentrated thought, the Mamas are able to intuit the axiomatic structure of *Sé*, and because *Sé* is

⁵¹ Ereira, *Elder Brothers’ Warning*, 92. Because of the fundamentality of sexual difference to their culture, Ereira asked Gil about homosexuality to which he responded that although it is uncommon (and that he had never tried it), it is not considered unnatural and that there are even cases of homosexual marriage, including a story of two women who lived together as wives who were very insistent that sex between women is “far superior” (see *Elder Brothers’ Warning*, 131-3).

⁵² As Gil describes it, “The original laws, the fundamental principles, are in *Sé*....*Sé* is not a person, not a thing. It is the sum of things. *Sé* is complex... There are many different forms of existence; one is the material world that arose from *Sé* but there is much more that exists only in spirit... [*Sé*] has no corporeal being—no body, no organs.” The four axioms or principles of *Sé* (also referred to by Gil as “parents”) are: the concept of order, the concept of materiality, the concept of time (memory, present, and possibility), and the concept of sexual difference. Ereira notes that the word “spirit” is misleading and that *Sé* could also be called “cosmic intelligence” (“The Law of *Sé*,” 21-4). To put this in the language of pre-Socratic thought, *Sé* is similar to *Nous* (cosmic mind) which has a rational structure (*logos*) according to which physical beings are brought forth by *alúna*, which is like *phusis* (force of generation); however *alúna* is also *psyche* (life-breath-mind) which binds all physical beings to the rationally structured cosmic mind.

neither in “space” nor “time,” they are able to comprehend spatio-temporal and causal connections that are not visible or formulizable to us in the space-time of physical reality. For them, the material world is built on the solid foundations of *Sé*, to which all thinking and living is bound by a dilated form of *alúna*; thus, the activity of the Mamas is closer to mathematics than mysticism in that it is a process of arriving at a proper formula that makes the underlying *sense* of Being *sensible*.⁵³ This sense, however, is not located in a supersensible or transcendent beyond, but is present in all physical reality through concentrated empirical perception: listening to the wind, looking at water, touching a stone. Because the material world is an interconnected whole of nearly infinite complexity, but is embedded in a rational structure, the Kogi see it as absolutely mandatory—not to mention completely logical—that any thinking, and certainly any physical intervention, involve the incorporeal intelligence of the *cosmos* as a “partner”⁵⁴

In their view, then, while the science of the Younger Brother proclaims itself as the pinnacle of rational thinking, it is deeply limited and illogical because in attaining the stance of exteriority by which it surveys the world (especially through technological apparatuses), it has actually severed its direct thread to the sense of the *cosmos* and can therefore only infer this structure through the observation and calculation of visible effects within isolated regions of the physical world.⁵⁵ They have recognized, however,

⁵³ Ereira calls this activity “divination,” but distinguishes it from both ancestor engagement (although this can be part of it) and receiving messages from the gods (although technically it is a form of intense communication with the Mother): “To put a question is an act in *alúna*, an act of pure thought, and if it is properly put then its answer is instantaneously present, here in the physical world as well. Divination is the mental process of properly shaping a question, and the highly formal process of reading the answer” (*Elder Brothers’ Warning*, 62).

⁵⁴ Gil, “The Law of *Sé*,” 23.

⁵⁵ Ereira writes that his occasional attempts to explain events in the news, such as debates about nuclear weapons, during his stays with the Kogi “were regarded as baffling and irrelevant. What difference does it make if we do not destroy the world in one way, when we are about to destroy it in another?” (178). Given the incredibly brief history of western technological science in comparison to their knowledge, they see our

that if their message is to be heeded, Younger Brother will need proof of what they are saying and thus they have recently met with a number of professional scientists, including astrophysicists, ecologists, marine biologists, and zoologists who have been stunned by their “cutting-edge” knowledge. For instance, they have demonstrated systematic understanding of some of the most complex and recent areas of western scientific research: regions of deep space impossible to observe without the most sophisticated telescopic instruments, the relativity of time and space, nonlocality, systems ecology, symbiogenesis, deep time, climate change, and, indeed, “dark matter.” In their 2012 film, for instance, the Mamas demonstrate much of this by traveling to England with Ereira in order to purchase 400 kilometers of gold thread that they then bring back to Colombia and unroll, step by step, in order to visibly link a series of special sites between the coast and the mountains. These sites, called *esuamas*, are nodes where the connection between the material world and *Sé* is particularly strong, like knots in the cosmic fabric. The ecologists are stunned when the Kogi reveal immediate interactions between sites that seem to have no local connection and demonstrate that waste generated by industrial plants on the coast is present in the source of the rivers at the top of the mountains. This has been profound enough that the Colombian government has designated this zone a protected site (named “*la Linea Negra*,” which is also the name of the line that often appears on the abdomen of pregnant women) and has—along with Spain, ironically—sought their council on new environmental initiatives and practices.

extreme pride in our science as short-sighted: “We are, to them, like people who have jumped off of a mountain and, falling fast, are proclaiming our ability to fly” (64). When speaking to the professional scientists in the film, the Mamas often seem extremely frustrated by the slow pace of our realizations, looking baffled when the scientists tell them about tentative research into and new “discoveries” of things they already know (esp. climate change and systems ecology). They think that our scientific burden of proof combined with our unwillingness to take any other knowledge practices seriously is endangering the entire planet.

The Kogi cosmology, like Irigaray's diaphysics thus raises profound questions about possible topologies of life, nature, and sexual difference beyond the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism. Indeed, in light of the Kogi, Irigaray's claim that "all traditions that remain faithful to the cosmic are sexuate and take account of natural powers in sexuate terms" seems far less superstitious or romantic than it might initially appear. What does the fact that western philosophy and science began with a ds-sexuation of the *cosmos* say about the fact that not only might this tradition turn out to understand the *least* about it, but is also certainly the most destructive of it? Is the fact that all of the Kogi's practices, including their science, are based on a cultivated relationship with the Mother and that they "have a much wider repertoire of female sexual symbols" whereas the western tradition has turned the maternal-feminine into the vacuum that nature abhors and that must be barred from all symbolic expression related to the fact that ninety-five percent of their *cosmos* is not dark, mysterious matter-energy that they cannot understand? Can many of science's failures, as well as its deleterious effects, be interpreted as symptomatic of this forgetting of *her*? Certainly, the Kogi attribute planetary catastrophe to the Younger Brother's "unwillingness or inability to recompense the Mother for what She has given." For them, this "inability to work *with* the Mother" is what "continues to give force to the death project."⁵⁶ And in her address to women after the Chernobyl disaster, Irigaray explicitly ties both micro- and macrocosmic disequilibrium to the death wish that seems to drive the subject of knowledge within technophallogocentrism:

The scientific subject today is enormously interested in acceleration that goes beyond our human powers, in weightlessness, in crossing through natural time

⁵⁶ Julia Suárez-Krabbe, *Race, Rights, and Rebels: Alternatives to Human Rights and Development from the Global South* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 5.

and space, in overcoming cosmic rhythms and their regulation, but also in disintegration, fission, explosion, catastrophes, etc. This reality can be confirmed within both the natural and the human sciences....Where are we to find our subjective status in all these disintegrations, these explosions, these splits or multiplicities, these losses of bodily identity? Obviously, men are doing battle here with the absolute that they have created....[thus] they now suggest to us as methods: ‘chance,’ ‘accident,’ ‘multiplicity,’ ‘pluralism,’ ‘ruptures,’ ‘leaps,’...Are we not faced here with an explosion or discharge of theoretical models that are too saturated or too entropic and that therefore pose a considerable threat to human bodies and minds?...With their microscopes or macroscopes in hand, researchers forget their bodies, forget life. This was already true with Plato, but it is a far greater threat to us now. And it is no laughing matter...The epistemology of the sciences is far from corresponding to the level of technical expansion and its effects (SP 219-21/204-6).

Heidegger, Irigaray, and the Kogi—each in their own way, no doubt—thus pose serious and direct challenges to western science regarding its complicity in the death project of western Man, challenges that should especially not be ignored by feminist theorists working to rethink the relationship between the humanities and sciences. Although, unlike Heidegger, the most important resonance between Irigaray’s philosophy and the Kogi cosmology is their *affirmation of life* against the cosmic Being-toward-death of western meta/physics.

To be sure, Heidegger’s “preparatory thinking” was an indispensable contribution to the opening of a path beyond the *Ge-Stell* of modern technological-scientific imperialism; however, his own forgetting of life meant that “thinking,” for him, could never leave the shelter of the House of Language. With Irigaray and the Kogi, on the other hand, the walls of the (t)autological circle of Being and thinking give way to a process of living in which perception and thinking are modes of *participation* in the life of the *cosmos* rather than the logical re-presentation, calculation, and ordering of a mechanical universe: a reciprocal (yet asymmetrical) partnership with the Mother as the Kogi describe it, or a *sym-pathos* or *com-passion* rather than an overcoming of mother-

matter as Irigaray puts it. For them, to think beyond the meta/physics of technophallogocentrism—and therefore to *think* at all—demands a complete sensory and energetic reconfiguration, a “different articulation of the speaking animal with nature, with matter, and with the body” (SNN 229). This is precisely why the practice of breathing is so central to Irigaray’s later works. As with the Kogi for whom thinking and living are dilated forms of the generative cosmic energy *alúna*, and as with the Milesians for whom the life-force of *psyche* (prior to any separation of thinking from living) is a contracted form of the cosmic breath *pneuma*, Irigaray sees the forgotten air as that which might enable “we hyperboreans” to return to the breath and life that meta/physics enframined in the airless spaces of the *logos*. For Irigaray, this unthought elementality is the saving power where “mother nature prevails” over all the powers of the subject because breathing, as she puts it, is where “life is cultivated by life itself.” To recall the air, according to Irigaray is therefore to recall something even more fundamental than Being, for “Being” is already a forgetting of breathing: “The forgetting of Being: the Being of forgetting. Fundamental tautology. To be: to forget, to forget: to be. To live—to *breathe*: to become—to (be) alter(ed). An appearing that is always different within an air that continuously offers itself as other. And at a tempo of transformation that is too quick for reason, consciousness, and for any means man can muster” (OA 145/164). For Irigaray, it is the free air of nature and not, as Heidegger said, the self-encircled clearing of the Saying that is the “self-vibrating realm” in which humanity and Being can “achieve their active nature by losing those qualities with which metaphysics has endowed them” (GA11 46/37). By shattering the vault of the *speculum mundi* that turns the *cosmos* into the reflection of man, by returning to living nature and learning how to live together in

relation and difference through the cultivation of one's own life as part of the "relational weaving" of the world, the Being of man no longer needs to be *projected* and *destined* toward death. "To be sure," Irigaray writes, within this new constellation of Being, "we will find ourselves then without parental guardianship and without the demiurgic activity of world builders. We will be exposed before the question of Being, of our Being and that of the cosmos. More abandoned than ever to a destiny that we must still discover and deploy" (FFA 315). A destiny that just might, *perhaps*, be a chance for life.

FOUR

AN ONTOGENESIS OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE

SEXUATION AND INDIVIDUATION BEYOND THE HYLEMORPHIC SCHEMA

“Sexuation is not only an empirical and secondary thing with regard to our being; it is what brings to it a specific morphology and individuation.”

– LUCE IRIGARAY, *Through Vegetal Being*

“Therefore, a study of individuation can lead to a reform of fundamental philosophical notions because it is possible to consider individuation as that which must be known first about Being...If it were true that logic provided statements about Being only after individuation, a theory of Being anterior to all logic must be instituted. This theory could serve as the foundation for logic because nothing proves in advance that Being is individuated in only one possible way. If multiple types of individuation were to exist, then multiple logics would also have to exist, each corresponding to a definite type of individuation. The classification of ontogeneses would permit us to pluralize logic with a valid foundation for plurality.”

– GILBERT SIMONDON, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information*

In the previous chapters, I have argued for an understanding of sexual difference as ontological difference, interpreting Irigaray's philosophy as a reformulation of the question of Being. I have argued that Irigaray develops this ontology by way of a rethinking of nature beyond the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism. In a critical engagement with Heidegger that uncovers Heidegger's own inability to adequately grapple with the relationship between Being and living, Irigaray is able to advance Heidegger's project of “getting over” metaphysics beyond his own impasses. By demonstrating that what this metaphysics forgot was not Being but rather vital, sexuate materiality, Irigaray develops a *diaphysics* “grounded” in life and sexual difference. By rethinking nature on the basis of life and sexual difference, Irigaray moves beyond both a reductive technical-scientific materialism and logocentrism, both of which are instantiations of a phallogocentrism that annihilates *her* (mother-matter-nature-woman). Central to Irigaray's diaphysics of sexual difference is a notion of the “cultivation of nature,” which finds a mediation between metaphysics of immanence (which privileges

complete continuity with nature) and transcendence (which postulates a radical rupture with nature). Both of these problematics, according to Irigaray, ultimately result from a failure to work out the relation with the maternal body, either seeking to appropriate its material generativity without recompense or by erecting a bar against it as an undifferentiated real against which the symbolic order is constructed. Against this, Irigaray's diaphysics is a placental model that emphasizes both individuation and relation, both a continuity and discontinuity with nature, the maternal body, and the sexuate other(s). Here, instead of culture being constructed as a separate plane existing parallel to nature in which all difference and relation are techno-logical fabrications, life is *cultivated* as it is given by nature into a shareable world.

In this chapter, I will develop this further by situating Irigaray's thought in relation to the original philosophy of individuation developed by Gilbert Simondon. There are a number of strong points of resonance between these two thinkers that are extremely important in rethinking ontology on the basis of life and sexual difference. Like Irigaray, Simondon's remarkable work offers an exhaustive post-Heideggerian reading of western metaphysics that seeks to rethink Being as such as more-than-one, challenging the "ontological privilege" afforded to the constituted individual throughout the history of philosophy. In so doing, he develops a thinking of individuation as a process of both differentiation and relation that greatly augments Irigaray's philosophy of sexualization. Indeed, he, too, seeks to move beyond the hegemony of the technical paradigm of hylemorphism that structures the thinking of Being in the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism. Such a paradigm is, for Simondon as for Irigaray, especially problematic when seeking to think life. In what follows, I will begin by outlining the

features of the hylemorphic schema, particularly as it pertains to the question of sexual difference, as well as outlining both Irigaray's and Simondon's critiques of it. As discussed in the previous chapter, central to Irigaray's rethinking of nature is replacing the form/matter dichotomy of hylemorphism with an understanding of nature as a process of morphogenesis—a rethinking that shares much with Simondon's rethinking of ontology as “ontogenesis” and his rethinking of form as “information.” Thus, I will move from their respective critiques of hylemorphism to outline Simondon's philosophy of ontogenesis or individuation in more detail. From here, I will develop a theory of sexuation as a process of individuation that runs from what Simondon calls the “pre-individual” to the “trans-individual.” I do so both by detailing Simondon's own brief remarks on sexuation, as well as drawing on and linking them with Irigaray's recent writings on sexuate individuation. I argue here that Simondon's more general theory of individuation and Irigaray's extensive philosophy of sexual difference help to elucidate the other's thinking of sexuation. Such a thinking of sexuate individuation differs substantially from most Euro-American feminist theorizing about sex and gender, which generally focuses on the constituted individual rather than *processes of individuation* (as both Irigaray and Simondon do). Thus, finally, I conclude by arguing that if sexuation runs from the pre-individual to the trans-individual by way of individuation then sexual difference must be thought both before and beyond the level of the individual. This means, I suggest, that sexual difference must be understood in its virtual as well as its actualized dimensions and that not only is sexuation an essential mode of becoming of living individuals but also that sexual difference “itself” is becoming, meaning that

Irigaray's ontology of sexual difference must be thought on the basis of *ontogenesis*, as becoming rather than as Being.

Hylemorphism and Sexual Difference

The hylemorphic schema was first articulated by Aristotle, in whose metaphysics it plays a central role. With the Pre-Socratics, there were no explicit concepts of matter and form and thus no distinction between them.¹ Some of these thinkers, such as the Milesians, Heraclitus, and Empedocles, understood the *cosmos* in terms of dynamic operations of basic elements and forces, while others such as Parmenides and the Pythagoreans, understood it in terms of timeless structure. Leucippus and Democritus had attempted to combine these two understandings in the doctrine of atomism, which postulated that the *cosmos* is composed of timeless, indivisible structures (*atomos*) in constant motion that form assemblies through chance encounters. The concept of *form*, of course, first becomes central in the philosophy of Plato, although he too had no concept of "matter" as such. In the *Timaeus*, however, he famously writes of the "receptacle" (*hypodochē*) or "space" (*khora*) upon which the forms (*eidos*) are imposed by the Demiurge. For Plato, the *hypodochē* is "itself" formless and without qualities and therefore cannot be identified with any of the defined elements, as the pre-Socratics did, because it underlies and subsists throughout their transformations.² As is well known, Plato theorizes this process in specifically sexual terms, comparing the source of the forms to the father and the *hypodochē* to the mother: "for the time being we should think of there being three kinds:

¹ This history is derived, in part, from Simondon's "Histoire de la notion d'individu" (ILFI 357-87).

² *Timaeus* 51a. Plato uses a number of words derived from the verb *dechomai* ("to receive") in order to describe the receptacle, including the simple participle "receiver" (*dechomenon*). *Hypodochē* would literally mean "the underlying receptacle."

the created world, the receptacle of creation, and the source, in whose likeness the created world is born. And it would not be out of place to compare the receptacle to a mother, the source to a father, and what they create between them to a child.”³ The *hypodochē* is a notoriously ambiguous and complex part of Plato’s cosmology, not the least because it seems to operate as both what we would call “space” and “matter.”

It is precisely in response to these problems that Aristotle develops the hylemorphic schema in his *Physics*. On the basis of his own distinction, he critiques all previous philosophers for seeking to explain nature in either exclusively material or exclusively formal terms. Aristotle, on the contrary, argues that all physical beings are composites of matter (*hyle*) and form (*morphe*). In this, Aristotle is not only the first to articulate the form-matter distinction; he in fact introduces the very concept of matter by appropriating the word *hyle*, which meant “forest” and, derivatively, “wood” or “timber” as a building material. By analogy, Aristotle uses this as a general term for that out of which something is made: the wood (*hyle*) out of which a bed is made is analogous to the clay out of which a brick is made. At some points, Aristotle claims that *hyle* is always “relative,” that is, “for different forms there is different matter,” which would seem to preclude the idea of a general material substrate.⁴ Yet, at others, he defines it as a “primary substratum [*proton hypokeimenon*],” suggesting that “as the bronze is to the statue, the wood to the bed, or the matter [*hyle*] and the formless [*amorphon*] before receiving form to any thing which has form, so is the underlying nature [*hypokeimenon phusis*] to substance [*ousia*], i.e., the ‘this’ or the existent [*on*]”⁵ Indeed, in Book IV, he

³ *Timaeus* 50d.

⁴ *Physics* II.2, 194b8.

⁵ *Physics* I.7, 191a10-12.

interprets Plato's *hypodochē* as *hyle*, that is, as a material substratum that persists through changes in form, although he critiques Plato's concept for conflating "matter" and "space" (*khora*), which Aristotle separates. Much like Plato's *eidos*, form, for Aristotle, is the intelligible shape or structure of a being.⁶ Crucially, Aristotle maps the *hyle/morphe* distinction onto another key distinction in his metaphysical system: that of potentiality (*dynamis*) and actuality (*entelechia*). For Aristotle, *hyle* is the potentiality of a being, while *morphe* is its actualization. Due to his commitment to the law of the excluded middle, however, Aristotle does not conceptualize this as a process of becoming from potentiality to actuality, nor is potentiality understood as anything positive. Instead, matter is associated with a "privation" or "lack" (*steresis*) that is the *opposite* of form and all "coming-to-be" (*gignomai*) is the "destruction" of this privation by form. Because form and privation are opposed, they contradict one another, which leads to a complicated schema in which matter in its potentiality "contains" privation but "desires" form or actuality. Matter is thus the substratum (*hypokeimenon*) that underlies the conversion from privation to form, potentiality to actuality, lack to perfection. And when Aristotle seeks to describe this passage, like Plato's *hypodochē* and *khora*, he does so by way of a sexuate analogy:

The form cannot desire itself, for it is not defective; nor can the privation desire it for contraries are mutually destructive. The truth is that what desires the form is matter, as the female desires the male and the ugly the beautiful... The matter comes to be and ceases to be in one sense, while in another it does not. As that which contains privation, it ceases to be in its own nature; for what ceases to be—the privation—is contained within it. But as potentiality it does not cease to be in

⁶ While his doctrine of the matter-form relation has been named hylemorphism, he often relates *hyle* to *eidos* rather than *morphe*. *Morphe* seems to name the specific way that matter is formed or shaped, while *eidos* is the intelligibility or appearance of the formed matter. While he does not see the *eidos* as transcendent, as Plato does, *eidos* is directly related to *logos* and has a higher place in his metaphysics. Thus, while there cannot be *morphe* without *hyle*, there can be *eidos* without *hyle*, such as the deity (*theos*) which is pure form without matter. (see Francis Peters, *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon* [New York: New York University Press, 1967]).

its own nature, but is necessarily outside the sphere of becoming and ceasing to be.⁷

The hylemorphic schema therefore bequeaths to philosophy a highly fraught and hierarchical dualist metaphysics in which matter is not only in some sense opposed to form but is also, as Judith Butler puts it, “a site at which a certain drama of sexual difference plays itself out.”⁸

It is precisely because of this drama that a reconceptualization of the form-matter relation is at the center of Irigaray’s philosophy of sexual difference. For her, hylemorphism is essential to the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism. In *Ethique de la différence sexuelle*, she therefore insists that the “transition to a new epoch...assumes and entails an evolution or transformation of forms, of the *form-matter* relations, and of the interval *between*” (E 15/7). As early as her essay on Aristotle in *Speculum* (“Comment concevoir une fille?” from 1974), Irigaray read his articulations of the hylemorphic schema in the *Physics* intertextually with his biological writings (especially *The Generation of Animals*). Across these texts, she discerns a clear association of masculinity and form: Aristotle’s argument that it is the father who contributes the form and actuality to the mother’s matter during reproduction is a direct correlate of his argument that matter seeks form like the female seeks the male and that it is the form alone that makes something what it is. The hylemorphic schema is therefore a *phallomorphic* schema in which the masculine imposes form on woman-matter. The status of the feminine, however, is much more ambiguous than merely the recipient of

⁷ *Physics* I.9, 192a20-30. Emma Bianchi develops an “aleatory feminism” through a feminist reading (partly inspired by Irigaray) of ambiguous status of the feminine in Aristotle’s physics in *The Feminine Symptom*.

⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 22.

form (as in Plato); indeed, Irigaray demonstrates that women is sometimes associated with *matter* (*hyle*) or potentiality (*dynamis*) and sometimes with *privation* (S 206/165). In this, however, woman is paradoxically both being (as matter) and non-being (as privation), which entails a violation of the logical laws on which the whole Aristotelian system rests.⁹ For Irigaray, woman thus confounds the hylemorphic schema, calling the law of the excluded middle into question. In the *Speculum* essay, then, she suggests that perhaps woman-matter must be thought somewhere *between* privation and form, potentiality and actuality. It is to this in-between that Irigaray returns in her later essay on Aristotle, “Le lieu, l’intervalle” (1982) in *Ethique*. There, she moves from her deconstruction of hylemorphism to an affirmative transvaluation of the interval (*intervalle*) as the generative condition of both matter and form and of the passage from potentiality to actuality, the space-time of difference and relation.¹⁰ The interval, as Irigaray describes it, “is located in the attractions, tensions, and acts between *form* and *matter*, but also in the *remainder* [*reste*] that subsists after each creation or work, *between* what is already identified and what has yet to be identified, etc.” (E 16/8). Thus if in *Speculum*, Irigaray sought to overturn the form-matter hierarchy and show that phallic form is in fact dependent on the generativity of mother-woman-matter, she does not stop at the identification of matter with the maternal-feminine nor with the valorization of

⁹ As Rebecca Hill explains: “By functioning as potential being in one case and as a lack in being in the other, woman violates Aristotle’s most privileged principle, the law of non-contradiction. Woman is both privation and potentiality... This paradoxical entanglement is extraordinarily troubling for the hierarchical figuration of matter and form in Aristotle. It betrays the inextricability of privation and matter, and this means that form’s proclaimed annihilation of the lack in being is by no means secure. The not-being of woman-*steresis* threatens to engulf the actuality (*entelechia*) of form precisely at the moment when form is supposed to act on woman-*hyle* and create *physis*” (*The Interval*, 84).

¹⁰ As Hill shows in her book, Irigaray’s concept of the interval is a transvaluation of “privation” (*steresis*) as well as the “interval” (*diastema*) that Aristotle rejects in his topology in *Physics* IV, in terms of generativity rather than lack.

matter over form. Rather, in her later writing on the interval, she seeks to rethink sexual difference beyond and before the distinction between matter and form. For Irigaray, the interval *intervenes* in the hylemorphic schema so that instead of one sex being the matter for the formation of the other, each sex is constituted by its own matter and form by the generativity of the interval. Thus, while the hylemorphic schema has *always* been a sexuate schema, it has been constituted by sexual *indifference* that operates on a binary logic of A/not-A (i.e., the masculine and not-masculine) structured by the law of the excluded middle. By centralizing the interval, Irigaray rethinks the form-matter relation in sexuate terms that enable *difference* and *relation* rather than symmetry and appropriation/exclusion.

For Aristotle, the hylemorphic schema is intended as a theorization of nature (*phusis*), hence its belonging to the *Physics*. And yet, while Book II opens with an attempt to distinguish between “natural” (*phusei*) and “technical” beings, it is by constant analogy to technical beings that Aristotle formulates the hylemorphic schema. For Irigaray, this is not an accident, but rather results from the fact that hylemorphism is an essentially sexuate (specifically phallic) understanding of Being. “The Being of Western man,” she writes, “is individuated—even in philosophy and religion—on the basis of a technical knowledge that privileges exteriority. This reality is clearly found in our technical epoch” (ED 136/76). According to Irigaray, this privilege of the technical schema is specifically related to man’s fraught relationship to the maternal function: “he will never engender in himself and must fabricate things outside of himself in order to differentiate himself from the mother; he must manufacture externally, while she engenders internally” (ED 136/76). It is this technical understanding of nature that leads

to the law of the excluded middle that obscures any internal relation *between* matter and form and instead conceives of two extremes that are only externally related. As many commentators on Aristotle have noted, this leads to a fundamental ambiguity with respect to the “principle of individuation” in his understanding of nature because it must be either form *or* matter that both makes something what it is and differentiates itself from other things. Irigaray associates these two extremes with the figures of Dionysus (matter without form) and Apollo (form without matter) and refers to them as “two individuations out of touch” (PCT 132). For Irigaray, on the contrary, the key question is what transpires in the relation *between* matter and form. The fact that the hylemorphic schema cannot think this in-between is, for her, symptomatic of the fact that it seeks to think nature in *technical* rather than *vital* terms. To overcome this, Irigaray returns to the forest from which Aristotle’s wood (*hyle*) came in order to develop a thinking of materiality that sees the tree as living rather than as raw material for technical fabrication:

It is possible [in the forest] to avoid the distinction between matter and form—*hyle* and *morphe*—which is at the root of our cultural tradition. The woods are an environment where matter produces its own forms without being reduced to a material to which we, as humans, have to give forms. The woods show us what being living consists of. Beyond the fact that they provide us without the material elements we need to survive and grow as living beings, the woods teach us that, as long as it remains alive, matter—*hyle*—produces its own form(s)—*morphe*. When we pretend we are those in charge of giving form(s) to matter, we... substitute a demiurge power for the task of producing our own forms as living (VB 72).

This non-technical thinking of materiality is what Irigaray develops in her theory of nature as morphogenesis, as detailed in the previous chapter, in which living matter always generates its own forms. Such a concept of morphogenic materiality is precisely what the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism cannot think because it violates the

foundational laws of that metaphysics by grasping becoming from the excluded middle.

Irigaray's critique of the hylemorphic schema, then, has three "stages":

- (1) A deconstruction of the phallic logic of the form-matter distinction that overturns the hierarchical privileging of form to emphasize the constitutive role played by woman-matter and demonstrating that woman's paradoxical situation in this topology alludes to an excluded middle between form and matter (*Speculum*);
- (2) The elaboration of a theory of that excluded middle as the generative interval that is the condition of both form and matter in which sexual difference cannot be mapped onto the form-matter distinction but rather must be situated beyond and between it such that the sexes each have their own form and matter (*Ethique de la difference sexuelle*);
- (3) The development of a full philosophy of nature that situates the interval in nature itself and understands "materiality" as a process of morphogenesis (of which sexuation is an inextricable dimension), making difference and relation essential rather than accidental characteristics or external events of nature (*J'aime à toi, Être Deux, Through Vegetal Being*, and many recent essays).

Beyond Hylemorphism: Gilbert Simondon's Philosophy of Individuation

In his major treatise on individuation, *L'individuation à la lumière des notions de forme et d'information* (1958), Simondon begins with a strong critique of the hylemorphic schema.¹¹ Simondon begins here precisely because this schema has, in one way or

¹¹ The resonances between Irigaray's and Simondon's work are purely coincidental. Although he was less than a decade older than her, Simondon's two major texts were written nearly two decades before Irigaray's

another, structured western metaphysics since Aristotle (if not before).¹² According to Simondon, hylemorphism began with the emergence of artisanal technologies in ancient Greece and was subsequently abstracted into a general metaphysical principle.¹³ One of Simondon's first gestures, here, is to demonstrate that, as a philosophical schema, hylemorphism fails to adequately grasp even the *technical* operation from which it is derived. Much like Irigaray, Simondon also points out that in Aristotle's paradigmatic example, the wood already has its own form: cellular limits, topological singularities, historical interactions with the wind, precipitation, animals, etc. All of these "historical singularities" or "haecceities" are what Simondon calls "information" that guide and limit any subsequent technical taking-form. Thus, the mold or the tool does not *impose form* on formless matter; rather, the informing gesture of the technical operation meets the information carried by the matter in order to *modulate* it, giving it a new morphological topology. This meeting is an exchange between two carriers of energetic potentials that reaches a provisional stabilization that Simondon calls "internal resonance." In other words, it is the establishment of "communication" between two orders of information that previously had no communication. All of this takes place in the *interval* between the form and matter of the hylemorphic schema, which grasps only the most two extreme terms of a dynamic "operatory chain" (ILFI 36-59). Thus, it is neither in the form nor the matter, but in this "obscure middle zone" where the principle of individuation can be found. For Simondon, this misunderstanding of the technical operation that structures the

first book. When I asked Irigaray if she was familiar with Simondon's work, due to what I perceived as some strong points of connection, she knew only vaguely of his work on technology.

¹² In "Histoire de la notion d'individu," Simondon suggests that a primitive version of the matter/form distinction is present in Anaxagoras and, as mentioned above, Aristotle's own development of the schema was an attempt to systematize all previous thinking of *phusis*, from Thales to Plato.

¹³ Simondon associates hylemorphism specifically with artisanal technics (ceramics, carpentry) because, he suggests, agriculture, pastoral techniques, and metallurgy still lack a concept of "pure matter" (ILFI 56).

hylemorphic schema is a result of the specific sociopolitical formations of the civilization that gave rise to it. In a society divided into “masters” or “citizens” and “workers” or “slaves,” the principle of individuation in the technical operation must be either the matter *or* the form. For example, the master who owns the matter upon which the slave works will locate the principle of individuation in the matter because all form-giving (i.e., “labor”) is abstract to him while materiality has singularity; likewise the slave, who works without owning or ordering, will locate the principle of individuation in the form because all matter is abstract until work gives it its concrete reality. This situation, which is particular to a certain type of technical operation within a society based on an exploitative division of labor, then becomes formalized and systematized into a metaphysics based on generalized concepts of “form,” matter,” and the “law of the excluded middle.” And yet, as Simondon suggests, “nothing proves that the notions of form and matter are generalizable” (ILFI 59). For Simondon, then, the problem is not only that the hylemorphic schema is derived from the technical rather than the vital domain, but that it is ultimately a “social representation” that cannot do justice to the dynamic realities of individuation, even in case of the technical operation.

Simondon thus undertakes a rethinking of both technicity and of metaphysics on the basis of his critique of hylemorphism. According to Simondon, most western philosophy has taken the individual as a metaphysical *a priori*—either as a hylemorphic merger of matter and form, or as an already-given substance (e.g., atomism)—and has only attempted to consider the processes that generate individuals *ex post facto* from the position of the constituted individual. It is against this view that Simondon elaborates a philosophy of individuation in which Being is conceptualized as a pre-physical and pre-

vital “metastable system that is filled with potentials: *form, matter, and energy pre-exist* in the system,” from which all beings, or individuals, are generated (ILFI 27/PPO 7).¹⁴

Pre-individual Being (which Simondon also frequently calls “Nature”) is more-than-one, but without distinctive “phases” (analogous to a supersaturated solution), giving it the ability to fall out of phase with itself (*se déphaser*), engendering processes of individuation, or “becoming”:

...becoming is a dimension of being corresponding to a capacity to fall out of phase with itself, that is, to resolve itself by dephasing itself. *Pre-individual being is being in which there is no phase*; the being in which individuation occurs is that in which a resolution appears through the division of being into phases. This division of being into phases is becoming. Becoming is not a framework in which being exists, it is a dimension of being, a mode of resolution of an initial incompatibility that is rich in potentials. *Individuation corresponds to the appearance of phases in being that are the phases of being* (ILFI 25/PPO 6).

Thus, for Simondon, “individuals” are responses to tensions and “problems” that become too unstable for the system to bear: As he puts it, “*the individual is the auto-constitution of a topology of being that resolves a prior incompatibility through the emergence of a new systematic*” (ILFI 257). This “systematic” is composed of a spatial dimension, or “structure,” and a temporal dimension, variably referred to as “function” or “operation,” as well as a “constitutive energetic system” that Simondon calls the “associated milieu” (ILFI 62).¹⁵ Thus, the pre-individual is not privation or potentiality that needs to be

¹⁴ I intentionally use the language of the Heideggerian ontological difference here because although some readers oppose Simondon to Heidegger, it is clear that Simondon is thinking in relation to a specifically Heideggerian problematic of metaphysics and technics. Simondon’s critique of the ontological privilege of the constituted individual at the expense of processes of individuation is a reformulation of Heidegger’s critique of the oblivion of Being in favor of beings. As Jacques Garelli writes in his preface to Simondon’s *L’individuation*, “[Simondon’s] conception of the non-identity of being...imposes itself in three different areas of research: 1) in the perception of the thing in the world, 2) in the question of the artistic creation in the ensemble, 3) in that always present ontological difference, provided that the question of Being [*l’Être*], as Heidegger taught, remains that of the Being of being [*l’Être de l’étant*]” but also points out that the “non-identitary dimension of Being, with regard to which the ontological difference is marked” ultimately cannot adequately be posed in the terms used by Heidegger (ILFI 19).

¹⁵ Some examples of “function” are “becoming, tendency, development, and aging” (ILFI 257).

formed, individuation is not *entelechia*, and the individual is not a composite of matter and form and the milieu is not external space-time: it is an organized function-structure system indissociable from its energetic conditions. For Simondon, then, the same process of individuation—the unique structure-function-energetic complex—that makes an individual what it is is also what makes it different from others. Individuation is a process of “interactive communication” between divergent “orders of magnitude” or “phases” that previously did not communicate (ILFI 27/PPO 7): for instance, crystallization is a process of individuation that generates a stabilized resolution between a structural seed (solvent molecule) and a supersaturated solution generating both an individual (crystal) and a milieu (the “mother water”). Both pre-individual and individuated being are never One: “Being” consists of a pre-individual polyphasic metastability, *as well as* of the processes of individuation that “it” engenders in response to problems that arise when this metastability produces tensions that are too great for the system to bear.

The individual’s relation to its milieu, or energetic system, is the difference between physical and vital individuation. A living individual is one that carries its milieu with it (both “externally” and “internally”), with which it remains in a constant relation of exchange, while a physical individual does not. This means that the living individual continues to exist in a metastable state and thus “conserves within itself a *permanent* activity of individuation” (ILFI 27/PPO 7). While the crystal is individuated all at once and has to be placed back into a supersaturated solution in order to generate more layers, the living individual carries within itself a certain “load” (*charge*) of pre-individual metastability, giving the living individual the capacity to fall out of phase with itself and individuate further. The living individual, as Simondon puts it, “is not only the *result* of

individuation, like a crystal or molecule, but a *theatre of individuation*.” A living individual, in other words, retains a permanent relation to the field of individuation—the pre-individual—which enables its perpetual becoming. “The living individual,” as Simondon puts it, “is a system of individuation, an individuated system *and* an individuating system [*système individuant et système s’individuant*]” (ILFI 28/PPO 7). There is, then, no *substantial* distinction between “living matter” and “nonliving matter” or between the vital and physical domains, but only what Muriel Combes calls “the heterogeneity of individuating rhythms.”¹⁶ Life, for Simondon, *prolongs* physico-chemical processes of individuation by carrying metastability (pre-individual being) into more and more complex structure-function systems. Thus, the more complex the individual is, the more incomplete its individuation: a living being is thus like “a crystal in a nascent state, amplifying without stabilizing,” hence an animal is like “an inchoate plant” (ILFI 152). To give a rather simplified schematization of this: the slower the process of individuation → the more metastability the individual carries with it → the more complex problems the individual encounters while resolving this metastability ← → the more complex structure-function system is necessary to resolve these problems. This also means that the more complex the individual is, the less it can resolve the metastability it carries by itself (i.e., by its own structure-function system), which gives rise to the *psychosocial* domain in living individuals. For Simondon, then, there are three general

¹⁶ “Between the physical and the vital, between the plant and the animal, we need not look for substantial differences that lend themselves to founding distinctions between genus and species, but rather for differences in speed in the process of their formation. What divides Being into domains is ultimately nothing other than the *rhythm of becoming*, sometimes speeding through stages, sometimes slowing to resume individuation at the very beginning. Such observations about the heterogeneity of individuating rhythms make it possible to speak about what constitutes the difference between ‘physical beings’ and ‘living beings’” (Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*, trans. Thomas LaMarre [Boston: The MIT Press, 2010], 22-3).

“phases” of Being: (1) pre-individual, (2) individual and milieu (either vital *or* physical), (3) trans-individual (psychic *and* collective, or “subjective” and “objective” trans-individual respectively).

The movement between the domains of Being is what Simondon calls “transduction,” or the “operation—physical, biological, mental, social—by which an activity propagates itself from one element to the next” (ILFI 32/PPO 11). Transduction describes the relations each individuated being maintains to the pre-individual as well as to the other domains or phases of individuation, and is what allows communication between them. The process of transduction both gives rise to the phases or domains of individuation and allows the movement between them; that is, it names both the process by which Being resolves internal tensions by giving rise to new domains and function-structure systems, as well as the way in which these domains are prolonged into and communicate with one another. For example, transduction is simultaneously the process by which the vital domain emerges in response to unresolved problems in the physical-chemical individual, as well as what subsequently enables an “internal resonance” or communication between the vital and physical-chemical dimensions within a living individual. Furthermore, because Being individuates through this process of transductive communication between the different domains of individuation, “thought”—which is a form of psychosocial individuation in living individuals—is also able to move between these domains analogically or “transductively.” In this sense, transduction is, according to Simondon, “at once metaphysical and logical”:

Transduction is the correlative appearance of dimensions and structures in a being of pre-individual tension, that is to say, in a being that is more than unity and more than identity, and that has not yet dephased itself into multiple dimensions.... This notion can be used to understand the different domains of

individuation: it applies to all cases where an individuation occurs, expressing the genesis of a fabric of relations founded on being.... Transduction corresponds to the existence of relations that are born when the pre-individual being individuates itself; it expresses individuation and allows it to be thought; it is therefore a notion that is both metaphysical and logical. *It applies to ontogenesis, and is ontogenesis itself* (ILFI 33/PPO 11).

This process of transduction is non-linear: that is, there is no smooth “translation” from one domain of individuation to the next and the process is not teleological or unidirectional. Complex life forms (especially humans), then, exist only and always between pre-individual metastability and trans-individual collectivity, in which the physical-chemical, vital, psychic, and social are all linked, and where each level *facilitates* the emergence of the next, but always in a recursive way.

Because the process of individuation is never complete, as Being continues to dephase in response to “problems,” Simondon replaces a static ontology of Being with a perpetual “*ontogenesis*” of becoming. In a strong sense, then, Simondon’s critique of the ontological privileging of the constituted individual and the obscuring of processes of individuation by atomism and hylemorphism follows Heidegger’s critique of the metaphysical conflation of beings with Being and the oblivion of that which gives. Except that in Simondon’s philosophy, the Heideggerian ontological *difference* is replaced by “onto-*genesis*.” In this way, “Being” and “beings” are only the two most extreme terms of an ongoing *process* of individuation: “one cannot even say that Being individuate[s] itself; there [i]s individuation in Being and individuation of Being [*on ne peut même pas dire que l’être s’est individué; il y a eu individuation dans l’être et individuation de l’être*]” (ILFI 262).¹⁷ In Simondon, there is therefore no “ontology” and

¹⁷ This point is similar to Deleuze’s reading of Heidegger’s ontological difference as a “fold” of Being rather than as a difference “between” Being and beings, as referenced in Chapter One vis-à-vis Irigaray.

no “beings,” but only *operations of individuation* (i.e., “ontogenesis”) in relation to pre-individual Being. To state this otherwise: an individual *is* essentially nothing other than “its” relation(s) in/from Being, that is, “its” operations of individuation or ontogenesis, as well as “its” trans-individual relations with other individuals. As Simondon writes:

What is truly and essentially the individual is *the active relation*...The individual is the reality of a constituting relation, not the interiority of a constituted term...the individual is the activity of relation, not a term of this relation; properly speaking, the individual is not *in* relation, neither with itself nor with other realities. Rather, it is the Being *of* the relation, and not being *in* relation...The principle of the individual is the individual itself in its activity, which is relational in itself...(ILFI 62-3).

If metaphysics needs to be convicted of another forgetting, in Simondon it would be precisely this relational dimension: the *essential relational operations of individuation* have been veiled by the freezing of the extreme terms that can only interact externally. For Simondon, then, the only way in which an individual can be “known” is by following its process(es) of individuation *from* pre-individual Being, or what Simondon calls the “real anterior to individuation.”¹⁸ “In this way,” Simondon writes, “a study of individuation can lead to the reformation of fundamental philosophic notions, because it is possible to consider individuation as that which must be known *first* about being” (ILFI 35-6/PPO 13). Such a revision obviously runs counter to the tendency of most western logic which abstracts Being as the most empty and general of all concepts, meaning that “*a theory of Being* anterior to any form of logic would have to be instituted” (ibid.). And if, as Combes succinctly puts it, the “ontogenic postulate” of Simondon’s philosophy is

¹⁸ “The true first philosophy is neither that of the subject nor that of the object, neither that of God or Nature studied according to a principle of transcendence nor immanence, but that of a real anterior to individuation, of a real that cannot be found either in the objectivist object nor the subjectivist subject, but at the limit between the individual and that which remains outside of it, according to a mediation suspended between transcendence and immanence” (ILFI 263).

that “relation has the status of Being and constitutes Being,” then thought itself must be relational.¹⁹ Indeed, for Simondon, knowledge itself a transductive operation of individuation that establishes relations between disparate domains of Being. Such a relation is not a “simple formal rapport,” or a logical relation between two terms, but a “relation of relations” (ILFI 83). For Simondon, in other words, thought is not an external relation between individuated terms, nor do the relations established by thought exist only *in* thought. Rather, the “epistemological postulate” of Simondon’s philosophy is the “realism of relations”: the relations that thought establishes between domains of Being, and between individuals, are part of the ontogenesis of Being “itself,” or what Combes calls the “*coindividuation* of thinking and being.”²⁰ As such, the thinking of Being could no longer take off from a metaphysical ground that seeks to move from beings to Being from a position of exteriority by moving from the All to the One. In this way, Being could no longer be reduced to something present for the thinking subject, but rather demands and effects a transformation in the subject itself: “We cannot, in the common understanding of the term, *know individuation*, we can only individuate, individuate ourselves, and individuate within ourselves” (ILFI 36/PPO 13). Simondon’s philosophy thus challenges the hegemony of the One in metaphysical and logical terms: if there is neither one mode of the individuation of Being, nor of the individuation of thought, then no single theory of Being and no single logic can ever claim the All.

¹⁹ Combes, *Gilbert Simondon*, 21.

²⁰ Combes, *Gilbert Simondon*, 10.

Does Life Have (a) Sex? Ontogenesis and Sexuation

Simondon's philosophy is of immense importance in conceptualizing an ontology, or rather, an ontogenesis, of sexual difference beyond the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism and its hylemorphic schema. Before explicating this, it is necessary to specify some additional distinctions that Simondon makes throughout the text on individuation. According to Simondon, strictly speaking, there are only two types of individuation: physical and vital. Psychosocial individuation is actually a continuation of vital individuation rather than a new individuation. To make this less confusing, then, Simondon refers to psychosocial individuation as *individualization*, which is "the individuation of an individuated being, resulting from an individuation, creating a new structuration at the heart of the individual" (ILFI 261). The process of individualization is a further dephasing of the pre-individual carried by the living individual that "dedoubles" the living individual into somatic and psychic domains that Simondon refers to as "living sub-ensembles at the level of the individuated being" (ibid.). In response to tensions in the living being's milieu, it generates organic specializations ("the body") and psychic schematizations ("the mind"), or "successive psycho-somatic couples" (ibid.) that correspond to one another because they are co-emergent but are not identical.²¹ The individualization of the living, then, is "its real historicity" (ibid.). Thus, according to Simondon, only what is dedoubled into the psychic and corporeal is *individualized* while

²¹ "One cannot find an identity between the somatic and the psychic; but one can find couples of complementary realities, constituting living sub-ensembles, at the level of the individuated being. The individuated being expresses itself in successive psycho-somatic couples, partially coordinated to one another... There is not properly speaking a psychic individuation, but rather an individualization of the living that gives birth to the somatic and the psychic: this individualization of the living is translated in the somatic domain by specialization and in the psychic domain by schematization that corresponds to this somatic specialization. Every psychic schema corresponds to a somatic specialization. One could name the ensemble of specializations of the living 'the body,' to which correspond psychic schematizations" (ILFI 261).

the unity of the individual is maintained by what in the individual is not individualized (i.e., what remains of the pre-individual). There are, then, three levels in the human individual:

- (1) the relation that the individual maintains to the metastable conditions of pre-individual being that make it a living being and enable its becoming: this is, properly speaking, the level of *individuation* (Simondon often refers to the “ensemble” of the individual and the pre-individual it carries as the *subject*, which is the individual as *more than itself*, “more-than-unity” and “more-than-one”);
- (2) psycho-somatic *individualization*; that is, the particular way that the living individual generates responses to the particular problems that it encounters in its milieu and “tends toward singularity” (ILFI 258);
- (3) the *personality* that works to maintain a reflexive coherency between the first two levels by building and replacing structurations that integrate the sub-ensembles into the living being.²²

To illustrate this: the subject (that is, the living individual at the level of individuation) encounters a problem or tension in its milieu, either from the “outside” in the form of *sensation* or from the “inside” in the form of *affection*. From this unstable situation, the individual resolves the problem through the creation of a new functional structuration and schematization (or psycho-somatic couple) that enables it to achieve a state of resonance (*perception* or *emotion*, respectively, both of which then become *information* that enables

²² I focus on humans here only for the sake of simplicity. Needless to say, Simondon does not uphold any *substantial* distinction between “the animal” and “the human.” Animals also have processes of psycho-somatic individualization and thus the difference between humans and nonhuman animals is “one of level rather than nature” (ILFI 265).

the individual to *act*). The new structuration generated in the emotion or perception contributes to the individual's particular individualization, which the personality then works reflexively to integrate into a whole. For Simondon, then, individuation is "unique" but never completed in the living individual (once individuation is complete, i.e., once the individual no longer carries pre-individual metastability that enables it to generate new structures in response to problems in its milieu it becomes a *physical* individual); individualization is continuous and "as permanent as current perceptions and behaviors," and personality is discontinuous or "quantic," constructed at "successive crises" (ILFI 262).

Very tellingly, every time Simondon calls on an example of a process that takes place at the level of individuation and not merely individualization and personality, he uses sexuation (e.g., ILFI 258, 260, 261, 263, 299-300).²³ Simondon describes sexuation as one of the "innate psychosomatic dynamisms and structures that constitute a mediation between the natural (pre-individual phase) and the individuated" (ILFI 299). While Simondon points out that sexuation could not exist if there was not a "psychosomatic distinction between individuals," this does imply that sexuation is in any way secondary: "sexuation is a modality of the *first individuation*" rather than a property or content of the individuated being (ILFI 300). This means that sexuation makes up more than part of the

²³ He only elaborates his theory of sexuation in any substantive way over the course of two pages, and only then as a digression in the course of using it as an example in a subsection called "Subjectivité et signification: caractère transindividuel de la signification" (299-300). Every other time sexuation is mentioned, it is used in the context of providing an example of a process that takes place at the level of individuation, distinguishing it from other processes of individualization or personalization, and always in the phrase "*telle est*" or "*comme la sexualité*." He never indicates, nor is it at all clear, what any other process at this level would be. Simondon does not use the noun *sexuation*, but rather the noun *la sexualité* and the adjective *sexué*; however, when it is clear that, by *la sexualité*, he is referring to the process or fact of being sexuate (*sexué*), I have translated it as "sexuation," while I have reserved "sexuality" for instances when he is clearly referring to relations between sexuate beings.

individual's psychosomatic individualization; rather, it is as much a part of the living individual as the fact that it is living. To explicate this, it is useful here to draw on the work of biologist Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan, who define "sex" as the transfer of genetic information from one individual to another, which always leads to genetically new individuals (even if there is no net increase in the *number* of individuals).²⁴

According to Margulis and Sagan, genes pass on information about lessons learned and stored in DNA. At the earliest stages, they say, "life repeatedly created problems for itself" as it complexified and the exchange of information through genes between bacteria, or the earliest forms of sex, enabled survival and variation through mutation.²⁵

For Simondon, as mentioned above, living individuals are distinguished from physical individuals by the capacity to receive information, which "passes from one problem to the other...radiat[ing] from one domain of individuation to another domain of individuation" enabling both the resolution of problems through new individuations and the conservation and transfer of pre-individual metastability from one individual to another (IFLI 318-9). From this perspective, bacteria resolved problems in their milieu through the transfer of genetic information (i.e., sex) from one center of individuation to another that produced new individuations (even if not new *individuals*), or structural-functional systems. Combining Simondon with Margulis and Sagan: if life is the capacity for exchange of information that produces new individuations, if sex names the exchange of the information that is constitutive of life, and if such exchange only takes place at a limit marking the threshold between the interior and exterior of an individual, then

²⁴ Margulis and Sagan, *What Is Sex?*. From the point of view of biology, *reproduction* is the net increase in number of individuals, while *sex* is genetic information exchange. In bacteria these are two separate processes, while in meiotic organisms they are the same.

²⁵ Margulis and Sagan, *What Is Sex?*, 59.

sexuation can be defined as *the relational limit in a living individual that creates the capacity for informatic exchange with another*. Among living beings whose individuality is more provisional such that it is more ambiguous what the “unit” of individuality is, sexuation is also more provisional lasting only as long as there is limited individuation. Here, there are as many “sexes” as there are possible points of informatic transfer. In more complex multicellular organisms, in which individuation is much more prolonged, “the adherence of sexuation to the individuated being creates an *inherent limit* to individuation within the individual” (ILFI 300).²⁶

Sexuation, then, takes place at the first level of individuation, *before* any psychosomatic individualization. When the individual emerges from the pre-individual, in the first individuation, two differentiations will already be made: (1) the individual will either carry pre-individual metastability with it as its associated milieu or not (i.e., it will be physical or vital) and (2) if living, it will either require another individual in order to achieve the metastability necessary to generate a new process of individuation or not. Organisms that reproduce asexually, although still sexuate for the purposes of informatic exchange, do not need fusion with another individual to generate the pre-individual from which a new individuation can emerge. Indeed, Simondon calls these organisms, such as amoebae and infusoria, “*pre-individual life*” because these are both living systems *and* pre-individual systems who contain enough metastability for continuous individuation without individualization (ILFI 168-9). Individuation in plants and animals, however, is

²⁶ Simondon distinguishes three “levels of composition” in vital individuals: cell, organ, organism. The “criteria of individuality” is not “material, spatial separation or liason” but rather “the possibility of living apart, of migration outside of the first biological unity” (ILFI 168). In multicellular organisms, then, cells and organs are not individuals. This point is highly significant in response to all forms of biological atomism or reductionism: the organism is irreducible to an assemblage of its components.

“bimodal” insofar as the pre-individual is split between (at least) two modes of individuation that must come together to generate a new process of individuation. For Simondon, sexuation actually enables a greater integration of the pre-individual into the process of individuation because the limitation to individuation that sexuation brings prevents the individual from complete individuation that would exhaust the pre-individual:

Sexuation is therefore *bimodal as individuation*, and precisely it is not an individuation that is completely achieved as individuation since it remains concretely bimodal. There is an arrest in the path of individuation which permits the conservation, *in this bimodality*, of the inherence of a load [*charge*] of *apeiron*. This translation of the unlimited in the limited saves the being from aseity and correlatively deprives it of complete individuation (ILFI 299).

As (at least) *bimodal*, the “unit” of individuation in sexuate beings is not exactly the individual, but the *couple*: “[Sexuation] is an individuation in suspense, arrested in the asymmetrical determination of the...unified duality of the couple” (ILFI 299). Sexuation, that is, is always an individuation *vis-à-vis the sexuate other*.²⁷ As part of the first individuation, sexuation will structure *every subsequent psycho-somatic dedoubling*, or individualization: the more complex the individual becomes through continual individualization, the more sexuate it becomes, and the more it is limited by this sexuation. And yet, sexuation far exceeds the constituted individual: because, as part of the first individuation, it belongs equally to the pre-individual and the individuated being (i.e., to the “subject,” in Simondon’s sense), sexuation is precisely what makes the individual *more than itself* by linking it to the sexuate other(s) what is not yet individuated. To quote Simondon:

²⁷ For Simondon, this is *not* about the individual’s role in reproduction: “[Sexuation] is not a species function placed by the species in the individual as a foreign principle: the individual *is* sexuate, it is not merely affected by a sexual index” (ILFI 299)

[Sexuation] remains from the pre-individual attached to the specified and dichotomized individual, so as to be carried in an implicit psycho-somatic manner by the individual. The division of the pre-individual permits a greater integration of this pre-individual charge in the individual. Yet, sexuation is more immanent to the individual than to the pre-individual, which remains a veritable *apeiron*. Sexuation molds the body and mind of the individuated being, creating an asymmetry between individuated beings as individuals. Sexuation lies at an equal distance between the *apeiron* of pre-individual nature and limited and determinate individuality; it realizes the inherence of a relation to the unlimited within limited and individuated individuality (ILFI 299).

As more complex living beings prolong earlier forms of vital individuation, they prolong earlier forms of sexuation, enabling more of the pre-individual to be integrated into new and more complex structure-function systems. This means that while forms of sexuation will become increasingly complex as individuals must respond to more complex problems, sexuation is an insuperable limit in vital individuation.

We are now in a position to consider the process of sexuation in humans in greater detail.²⁸ (Recall that for Simondon to understand the ontogenesis of any individual, its process of individuation must be followed from the pre-individual conditions of its emergence.) The gametes are the result of what Simondon calls provisional or “elementary” individuations (i.e., spermatogenesis and oogenesis) that are generated from the *sexuate* pre-individual metastability of sexuate living individuals (ILFI 182).²⁹ The relation between these two elementary individuals, generates a new

²⁸ Again, because Simondon only distinguishes between different forms of living beings by their informatic capacities and structure-function systems, rather than “species,” what will be elaborated here should apply to all living beings, only in lesser terms for less complex beings.

²⁹ In his discussion of different forms of reproduction, Simondon rejects substantialism, both as monism in which the entire individual is seen as hereditary substance (specifically the work of Étienne Rabaud) and as the soma-germ dualism of August Weismann. For Simondon, the gametes are “elementary individuals” that are “comparable to the smallest living units that can exist in an autonomous state” although very limited in time and space and in highly specific bio-chemical conditions. In this way, Simondon tempers the dichotomy between “sexual” and “asexual” reproduction because in *all* reproduction, there is “a passage through a phase of elementary individuation.” Spermatogenesis and oogenesis are elementary individuation that produce sexuate elementary individuals because the pre-individual from which they come, carried by sexuate individuals, is sexuate. In budding, on the other hand, the elementary individuation is when part of

pre-individual singularity, the zygote, from which the new individual can emerge. Here, the first individuation will be *vital and sexuate*, but this cannot even be reduced to the chromosomes because what makes the new individual living and sexuate comes from the *pre-individual*. In other words, it is what is *more* than the individual in each individual that enables individuation. As a pre-individual field, the fertilized egg is a metastable system that is already constituted by differentiations and intensities, containing more form, matter, and energy potentials than can or will be actualized. From this equipotentiality, individuation is the constant energetic exchange or internal resonance between the developing embryo and its milieu, that is, the generation of structure-function complexes that resolve tensions. Yet, properly speaking then, embryonic development is already the process of *individualization*: the continual psycho-somatic dedoubling, or individuation of the already individuated vital and sexuate being. And as long as the individual is living, it will continue this process of sexuate individualization, which continues to draw from the load of form, matter, and energy potentials it carries with it in its pre-individual field. Throughout its life, that is, the human individual is an increasing concretization of its zygotic potentials in response to informatic exchanges with its milieu. This process has both a spatial (or structural) and a temporal (or functional) dimension, generating increasingly individualized corporeal structures and associated psychic schemas that are reflective of the individual's specific history, its responses to affections and sensations. These individualizations are attached to the individual's vital sexuate individuation through personalization. We can, then, distinguish three levels of sexuation in the human individual:

the colony breaks off to start a new colony: this elementary individual (the polyp) is not sexuate because the pre-individual from which it comes (i.e., the colony) is not sexuate.

- (1) *individuation*: this is the “psychosomatic immanence of pre-individual nature in the individuated being” or the level at which “sexuation is a mixture of nature and individuation” (ILFI 299). This process is synonymous with living or becoming itself, enabling a “communication between individuality and nature” (ibid.). At this level, sexuation is what makes the individual more than itself by placing the nearly limitless field of pre-individual potentials (“virtual multiplicities”) that it carries within the limited being: while the pre-individual field ties the individual to the entire history of life that it carries with it, giving it its resources for resolving problems in its milieu, the actualization of these potentials always takes place via the inherent limitations formed by its sexuation vis-à-vis *sexuate other*.³⁰
- (2) *individualization*: this is level of the singular psycho-somatic couples that the individual has generated in response to sensations and affections. Because this process is an individuation of an individuated and *sexuate* being, it is *always sexuate*. This means that the individual does not interact with neutral objects in abstract space but rather occasions of possible information in a milieu

³⁰ “Virtual multiplicities” is the term Deleuze uses in his elaboration of Simondon’s theory of individuation in *Difference and Repetition*. There Deleuze gives the following sequence: differentiation—individuation—dramatization—differentiation. Differentiation names the virtual multiplicities, or the *already differentiated matter, form, energy potentials* that constitute a pre-individual field. Deleuze places Simondon’s individuation as the intensive process of spatio-temporal dynamisms that is between Bergson’s virtual and actual. Differentiation, then, is actualized differences, or what Simondon would call individualization (see *Difference and Repetition*, 244-54). In the conclusion of *L’individuation*, Simondon specifically says that “the notion of virtuality must be replaced by that of the *metastability* of a system” (ILFI 304); however, Deleuze helps to mediate between Simondon and Bergson on this point, by using the concept of the virtual to think the *differentiations within metastability* (which Simondon clearly assumes but does not discuss). This is especially pertinent here given that for Bergson, the virtual is *memory*: as Margulis and Sagan argue, life is a “memory storage system” (in DNA) that is exchanged through genetic transfer (i.e., sex). The pre-individual human, the zygote, thus contains within it the history of life and sex in highly contracted form that is increasingly these potentials are actualized by and through the individual. This is why Margulis and Sagan say that human sex draws on the whole history of sex, all the way “down” to the bacterial level, every time.

already polarized by sense/direction [*sens*] toward the individual (ILFI 238).

Thus, every perception, emotion, and action that the individual undertakes further individualizes its *sexuation* as the relation between the individual and its milieu is more and more concretized by habits, tendencies, frames, etc.³¹

(3) *personalization*: this is the process that “integrates, in a unique situation, sexuation and the individual history of events [*histoire individuelle événementielle*]” (ILFI 258), that is, the process of creating a resonance between the specific psycho-somatic couples and sexuate individuation, between the individual’s corporeal structures and psychic schemas and that which puts the individual into question as individual. This is, however, a process of *non-linear transduction* rather than synthesis or identity.³²

³¹ In this way, we can continue to understand *all* informatic exchange as *sex(uate)*. As the individual is more complex, it is capable of exchanging far more types forms of information than genetic, thus, what is an intermittent capacity in less complex living beings is *prolonged* in the more complex.

³² With these levels, the sex-gender schema in gender studies can be helpfully modified: In Simondon, “biological sex” (e.g., chromosomes, hormones, genitals and other anatomical features) would all be part of the individual’s continuous *individualization*, that is, as part of the *particular* psychosomatic structures the individual develops to resolve problems. In this sense, genitals are no more or less sexuate than any other corporeal structure in the individual; all the individual’s corporeal structures and psychic schematizations individualize its sexuation. This also means that none of these structures or functions can be considered in purely binary terms. Personality, which is reflexive, would be the level of what is referred to as “gender identity,” and is the *discontinuous* ways in which the individual relates to its psychosomatic individualization to its process of becoming. *Both* individualization and personalization are *transductive* processes of establishing communication between different domains or phases of the individual and thus there is no direct, linear connection between the corporeal-psychic structures and functions and the individual’s personality. Such a notion might therefore be very useful in trans studies. To say, however, that even “biological sex” is a way in which the individual tends toward singularity does not negate the individual’s *fundamental sexuation*. As Simondon says, “personality is that which makes a unity between the being’s universal foundations [*fondements d’universalité*] and its particularities of individualization” (ILFI 259). As part of the process of *individuation*, sexuation is what is *universal* in the being: in other words, what is universal in a living, sexuate being is that *it is a being vis-à-vis the sexuate other*. And yet this cannot be reduced to any *comparative* difference because any referent that could enable comparison (e.g., genitals, hormones, chromosomes) is already *individualized*.

Consequences of the Notion of Individuation for Feminist Theory

Simondon's philosophy of individuation, especially if considered with Irigaray's ontology of sexual difference as I have elaborated it throughout this dissertation, has a number of important consequences for feminist theory. First, in such a philosophy, sexuation can never be reduced to genitalia, hormones, or chromosomes. All of these are *individualizations*, or corporeal structure-function systems generated in order to resolve tensions that the living, sexuate individual encounters. Any structure or function is already individualized, while sexuation pertains to the relation between the *pre-individual* and the individual. Sexuation, then, far exceeds any physical, chemical, biological, or psychosocial formation: it links the individual with what in the individual is more than what is *individuated* or *individualized*. Because we carry "virtual" forms of sexuation in the load of pre-individual metastability that we carry as living beings, we are *virtually sexuate* in countless and unknowable ways beyond our individualized, or *actualized* forms of sexuation: to put it in Deleuze's terms, sexual differentiation is subtended by sexual differentiation. This virtual or pre-individual sexuation means that, while carried by limited individuated beings, the individualization of sexuate psycho-somatic structures is nevertheless somewhat open-ended: while the pre-individual human is generated by the fusion of the two sexuate gametes, there is a margin of openness in the sexuate individuation that results from this, as in the case of so-called intersexuality, which may well constitute additional sexes and lead to increasingly complex forms of human sexuation.³³ The point here is that sexual difference is primarily an *intensive process of differentiation and individuation*, of which only aspects are locatable in extension.

³³ On intersexuality, see Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*.

It is perhaps here that Irigaray's work resonates most with Simondon's. We know well from Irigaray's work that the "predominance of the visual, and of the discrimination and individualization of form" is a product of the phallic sexual imaginary (CS 25/25). As Irigaray has pointed out in her work on fluids, phallocentrism has only ever represented sex as *res extensa*. The externality of the penis has led precisely to the type of ontological privileging of the already-constituted individual that Simondon critiques: the primacy of visualization, measurement, and counting of static *substances* at the expense of fluid *processes* that cannot be seen, measured, located, or counted. Both forms of this ontological privilege, substantialism and hylemorphism, are therefore modalities of *phallomorphism*. The phallocentric preoccupation with rigidity, calculability, solidity, and self-identity has ensured that the masculine sex is *the* sex. In its attempt to position itself as fully individuated—the phallic *One*—it has reduced the feminine to the undifferentiated ground against which the individuality of man can be defined and erected. In this representational economy, man is always already an individual: he is either a pre-given atomistic substance, emerging *ex nihilo*, essentiality unrelated to anything or anyone else; or in the hylemorphic schema, woman-mother-nature is the raw matter out of which man forms his subjectivity and molds the world in his image. In her psychoanalysis of the masculine Imaginary, Irigaray demonstrates that it is the phallic fear of regression to the undifferentiated no-thing of the maternal body, an unconscious *horror vacui*, that underwrites this onto-logic. All of western metaphysics, especially psychoanalysis, is structured by the fantasy of a primordial state of fusion in the womb. In Simondon's theory of sexuation, however, the mother cannot be identified with the pre-individual, which is the zygote: instead, the maternal body is the *first milieu* in which

the most formative and rapid period of the process of individualization in the life of the individual takes place. It is through energetic and informatic exchanges with the maternal body that the basic corporeal-psychic structures will be formed. And yet even these are always mediated by the placenta, which results from the first cellular division of the fertilized egg and constitutes an interval between the growing embryo and the maternal body.³⁴ We can see here why Simondon suggests that first philosophy should begin from the “real anterior to individuation,” for if we developed an ontogenesis of the human from this point, we would arrive at nothing like atomistic substantialism or the hylemorphic schema of raw matter, ideal form, and the law of the excluded middle. As Irigaray has tirelessly pointed out, western metaphysics not only begins by skipping over these real conditions of ontogenesis, but also by substituting for them a mirror that turns the world into a reflection of the masculine unconscious. It is therefore much more than coincidence that Simondon uses the crystal as the paradigmatic example of physical individuation—that is, a process of individuation in which the individual is individuated all at once and subsequently detached from its generative conditions, remaining self-

³⁴ The work of biologist Hélène Rouch is exemplary on this point, particularly her essay “La placenta comme tiers” which was first published in a special issue of *Langages* edited by Irigaray in 1987. There is a great deal of reciprocal influence between Rouch and Irigaray, and Rouch’s scientific writings on the realities of the maternal context have influenced Irigaray’s later works on the interval. Rouch argues that the placenta is enables differentiation and relation that confounds the phallic logic of the excluded middle: “The placenta constitutes... a mode of relation to the mother: it establishes an anatomical discontinuity and a physiological continuity. It is thus, in a certain way, separation and reunion. From this point of view, it could represent, not an object, but a *transitional space* through which the fetus is simultaneously connected to the mother and separated from her, dependent and independent” (see Rouch *Les corps, ces objets encombrants: contribution à la critique féministe des sciences* [Paris: Éditions iXe, 2011], 52). Bracha Ettinger, who draws on this element of Irigaray’s work along with Deleuze—without reference to Simondon, but very interestingly resonant with his theory—argues that because corporeal differentiation already takes place within the maternal body, psychic formations do as well, and that there is a “matrixial” dimension of the psyche structured by this intrauterine relationality that is the basis for forms of affectivity and sensation that subtend forms of logical perception. (See *The Matrixial Borderspace*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). In future work, I would like to develop this footnote substantively to develop a feminist theory of the pre-individual.

identical—and Irigaray juxtaposes the living body to the crystal as the image of masculine subjectivity:

But is the body always the same? Can we fix it in one self-same form? Does it not wither when it has to keep to one appearance? Is not mobility its life?...If we are living, how can we be pure crystal? And if your thinking aspires to the realm of crystal, how can we survive in it?...And what does it signify, this attraction of yours for the mineral? A triumph over expansion through the cosmos? A means of avoiding change? Your need for mastery? (EP 33).

Throughout their work, then, both Irigaray and Simondon show why it is not only ontologically and epistemologically inadequate, but also ethically problematic, to develop a theory of the *living* being on the basis of technical or physical operations.

Indeed, here is where we must consider the way that the pre-individual is, for Simondon, inherently linked to the trans-individual. In his comments on sexuation, Simondon distinguishes his theorization of the immanence of the unlimited pre-individual within the limited individual from both the myth of the androgyny and Freud's polymorphous perversity. Even though both of these theories attempt to consider the ways in which the sexuation of the individual goes beyond unimodal anatomical sex, they both continue to privilege the individual. What happens in both of these cases, then, is that sexuation is contained *within* the individual rather than linking the individual to what is *more than individual* within it. "The difficulty with Freud's entire doctrine," he writes, "is that the subject [i.e., the individual plus its load of pre-individual] is identified with the individual and that sexuation is placed *within* the individual as something that the individual contains and encloses" (ILFI 300). Because the individual is taken as an *a priori*, the virtuality of sexuation is viewed as always already present within each individual. This leads to a sort of hylemorphic schema in which the polymorphous potentiality of the individual is molded through technics of repression that actualize only

a limited form of this potentiality. This is what Foucault has called the “*dispositif* of sexuality” that functions to produce an “artificial unity” and intelligibility out of disparate phenomena such as “anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, pleasures” (HS 204/154). This technics of “sex” is what Simondon would call a “mold”—i.e., a “*dispositif for producing an information that is always the same with each molding*” (ILFI 57)—that functions *orthopedically* through forms of discipline and regulation, literally forcing the different phases of sexuation—vital individuation, psycho-somatic individualizations, personalization—to line up “straight” and coherent under the sign of binary sex, gender, and sexuality structured according to the dictates of reproductive phallogentrism.³⁵ The potentiality that is not actualized, then, is said to constitute the unconscious of the individual, which is only individualized by its specific pathologies. This orthopedic technics of sex, substitutes a molding for sexuate individuation that limits the sexuate becoming of all individuals, but since the mold is phallic, it especially limits the individuation of the feminine (the sex that is not one).

For Simondon, on the contrary, sexuation is ultimately at the level of the subject—that is, the individual plus that within it that is more-than-individual (i.e., the pre-individual)—rather than at the level of the individual. Unlike psychoanalysis where sexuation is a *castration* of an originary plenitude, sexuation here is what makes the individual *more* than itself, rather than less. It is this more-than-individual that essentially connects the individual to other individuals in what Simondon calls the trans-individual. For Simondon, while social formations or “communities” are constituted *a posteriori* by

³⁵ In this regard, the specific points in the molding operation at which there is an energy transfer between the material and the mold are precisely the “transfer points” that Foucault theorizes as “power” (HS 123/94). Foucault’s theory of power, then, is *transductive* in Simondon’s sense: power both creates new domains and structurations and propagates elements from one domain to the next.

“*inter-individual*” interactions that take place at the level of personality, the collective is an *a priori* or essential relation that is the “other side” of the pre-individual that the individual carries within it. The greater the share of pre-individual metastability that the individual carries, the less this can be resolved or individuated by the individual itself and thus the pre-individual metastability that makes the individual more than itself takes the individual outside itself to find resolution in the collective. “For this reason,” Simondon says, “sexuation is an inspiration or incitement to the collective, but it is not the collective....Putting the being in motion, it makes the subject understand that he is not a closed individual, that he possesses no aseity” (ILFI 300). The individual, then, does not already contain all of the “polymorphous” forms of sexuation in the form of drives nor does it contain the sexuate other within it in repressed or negated form. Rather, the individual is essentially linked to *virtual forms of sexuation that can only find their actualization and signification in the collective*. The individuation of the sexuate individual is always an individuation in relation to the sexuate other. Thus, what is missed in both substantialism, in which the individual is born with a fully actualized sexuation (attributable to some specific psycho-somatic structure or function), and hylemorphism, in which there is a dualism between the psychosomatic potential of the individual (matter) and social norms (form), is precisely “the discovery of the transindividual, that is to say, when the charge of [pre-individual] nature that is in the subject with the individual can encounter other charges of [pre-individual] nature in other subjects with which it could form a transindividual world of meanings” (ILFI 300). Metaphysical individualism, especially the technophallogocentric hylemorphic schema has therefore alienated us from our sexuate individuation and eliminated our ability to

actualize the pre-individual sexuation that we carry with us in the collective. Thus, in words that sound almost like they could have been written by Irigaray, Simondon says:

The pathological relation to another is that which lacks meanings, which dissolves in the neutrality of things and leaves life without polarity. The individual then becomes an insular reality—abusively defeated or falsely triumphant and domineering, the subject seeks to connect its individual being with a world that loses its meaning. The transindividual relation of signification is replaced by the impotent relation of the subject to neutral objects, some of which are its fellows (ILFI 300).

The vital, sexuate individuation that we “are” can only find signification in a trans-individual collective constituted by sexual difference. Perhaps understandably, feminist and queer theory have often rejected centralizing sexual difference—especially the relation between the sexes—because of their desire to destabilize heterosexism. However, from this perspective, “heterosexism” is precisely an inter-individual regulatory norm that compensates for the lack of any *significant* sexuate relation.³⁶ To return to the understanding of sex as informatic exchange, there is a sense in which we do not yet have *sex* at the human level because it has been reduced to either reproductive function or to inter-individual encounters involving certain anatomical functions or acts. But reproduction is not sex and gene transfer is not sufficient to give signification to the complex sexuate being that we are. Sex, here, would therefore be the creation of some trans-individual relation capable of signifying the sexuate being that we are and actualizing the virtuality that we carry. By failing to cultivate sexuation in the trans-individual, we have instead imprisoned the sexuate pre-individual metastability that we carry within us. However, because the pre-individual is (at least) bimodal in the case of

³⁶ This lack of signification is precisely what Lacan captures in his famous dictum “there is no sexual relation.” For Lacan, there is no signifier for sexual difference because there is no psychic representation of the reproductive function.

sexuate beings, a trans-individual collective of sexual difference is the *only* way we can achieve the metastability necessary to give rise to new sexuate individuations: the culture of sexual difference of which Irigaray so longingly writes would be analogous to the supersaturated solution by which new forms of human individuation could be engendered that actualize more of the virtuality that we are. No matter how many viral, bacterial, symbiotic or nano sexes that we can find, we cannot “queer” our way to new forms of sexuation, we must go *through* the trans-individual of sexual difference. The sexuate becoming of each one in relation to the sexuate other is simultaneously the becoming of sexuation itself.

In the first chapter, I detailed two central critiques of Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference in feminist theory. The first was Judith Butler’s political de-ontologization of sexual difference which argues that such an ontology dissimulates and naturalizes the heteronormative power relations that constitute it. The second was Myra Hird’s scientific de-ontologization of sexual difference which suggests, by way of reviewing scientific research that demonstrates an enormous range of sexual diversity in the natural world, that Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference is an extreme form of anthropomorphism. We are now in a position to respond to those critiques once again. From the point of view of Simondon’s philosophy of individuation, both of them continue to afford an ontological privilege to the constituted individual, seeking to theorize sex and gender *ex post facto* on the basis of existing individuals rather than following the process of sexuation from the real conditions anterior to individuation. On the one hand, Hird represents a sort of biological atomism that sees the human individual as an “assemblage” of bacteria, viruses, and human cells, arguing that because, of all of these, only the

gametes are “sexuate” that the human individual is only sexuate in a highly restricted sense. On the other hand, Butler represents a version of hylemorphism in which the sexuate individual is the result of a process of the materialization of heterosexist gender norms. Even though Butler sees this process as ongoing and inherently social, the middle zone between the individual and social norms that mold it is obscured, while the remainder of the individual’s potentiality that is circumscribed by power is foreclosed. Through the work of Irigaray and Simondon, I have tried to develop a theory of sexuate individuation in which, as Irigaray puts it, “Sexuation is not only an empirical and secondary thing with regard to our being; it is what brings to it a specific morphology and individuation.” As their work shows, Butler and Hird are indeed correct that there is no *ontic* ground on which to base an ontology of sexual difference—no specific structure or function can be placed as the ultimate foundation of sexuation. And yet, this does not mean that our sexuate Being can be nihilated; rather, it means that we have yet to consider living sexuation through an appropriate theory of ontogenesis. As Irigaray and Simondon enable us to see, we are much more than assemblages of genes, viruses, and bacteria and much more than the materialization of social norms. We are sexuate living beings within the “fabric of relations founded on Being,” beings who are always more-than-one and at least two.

CONCLUSION

DESIRING LIFE

“We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation. Sex is not a fatality: it is the possibility for creative life.”

– MICHEL FOUCAULT, “Sex, Power, and the Politics of Identity”

“What is at the origin of our relational life as desire has not been taken into account as a crucial aspect and condition of our human development....Sexuate energy must neither be kept for sexual relations in a so-called private context...nor ignored and repressed in a sociocultural environment where we ought to behave as sexless individuals. Sexuate energy represents an important living source and reserve of our own becoming and our taking a place among other living beings.”

– LUCE IRIGARAY, *Through Vegetal Being*

Within feminist and queer theory, there has been no theorization of the relationship between life and sex more influential than that of Michel Foucault. Already in *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault had located the emergence of the concept of “life itself” as one of the three constitutive axes (along with labor and language) of the modern *episteme* of Man. Because of the inextricability of power and knowledge, once “life” becomes an object of knowledge in modern biology, it simultaneously becomes an object of the operations of power as well. In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1976), then, Foucault coins the term “bio-power” to name precisely that which “brought life and its mechanisms into the domain of explicit calculations and made knowledge-power an agent of transformation” of life itself (HS 188/143). In this text, Foucault argues that the “*dispositif* of sexuality” is “one of the most important” of the “concrete assemblages [*agencements concrets*]” that constitute the larger field of bio-power (HS 185/140). One of the most daring, and damning, of Foucault’s arguments here is that “sex” is actually “historically subordinate to sexuality.” In other words, sex is not some material reality that anchors the contingent manifestations of sexuality; rather, the *dispositif* of sexuality

“is what gave rise to the notion of sex, as a speculative element necessary for its operation” (HS 207/157). It is the notion of “sex,” in other words, that naturalizes the operations of the *dispositif* of sexuality and grants bio-power access to bodies in their very “materiality, their forces, energies, sensations, and pleasures” (HS 205/155). In light of this, Irigaray’s ontology of sexual difference and Simondon’s theory of sexuation as ontogenesis, as well as my attempt to put them together in this dissertation, would seem to be irremediably susceptible to Foucauldian critique, given that they rethink Being as such in terms of life and sex through a philosophy of nature. In the wake of Foucault’s critique of “sex” and “life” as technologies of bio-power, (how) can we still *desire life*?

By way of conclusion to this project, I will attempt to answer this question. In response to Foucault’s analysis, many Anglophone feminist and queer thinkers have understood sex(uality) either as a socially and historically contingent “construction” or as a more deeply entrenched, but no more natural, mode of ideology or “subjectification.” Following Foucault’s own attempts to trace the trajectory of his oeuvre in his late works, however, it would be more accurate to say that, for Foucault, sexuality is a *historical ontology*. For Foucault, a “history of thought” takes the form of an “ontology of ourselves” or an “ontology of the present” rather than an analytic of truth or a history of norms, ideology, mentalities, or forms of subjectification.¹ “Sex(uality)” is thus a way that we answer the question of what it means *to be*. Such a formulation helps to bring out a certain Heideggerian dimension of Foucault’s thought that is largely neglected in the reception of his work in gender studies.² Given this later characterization of his work, it is

¹ See Michel Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-1983*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 1-21, 331.

² Although Foucault never wrote on Heidegger explicitly, he famously claimed in his final interview that “for me Heidegger has always been the essential philosopher....My entire philosophical development was

perhaps not by coincidence that the term Foucault chooses to theorize sexuality, *dispositif*, is the same term used to translate Heidegger's *Ge-Stell* in French.³ The modern formation of sex and sexuality can therefore be seen as part of the modern technical-scientific theory of nature analyzed by Heidegger. If the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology is the *a priori* determination of Being, the onto-logic, that makes possible the scientific, political, and capitalist administration of "Nature," the *dispositif* of modern sexuality is the ontology subtending the scientific, political, and capitalist administration of "Life." In other words, like the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology is constituted by the procedures of "unlocking, transforming, storing, distributing, and switching" that challenge-forth the real into the standing-reserve (GA7 /QCT 16), the *dispositif* of sexuality consists of the "manifold mechanisms which, in the areas of economy, pedagogy, medicine and justice, incite, extract, distribute, and institutionalize" sexuality for the operations of bio-power (HS 45/33). While "nature" has become the domain of the physical sciences, "life" and "sex" have become the objects of a *Scientia sexualis* that spans biology, anthropology, and psychology.⁴ And as *tekhne* replaced *phusis* as the *arkhe* of "Nature" in the *Ge-Stell*

determined by my reading of Heidegger. I nevertheless recognize that Nietzsche outweighed him." The relationship between Foucault and Heidegger has been widely discussed in continental philosophy: see, for instance Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg, eds., *Foucault and Heidegger: Critical Encounters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003). In feminist and queer theory, however, the ontological dimensions of Foucault's work have been largely overlooked and he has often been read vis-à-vis psychoanalysis (despite his own lifelong critique of it). This is largely a result of the fact that in Anglophone gender studies reading Foucault is often filtered through Judith Butler's influential (if not hegemonic) interpretation of him and that her own project consists of both a deconstruction of ontology and an attempt to link Foucault's theory of power with psychoanalytic models of subject formation.

³ The French word *dispositif*, which means "arrangement" or "lay-out" but also "device" or "operation," is derived from the Latin participle (*dispositus*) of the verb *dispono* meaning "to arrange" or to "distribute," which is itself derived from *pono* or *posino* which mean "to place" or "to position." Both *Ge-Stell* and *dispositif*, then, are nouns derived from verbs for "to position" (*stellen* and *pono*), which means "the positioning" is a more accurate rendering for both than "enframing," "apparatus," or "deployment."

⁴ This is precisely why Heidegger argues that "life" cannot ground a fundamental ontology in *Being and Time* and why he insists that *Dasein* is sexually "neutral" in the 1928 Marburg lectures: he recognizes that the modern concepts of "life" and "sex" are products of the technical-scientific understanding of Being that he will later theorize as the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology.

of modern technology, the *dispositif* of sexuality and bio-power substitute a technical operation of molding for processes of individuation with the concepts of “life” and “sex” serving to naturalize the technicity of this operation.⁵

Within the *Ge-Stell* of modern technicity, “life” and “sex” are therefore ontologically linked through the technical-scientific operations of bio-power, which produce sexuality as a “field of experience” constituted by its own forms of veridiction, its own procedures of governmentality, and its own pragmatics of the self.⁶ To understand Foucault in this Heideggerian register requires reconsidering both Foucault’s solution to this problematic as well as the responses to his proposals within feminist and queer theory. As is well known, many readers find the route that Foucault’s work took after the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* puzzling and unsatisfying if not conservative. On the one hand, queer theorists criticize him for not pursuing the radical consequences of his critique of the normalizing function of the *dispositif* of sexuality by defending a politics of “non-normative” sexual practices. On the other hand, critical race theorists fault him for turning away from the implications of the theory of bio-power for thinking the question of racism. Indeed, those hoping for an anti-racist or queer Foucault would certainly seem to be let down by his turn to ancient practices of sexuality in the subsequent volumes of *The History of Sexuality*. And yet, reconsidering this move from a Heideggerian approach makes it somewhat less confusing. Already in the first volume of

⁵ As Foucault describes it, bio-power is a technology of individual and collective individuation that consists of two poles: through disciplinary techniques it produces each individual’s body as a capacity-machine, while through regulatory techniques it forms population aggregates (HS 183/139). Foucault’s theory of bio-power can be tied more explicitly to the discussion of Simondon’s theory of individuation in the previous chapter by way of Deleuze: in Deleuze’s formulation, bio-power creates particular stratifications of the body by controlling which *pre-individual virtualities* are actualized. In this regard, we could say that bio-power is the technology of individualization that determines, through discipline and regulation, the psychosomatic couples that the living individual develops. See *Two Regimes of Madness*, 131.

⁶ Foucault, *The Government of the Self and Others*, 4-5.

The History of Sexuality, Foucault points out two problematic consequences of the emergence of the techniques of bio-power and the *dispositif* of sexuality at the “threshold of modernity,” one of which ties the new techniques of power to an old concept while the other ties a new concept to the old techniques of power. In the first case, the modern techniques of bio-power are tied to the pre-modern “symbolics of blood,” creating the biological concept of race. In the second case, the modern “analytics of sexuality” is tethered back to pre-modern techniques of power: the juridico-discursive operations of the law and prohibition (HS 196-8/149-50). Thus, the “bio-politics of the population” consists, above all, of *techniques of racialization* while the “anatomo-politics of the human body” produces the individual subject primarily through *techniques of prohibition*. The reception of Foucault in gender studies has tended to focus on one pole of this problematic or the other: (1) queer theorists that focus on sex(uality) therefore think in terms of the individual, emphasize power as discipline, often conceptualize resistance as “transgression,” and overlook questions of race; while (2) theorists that focus on bio-power think in terms of the population, emphasize power as regulation or control, criticize the queer fixation with resistance or opposition, and decenter sex(uality) in their analyses. The problem here is not only that within bio-power, sex(uality) and race are essentially—*ontologically*—linked, that bio-power works both by discipline and control, that it produces an individual through the integration of various conducts, sensations, anatomical components made intelligible and coherent through “sex” even as it simultaneously dis-integrates this individual into a series of what Deleuze calls “*dividuals*” or “masses, samples, data, markets or banks.”⁷ The larger problem, if bio-

⁷ Deleuze, *Negotiations*, 180.

power is read as part of the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology, is precisely as Heidegger articulated it in “The Question Concerning Technics”: namely, that both theoretical trajectories respond to the onto-logic of technicity *technologically*. Like we cannot bring about a different relationship to technology through an instrumental ethics or politics of technology developed from the very onto-logic of technicity itself (e.g., both the technocrats and the luddites), an ethics or politics of race or sex(uality) cannot ground new forms of living because these are the two faces of “Life” within bio-power. What is needed instead is a new understanding of, another way of problematizing, Being than the modern technical-scientific.

While “The Question Concerning Technics” is often read as thoroughly pessimistic, what Heidegger is actually seeking is a “free relationship” to technics that can be opened only through a new relation to Being. Thus, when Heidegger speaks of the *Ge-Stell* of technology he is not saying that technology is a “social construction” under human control but neither is it an inevitable fact of existence; rather, it belongs to a specific *a priori* understanding of Being that is open to transformation only if we learn what *in* technology corresponds to human being so that we can be released from the onto-logic of technology into a new *epoch* of Being where we coexist with technology through what we share with it. A “free relationship” to life and sex, then, would not be a freedom *from* life and sex, as is evident from Foucault’s adamant refusal of a politics of “liberation” with respect to sex(uality). But this does not mean that the *dispositif* of sexuality is some sort of inevitable structure of psychic and social life. Just as the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology is not the only approach to nature, the technical scientific onto-logic of bio-power is not the only way to link life and sex. What, then, remains

within the *dispositif* of sexuality that can open a path beyond it? Perhaps this is what Foucault was alluding to with his notorious exhortation that “the rallying point for the counterattack against the *dispositif* of sexuality ought not to be sex-desire, but *bodies and pleasures*” (HS 208/157)? This is where I would like to link Foucault’s work on life and sex with the theory of vital sexuate individuation that I have developed through Irigaray and Simondon throughout this dissertation: if the *dispositif* of sexuality is the technical-scientific *positioning* or *arrangement* of bodies and pleasures, and if bodies and pleasures are what remain within the *dispositif* that actually corresponds to human being, then bodies and pleasures is another name for the vital, sexuate individuation that I have developed through Irigaray and Simondon in this dissertation.⁸ In this way, Foucault’s invocation of “bodies and pleasures” and his so-called “flight to Greece” is neither a call to liberate a polymorphous perversity beyond the dictates of “the austere monarchy of sex” nor a retreat from the horrors of racism and biocapital. Rather, it is a recognition that the only path to a “free relationship” to life and sex beyond the *dispositif* of sexuality is not through a politics of race and sexuality but through the cultivation of bodies and pleasures, or vital sexuation, within an erotic ethics yet to be elaborated: “Isn’t the problem,” he asks in his final interview, “that of defining the practices of freedom by

⁸ This suggestion might seem to directly contradict one of Foucault’s claims in *The History of Sexuality*. There he explicitly writes that while his historical analysis of sexuality does not “imply the elision of the body, anatomy, the biological, [and] the functional,” that this “materiality” of the body is *not* “sex itself [*le sexe*].” In the next paragraph, he critiques the “idea that there exists *something other* than bodies, organs, somatic localizations, functions, anatomo-physiological systems, sensations, and pleasures; something else and something more, with intrinsic properties and laws of its own: ‘sex itself’” (HS 200-1/151-2). What he challenges in the concept of sex, then, is precisely that it is a *surplus* over and above bodies, anatomo-physiological systems, pleasures, etc that unifies them and gives them their intelligibility. In my estimation, however, this does *not* preclude the fact that those things are *already sexuate* as a result of the processes of individuation as outlined in the previous chapter. As I argued in the previous chapter, the *dispositif* of sexuality imposes an orthopedic mold on the sexuate individuation theorized by Irigaray and Simondon and we could say that *le sexe* is what naturalizes this technical operation: sexuation in neither Irigaray nor Simondon is not synonymous with the fiction of natural “sex” as critiqued by Foucault.

which one could define what is sexual pleasure and erotic, amorous, and passionate relationships with others? This ethical problem of the definition of practices of freedom, it seems to me, is much more important than the rather repetitive affirmation that sexuality or desire must be liberated.”⁹

In somewhat of an alliance with Irigaray, then, Foucault sees erotic ethics as the way beyond the technical-scientific understanding of human being (of which bio-power and its attendant concepts of race and reproductive heterosexuality are an essential part).¹⁰ Such an erotic ethics, for Foucault, is the very “possibility for creative life” that, by “reopen[ing] affective and relational virtualities,” creates new modes of living and being-together.¹¹ These virtualities might be interpreted as what Simondon refers to as the charges of the “pre-individual” carried by living beings that can only be actualized in the collective (or “trans-individual”). This is why Simondon’s ethics “follows a kind of movement running from the pre-individual to the trans-individual via individuation.”¹² The individual, for Simondon, is therefore neither “a substance nor a precarious being aspiring to substantiality” but rather a “*singular point in an open infinity of relations*” (ILFI 334). Through ethical acts, the individual actualizes or “transfers” pre-individual virtuality in the collective, thereby amplifying the trans-individual network of relations that constitutes Being by facilitating the perpetual becoming of the “self” and others.

⁹ Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 1)*, ed. Paul Rabinow, trans. Robert Hurley et al (New York: The New Press, 1998), 283. As Lynne Huffer puts it, in Foucault’s work, “eros emerges as a new name for an unreasonable, corporeal ethics of living in the biopolitical present” (*Are the Lips a Grave?* 12).

¹⁰ Lynne Huffer has traced the relationship between the erotic ethics elaborated in both Irigaray and Foucault vis-à-vis the queer theory in *Are the Lips a Grave?*

¹¹ Foucault, *Ethics*, 163, 138.

¹² This is Deleuze’s description of Simondon’s ethics in his review of Simondon’s *L’individuation psychique et collective* in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953-1973*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Mike Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e)), 89.

An ethical or free collective would be one in which individuals' acts take them beyond themselves to resonate trans-individually with others, while an unethical or closed collective would be one in which individuals are self-enclosed and thus instead of *trans-individual relations* there are only *inter-individual interactions* between atomistic units. For Simondon, because the charge of pre-individual carried by an individual can *only* be actualized in the trans-individual relation, this means that the individual is constitutively dependent on the collective for its becoming (which is simultaneously the becoming of the collective itself). In the case of the closed society, then, there is no real becoming of individuals or of the collective, but only a *circulation*. Simondon, moreover, calls the awareness and respect of the relational virtualities that both constitute the individual while making it more than itself “spirituality”:

Spirituality is the signification of the relation of the individuated being to the collective and hence of the foundation of this relation, i.e., of the fact that the individuated being is not entirely individuated but still contains a certain load [*charge*] of non-individuated reality, the pre-individual, and that s/he preserves it, respects it, lives with the awareness of its existence instead of enclosing it in a substantial individuality, a false aseity. Spirituality is the respect of this relation of the individual and the pre-individual. It is essentially affectivity and emotivity (ILFI 246-7).

And, as detailed in the previous chapter, Simondon explicitly argues that because sexuation is an always individuation vis-à-vis the sexuate other, for sexuate beings it is *sexuation* that makes the individual more than itself and thus that the pre-individual carried by sexuate beings can only find its signification in a *sexuate collective*. As such, Simondon claims that sexuality is “an incitement toward the collective, but it is not the collective, nor is it spirituality but an *incitement* to spirituality” (ILFI 299). This means that the “affective and relational virtualities” that are the foundation of ethics must be understood as sexuate and erotic. In other words, it is sexuate energy or desire that is the

source of relational life: through these desires, as Foucault puts it, “go new forms of relationships, new forms of love, new forms of creation.” Or, as Irigaray writes, “sexuate energy represents an important living source and reserve of our own becoming and our taking a place among other living beings.” Unlike other theories of the relation between desire and the collective, such as Hegel, for whom the “ethical sphere” (*Sittlichkeit*) is founded on the sublation of the desire or love between the sexes, or Freud, for whom “civilization” requires a sublimation of the individual’s constitutive sexual energy, Foucault’s erotic ethics of bodies and pleasures or Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference would facilitate the maximal becoming and actualization of the sexuate or erotic virtualities that we carry through the most free forms of trans-individual relation.

And yet, to link the relational ontology of Simondon with that of Foucault, the individual is not only a point of transfer for shares of pre-individual virtuality but also of power. This is to say: *the trans-individual actualization of pre-individual virtuality—i.e., individuation—is always a relation of power*. For Foucault, individuals are therefore “conductors” (in the sense that this term is given in physics, as something that transmits energy) of power. An open or free society is one in which power is mobile, perpetually conducted between individuals, while in a society of domination these power relations are frozen or congealed.¹³ When power is immobilized, the trans-individual actualization of pre-individual virtuality is also frozen, and the process of individuation is supplanted by a technical operation (*dispositif*) that molds individuals according to normative

¹³ Foucault defines power relations as “strategic games between liberties [*jeux stratégiques entre des libertés*]” through which “some try to determine the conduct of others who, in turn, try to avoid allowing their conduct to be determined or try to determine the conduct of others” while “states of domination” are those “in which power relations, instead of being mobile and allowing participants strategies for modifying them, remain blocked, frozen” (*Ethics*, 299-300).

forms.¹⁴ Instead of allowing our erotic and sexuate relational virtualities to be actualized through trans-individual relations, then, the *dispositif* of sexuality arrests them in the forms of sex(uality) and race constructed by bio-power. To actualize this erotic and sexuate virtuality, what is called for is therefore not the *elimination* of power relations (i.e., the “liberation” of sex or desire) but the development of more mobile “games of power [*jeux de pouvoir*]” or “practices of freedom” that do not substitute *dispositifs* for processes of individual and collective individuation—new “rules of conduct [*règles de conduite*]” in Foucault’s terms or, as Simondon puts it, a “profound *transformation* of conducts [*conduites*]” rather than a “*deregulation or breakdown* of conduct [*dérèglement de la conduite*]” (ILFI 345).¹⁵ But *how* to develop such new forms of individual and

¹⁴ As Thomas LaMarre puts it, Simondon “sticks to the realism of relation in order to show not only that the individual is in process but that stopping or prolonging that process brings into play a *dispositif* (Foucault’s term), that is, a set of techniques, an ‘apparatus’ or ‘paradigm,’ around which procedures of territorialization, discipline, or control gather” (in Combes, *Gilbert Simondon*, 87).

¹⁵ This is an important rejoinder to those queer theorists who, even when eschewing the possibilities of liberation, continue to think of resistance to the *dispositif* of sexuality in terms of *deregulation*. For Simondon, this is a technical understanding that thinks of the human as a machine. Because the machine has no interiority or exteriority it cannot change its function except by breaking down (*dérèglement*), while humans can always change their conduct through different relations (which would always be relations of power) that allow the pre-individual virtuality they carry to be actualized with others in new function-structure systems. Tellingly, Simondon refers to the latter as *revolt*: “The machine can break down [*se dérègler*] and thereby present functional characteristics analogous to madness [*conduite folle*] in a living being, but *it cannot revolt* [*se révolter*]. Revolt implies a profound transformation in conduct and not a breakdown in conduct” (ILFI 345). Such a transformation in conduct can only come about through ethical acts that establish new relations that enable the trans-individual actualization of the pre-individual carried by individuals. In the technical schema of hylemorphism, ethics is thought in terms of a division between norms (form) and individuals and collectives (matter) and all acts and relations are technical operations oriented toward the production (or reproduction) of pre-given forms (norms). In Simondon’s philosophy, however, ethics is neither at the level of norms nor at the level of individuals and collectives themselves but in the acts that enable individual and collective individuation whose only “end” is the creation of a field of relations that is more and more open to the becoming of one and all: “conformism or permanent opposition to social norms is a renunciation [*démission*] in the face of the contemporary relevance [*caractère d’actualité*] of acts and a refuge in a *style of iteration* following either a positive form of coincidence or negative form of opposition with respect to a given....[Ethics] is that by which the subject remains in an internal and external problematic that is always in tension, i.e., in a real present, living in the central zone of Being, wanting to become neither form nor matter. Ethics expresses the *sense and direction* [*sens*] of perpetual individuation, the stability of a becoming which is that of pre-individual Being individuating itself and tending toward a continuity that reconstructs, in the form of organized communication, a reality as vast as the pre-individual system” (325). Queer ethics and politics in this sense would not be the permanent opposition to “heteronormativity,” as it has often been defined, but the perpetual attempt to establish a collective, trans-individual reality in which the system of actual sexuate acts and relations is as

collective conduct, new modes of the “government of the self and others”? For Foucault it comes down to what he sees as the most significant ethical and political question of all: the question of truth. To quote Foucault:

Isn't the most general of political problems the problem of truth? How can one analyze the connection between ways of distinguishing true and false and ways of governing oneself and others. The search for a new foundation for each of these practices, in itself and relative to the other, the will to discover a different way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false—this is what I would call ‘political spirituality.’¹⁶

In his late work, Foucault distinguishes *philosophy*, as the question of truth, from *spirituality*, as the transformations in the Being of the subject necessary to access the truth. In spirituality, then, the question of truth is essentially linked to the question of Being and of ethics: what mode of Being, what forms of individual and collective conduct, are necessary for the revealing of truth? And what modes of Being and practices of conduct are made possible through a different articulation of truth? Here, we are brought back to Heidegger who, in the “Letter on Humanism,” says that “the truth of Being offers a hold [*Halt*] for all conduct [*Verhalten*]” (GA9 361/274). The question of the truth of Being is therefore something beyond both “ethics” and “ontology” in the modern sense insofar as it thinks the essential dwelling of humanity (*ethos*) in the openness or truth (*aletheia*) of Being. What Foucault calls “*political spirituality*” then is the openness of any ethics, ontology, and order of truth to reciprocal transformation.

According to both Foucault and Heidegger, spirituality and philosophy were once inextricably linked; however, western philosophy (and especially the science it

vast as our pre-individual, virtual sexuation. For an overview of the centrality of “anti-normativity” in queer theory, see Robyn Weigman and Elizabeth Wilson, “Antinormativity’s Queer Conventions,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* Vol. 26, No. 1 (2015), 1-25.

¹⁶ Foucault *Live*, 282.

engenders) comes to be the mode of thought that gives access to truth regardless of the mode of Being. Without spirituality, ontology becomes a general theory of existent beings while ethics becomes the administration of neutral, identical individuals, both of which are founded on universal and eternal truths the sole mode of access to which is “knowledge.”¹⁷ For both thinkers, this shift is constitutive of the modern epoch. As Foucault argues:

I think the modern age of the history of truth begins when knowledge [*connaissance*] itself and knowledge alone gives access to the truth. That is to say, it is when the philosopher (or the scientist, or simply someone who seeks the truth) can recognize the truth and have access to it in himself and through his acts of knowledge alone, without anything else being demanded of him and without his having to alter or change in any way his being as subject.¹⁸

Foucault traces this shift to what he (somewhat half-heartedly) calls the “Cartesian moment” because, for Foucault, Descartes both “requalified” the principle of “know thyself [*gnothi seauton*]” by making self-certainty the foundation for truth while simultaneously “disqualifying” the “care of the self [*epimeleia heautou*]” which throughout ancient philosophy had been indissociable.¹⁹ This Cartesian moment in what Foucault refers to as “the history of truth” corresponds to a Cartesian moment in what Heidegger calls the “history of Being” for it is “Descartes’s interpretation of what it is *to be* and of truth that first creates the presupposition underlying the possibility of a theory of knowledge or a metaphysics of knowledge” (GA5 99/75). For Heidegger, this Cartesian moment is the opening of the technical-scientific (or “mathematical”)

¹⁷ Thus, in this sense, while Heidegger largely focuses on the oblivion of *Being*, while Foucault is more concerned with the loss of *ethical practices of transformation*, the projects of both thinkers (especially their respective later works) seek to grapple with what happens to truth in the dislocation of spirituality from philosophy.

¹⁸ Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1982-82*, ed. Frédéric Gros, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2005), 17.

¹⁹ Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 19.

determination of Being as objectivity that is the “herald” of the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology.²⁰ And yet, the point that Heidegger believes has not been grasped is that insofar as technology is a (or, rather, *the*) mode of revealing Being—even though it annihilates Being—technology is a (or, rather, *the*) “*form of truth*” in the modern epoch (GA9 171/259). As the truth of Being in our epoch, technology determines who we are and what we do: our relations to ourselves and to others, to beings and to Being, are *essentially technical*.

For Irigaray, the central problem is thus that we have confused “frameworks [échafaudages]” for producing the truth—the *dispositifs* or *Ge-Stelle*—with the truth. If, for Heidegger, the truth of Being is nothing other than the revealing of Being, and the living body that “sustains” *Da-sein* is the *topos* where Being is revealed (or is, at least indistinguishable from it), then the question of truth is intimately bound with the question of the body. And if this living body has been technically molded by the *dispositifs* of bio-power, then Irigaray is correct when she claims that “what is called the truth is merely the structure for sustaining it” (ED 188/106). This means that the reason we cannot think beyond technicity is that the very *topos* where the truth of Being is revealed—the body—is itself a technical fabrication. And it is because, as detailed in this dissertation, Irigaray locates the provenance of the technical *Ge-Stell* in the meta/physics of technophallogocentrism, which is based in the ontological annihilation of the living, sexuate body, that Irigaray insists that *sexual difference* serve as a new foundation for the

²⁰ “The objectifying of whatever is, is accomplished in a setting-before, a representation [*Vorstellen*], that aims at bringing each particular being before it in such a way that man who calculates can be sure, and that means be certain, of that being. We first arrive at science as research when and only when truth has been transformed into the certainty of representation. What it is *to be* is, for the first time, defined as the objectiveness of representing, and truth is defined as the certainty of representing, in the metaphysics of Descartes” (GA5 87/65).

truth of Being. As a new foundation for Being, Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference is therefore also a new foundation for conduct (or ethics) and truth—a "revolution in thought and ethics," or what Foucault calls a "political spirituality"—that returns philosophy to a care for the self and others and leads to a new articulation of living and thinking through transformations in and between subjects:

Such an alliance between ethics and truth would open a new epoch of thought, of philosophy, in which language, the constitution of the subject, and cultural values would take care [*se soucient*] of bodies as elements of nature to be spiritualized while being respected as corporeal; of hearts as organs of life and of love irreducible to alienation and to logical reduction; and of measurement as a form of reason capable of cultivating them in their truths, their affects, and their differences, that is, as the women and men that we are in body, in heart, and in speech (ED 189/106).

For his part, Heidegger came very close to grasping this when he located the "saving power" of technology in the concealed belonging of *tekhne* to *poiesis* in "The Question Concerning Technics." While he takes this provenance from the speech of Socrates in Plato's *Symposium*, he mentions neither that in his speech Socrates is relaying the teachings of the priestess Diotima nor that the context of the speech is a banquet in honor of the god Eros. Diotima does teach, as Heidegger tells us, that all modes of bringing-forth, of coming-to-be, both *phusis* and *tekhne*, are acts of *poiesis*. However, she makes this point only by way of an analogy to clarify her central argument that *eros* is an act of "begetting" (*tokos*) "by means of both body [*soma*] and spirit [*psyche*]." ²¹ In her reading of Diotima's discourse in her beautiful essay "L'amour sorcier," Irigaray notices that Diotima seems to vacillate between two incompatible understandings of *eros* in her teachings—or, rather, continually pointing out that Diotima is not actually present at the

²¹ *Symposium*, 206b. *Tokos* is a noun derived from the verb *tikto* ("to give birth to," "to generate"). *Tikto* and *tekhne* share the same proto-Indo-European root, **tek-*, which means "to beget."

banquet giving her own discourse (perhaps she declined the invitation, Irigaray surmises), Irigaray wonders if perhaps Socrates who is relaying Diotima's teachings is not twisting her words into his own from time to time. Diotima's teaching is generally remembered for her so-called "ladder of love" leading from lust to morality up which the philosopher moves from the love of a beautiful body to the love of beauty to the love of wisdom to the love of the Ideal Form of Beauty (i.e., eternal Truth). In her essay, Irigaray suggests that Diotima sounds a bit too much like Socrates here and therefore returns to the earlier part of her discourse where she tells Socrates that *eros* is a medium (*metaxy*), a *daimon*, halfway between divinity and humanity, mortality and immortality. This earlier teaching of *eros* confounds the law of the excluded middle while also preventing a dialectical progression from one opposition to another—from mortality to immortality, from human to god—but rather "acts as an intermediate terrain, a mediator, a space-time of permanent *passage*" (E 34/28). Here, *eros*, as the "being-together [*sunousia*]" of lovers is described as a form of fecundity and generation through which the lovers give birth to each other *prior* to any procreation.²² "All love," Irigaray writes, "is seen as creation and potentially divine, a path between the condition of the mortal and that of the immortal. Love is fecund prior to any procreation. And its fecundity is *mediumlike*, *daimonic*, the guarantee for each one [*chacun(e)*] of the immortal becoming of the living" (E 32/26). At this point, *eros* is a pathway of becoming opened in the relation between two that enables a perpetual (re)generation of both rather than a teleology or a desire *for* something. As her discourse progresses, Diotima (or "Diotima"?) will claim that *eros* is a desire *of* the mortal being *for* the immortality that it lacks as a living being: of the lovers for a child, of

²² *Symposium*, 206c. While *sunousia* can mean "sexual intercourse" it literally means being-with.

the great man for fame, of the philosopher for Truth. But here, Irigaray says, “Diotima’s method miscarries. From this point on she leads love into a split between mortality and immortality and love loses its *daimonic* character.... There will be lovers in body, lovers in soul. But the perpetual passage between mortal and immortal that lovers confer on each other is blurred. Love has lost its divinity, its mediumistic, alchemical qualities between couples of opposites. Since love is no longer the intermediary, the child plays this role.” In this split between body and soul, mortal and immortal, life and death—oppositions that *eros* once allowed a passage between—*eros* becomes a transcendent quest for an inaccessible object. And is this not, Irigaray asks, the “foundational act of meta-physics?” (E 33/27).²³

The entire problematic of technology and metaphysics traced by Heidegger then circles around the question of *eros*. Indeed, the very basis of Heidegger’s hope for a future beyond the *Ge-Stell* of technology is taken from a speech on the transformative powers of love. While Heidegger’s intuition sent him to look for the “saving power” in the right place it seems that, like Socrates, he too was unable to hear Diotima’s original lesson. The “saving power” is not *tekhne*’s concealed belonging to *poiesis* but rather its belonging to *tikto*, and therefore to *eros*. Thus, when a more resigned Heidegger claimed in his last interview (1966) that not even the poetical but “only a god can save us now,”

²³ “What seemed to me to be original in Diotima’s method has disappeared once again. This intermediary milieu of love, which is irreducible, is resplit between a “subject” (an inadequate word in Plato) and a “beloved reality.” Falling in love no longer constitutes a becoming of the lover himself, of love in the lover [*amant(e)*], or between the lovers, but is now the teleological quest for what is deemed a higher reality and often situated in a transcendence inaccessible to our mortal condition. Immortality has already been put off until death and does not figure as one of our constant tasks as mortals, a transmutation that is endlessly incumbent upon us here, now—its possibility having been inscribed in the body, which is capable of becoming divine” (E 36/29).

perhaps the god had always been closer than he thought: the *daimon* of *eros*? Though both Irigaray and Heidegger go to the same text, they hear very different things there: while Heidegger follows the call of the poetical, Irigaray responds to the murmur of *eros*: thus, for her, the task at the “end of philosophy” is not, as it was for Heidegger, a poetic thinking of the clearing of Being but to reinterpret the relationship between loving and thinking (ED 187/105). Irigaray points out that, in her discourse, Diotima’s teaching on the relationship between *eros* and philosophy is also split between two understandings. And while she is more famous for teaching philosophy as a *love of wisdom* and desire for the eternal Truth, she *first* says that philosophy is a *way* or *wisdom of love*. It is this teaching that Irigaray says “seems never to have been heard”: the teaching of a philosophy that is not about a Being-toward-death in which Truth is accessed only in the dislocation of the soul from the body, but rather a philosophy as a Being-toward-life in which truth is perpetually engendered in amorous, desiring relations. For Heidegger, a new truth can only take place as an irruptive event, *ereignis*, in thought that leads to a new relation, or “belonging-together”, of humanity and Being. Because the metaphysical epoch was opened when *eros* is no longer a perpetual becoming in relation, however, Irigaray believes that the new relation between humanity and Being can only take place in amorous relations between humans: “Such an *ereignis* leads us to attain what most truly corresponds to our own Being through an experience in which our *Dasein*—our being-there—is determined by our desire and our love and their sharing in difference” (TBB 102).

For Irigaray, then, it is a recovery of neither Being nor *phusis*, neither *poeisis* nor even life itself that might take us beyond the meta/physics of technophallogocentrism

(although the recovery of each of these from their oblivion is not unnecessary), but, above all, *a way of eros*. Eros is the link between Being, life, and sex that remains unthought, perhaps unthinkable, within the onto-logic of technology and it therefore goes beyond each of them as they are presently configured. Following Foucault and Simondon, eros would be another way of *problematizing* life, sex and Being, of posing these problems in a more generative way such that in our responses to them more of the vital sexuate virtuality that we carry can be brought-forth: for “love,” as Jean Genet writes, “*precipitates beings*”²⁴ Eros makes a world of difference and it is this affective power of differentiation and relation that runs through the ethics of bodies and pleasures so provocatively alluded to by Foucault, the sexuate virtuality that Simondon tells us is waiting for its actualization in a sexuate trans-individuality, and the ontology and ethics of sexual difference extensively developed by Irigaray. In each case, though in different ways no doubt, truth is not given in knowledge (*connaissance*) but in a co-birth (*co-naissance*), a perpetual individuation or transformation of the self, in erotic or sexuate relation with others. Here, truth could never be static but would always be shared in-between, for “love knows” Irigaray writes, “that truth does not exist once and for all but that its only proof is the fecundity of what it produces toward the cultivation of life for all living beings” (TBB 102). Such a thought could therefore never be a science of sex or life, nor even an *ars erotica*. Nor would it be a logic of *tekhne* or Being/being (a technology or ontology), or even a poetics. It would, rather, be an *erotics*—an *erotikos*—an engendering through eros that permits a *passage between* all the oppositions of the metaphysics of technophallogocentrism—*phusis* and *tekhne*, immortality and

²⁴ Jean Genet, *Journal du voleur* (Paris: Gallimard), 9.

mortality, life and death, body and soul, matter and spirit, immanence and transcendence, man and woman, heterosexual and homosexual, love (*eros*) and friendship (*philia*)—toward a future that is still and always open. “We lack the words for such a thought,” Irigaray says, but “that does not mean that it is impossible, or meaningless, that it represents an unfeasible utopia. We simply do not have it now” (ED 106/188). Although, maybe in a sense we do have it now. Maybe it just corresponds to a world that cannot be *known* with any certainty—indeed, a world where that of which one was most certain, most of all “the self,” dissolves in an alchemical transfiguration. A world that cannot be measured by its “effects,” a world in which our “games of truth [*jeux de vérité*]” do not operate, a world that is not *there* once and for all as the empty space-time of cause-effect relations but is always becoming in the infinite space-time that lives in an instant of relation. But here, the event (*ereignis*) of “world disclosure” would occur not as a single “flash of light” revealed in the Saying or Showing of language, but as a ceaseless engendering that takes place again and always in the interval held open by *eros*. In this way, waiting for the advent of a “new beginning” of thinking and Being is not our only hope for a “turn” out of the *Ge-Stell* of modern technology, it simply requires a wisdom of a different kind:

*Erotic games disclose a nameless world which is revealed by the nocturnal language of lovers. Such a language is not written down. It is whispered into the ear at night in a hoarse voice. At dawn it is forgotten.*²⁵

²⁵ Genet, *Journal du voleur*, 9-10.

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