

A Glimpse into a True Democracy. An Interview with Luce Irigaray

ALEKSANDER KOPKA: Let me begin with justice. In Book V of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle defines justice as the practice of perfect virtue displayed toward others, namely, the kind of justice which assumes its ultimate character precisely through relations with others. From this point of view, care about one's growth would be strictly connected to care about others. Given the emphasis that you put on our relational identity, is there a place for the notion of justice in your philosophy? If so, how can we display justice toward all living beings, and the natural environment in general, during the climate crisis?

LUCE IRIGARAY: Your first question made me laugh. How could Aristotle practice justice towards the other(s) given what he thought and wrote about the woman? What does the word 'other' mean for him—as for many authors of edifying moralistic discourses—if the value of the difference of the other(s), beginning with their natural difference, is not acknowledged? In a logic based on identity, sameness, equality, what can be the status of an other? Does this word not amount to a mere definition in/by a logos which does not take difference into account, except as a more or less identical, same, equal in a scale of values according to which the different always represents that which is inferior with respect to the model or the ideal?

Yes, I worry about justice in my work. However, given the culture, which is ours, the first concern is to care about rights regarding every being without entrusting the practice of justice to people who are unable to be equal to such a task, what could be their ethical claims on this subject. For this very reason, I worked a lot towards the re-thinking of civil rights which can ensure justice. In reality, our current rights, which supposedly have been defined in a neutral and in a neuter way, have been established by masculine

subjects educated according to a certain logic. I thus began with trying to define sexual rights (cf. *Je, Tu, Nous; Thinking the Difference, Sexes and Genealogies; I Love to You*) and I struggled politically, notably within the framework of the Italian Communist Party and that of the European Parliament, to get these rights recognized and applied. This has been a really difficult undertaking! Most of the people who are presumed to be democratic have not yet truly understood that democracy is first a question of rights that allow each citizen to legally oppose any power, including the power of the state.

ALEKSANDER KOPKA: You argue that the sustainability of life should not come down to a competitive and conflictual form of survival and that survival should be based on the cultivation of life. Could you explain why we have become so obsessed with this conflictual form of survival and how we could overcome it?

LUCE IRIGARAY: I do not take a great interest in 'survival', which—in my opinion—partakes in a culture that is coming to an end. Does not speaking about 'survival' and even about the 'sustainability of life' amount to considering life to be something that we could have at hand, and that we could handle by ourselves? Obviously, it is then no longer truly a question of life. Life is autonomous with respect to us and it really exists when it develops by itself. We must above all respect it and contribute to its development without aiming at substituting our work for the growth of life itself. The first words of the chorus in the tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles are enlightening regarding the problem that the intervention of man in the functioning of nature raises.

ALEKSANDER KOPKA: With the rise of the capitalist system we have been witnessing and experiencing an unprecedented acceleration of our detachment and isolation from the so-called natural world. Through its insatiable drive to accumulate and appropriate, capitalism has distorted and impaired our relations of subsistence and sustainability with the natural world. However, is not capitalism rather a symptom of a deeper problem or a flaw in our culture and approach toward the natural environment and other, human and non-human, living beings? How can we prevent the ongoing destruction of the natural world and our ties with it?

LUCE IRIGARAY: It seems to me that the greatest mistake of capitalism lies in its way of producing without taking a sufficient account of the autonomous production of living beings. It favors the manufacturing of products to

the detriment of the fruits of a natural growth. Acting in this way, capitalism has increased man's claim to substitute the potential of nature itself with his own work - a claim that exists from the beginning of our culture, as it is told by the chorus in the tragedy *Antigone*. The acceleration of such a process is notably due to the transformation of the means of production, especially through the use of machines and products which speed up the rhythm of a natural growth. Machines can produce more quickly and efficiently than humans can. Little by little, they have surpassed the human potential and the value of human work. Human beings had to endeavor to become as efficient as machines, which removes them from their belonging to the natural world.

Perhaps a means of remedying this removal from nature is to consider the human to be a living being among other living beings which are mutually dependent on one another. We must thus respect our respective rhythms of development so that each of us should bring to the other(s) what corresponds to our respective potential. From this viewpoint, it is important to remember that living beings, unlike machines, are sexuate; and to take into consideration the fecundity of sexuation and sexuate difference, not only at the level of reproduction but at the level of production—for example, of energy, relations, or culture.

ALEKSANDER KOPKA: In the famous 11th thesis on Feuerbach, Marx writes that "philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it." While according to Gramsci, Marx did not renunciate philosophy as a whole, he repudiated a certain type of philosophy, namely, a theoretico-speculative philosophy. In contrast to this theoretico-speculative way of philosophizing, as a staunch critic of disembodied, possessive, and phallogocentric philosophy, you encourage us to move toward a philosophy which is concerned, as you argue in *In the Beginning She Was*, with the "cultivation of our relational identity." At the same time, you raise concerns about the shortcomings of both idealism and materialism. What is, therefore, the path from theory to practice in your philosophy? And how can your philosophy of sexuate difference, to use Marx's words, change the world?

LUCE IRIGARAY: I am not sure Marx has really changed the world. Has he not been mainly a theoretician who interprets and criticizes the existing world? To succeed in changing the world, it is necessary to modify its background—for example, to question the subject-object logic which underlies the con-

struction of our world and the general objectalisation that results from it. It is necessary to interrogate why subjectivity is determined by its relation to/with objects—be they material or spiritual—more than by its natural and material belonging, and its relation to/with other subjects. It is also crucial to propose other modes of production and not a mere appropriation of the same means of production by the workers.

Concerning your question about the path from theory to practice in my philosophy, I would first like to say that thinking for me is a practice. Second, I would like to stress the fact that my thought is inspired by a living practice—beginning with the one of my own life—before my practice becomes inspired by my theory. Next, I also would like to say that my thinking aims at shaking the foundation—or *upokeimenon*—of our culture, in particular by substituting a subject-subject logic for a subject-object logic, and also a logic of difference for a logic of sameness, identity, similarity, and equality. This entails us taking on the negative which corresponds with the partiality of our natural belonging instead of using the negative as we please—as is the case in almost our whole philosophical tradition—or as a negative evaluation or connotation of the world and the way of behaving—which also presupposes that we have the negative at hand.

I would like to add that to consider our subjectivity to be sexuate, as I suggest, could be a path to overcome the master-slave relation which undermines the foundation of our theories and practices and is the cause of many sorts of unfairness. Those of the latter that Marx condemns relate above all to having and not to being. And, for example, besides the fact that he does not envision the transformation of our subjectivity which is needed to surmount many forms of unfairness, he has not thought of some unfairnesses that we are facing today, notably of the problem of pollution, which is too often negated to preserve the employment of the workers. I could also allude to other points—for example, the problem that the subjection of a human being to mechanization and technology raises.

ALEKSANDER KOPKA: In your writings like *To Be Born*, you seem to be profoundly occupied with the problem of human development and education. What kind of changes in the way we educate ourselves and others must be made to address the issues of the cultivation of life and preservation of the natural environment? And since this question remains inseparable from the problem of language, what kind of changes in our language, and by consequence, in the ecologic discourse (if there is only one) must be made? I am asking you about language because I believe that this issue is all the more

important since, as you write in “What the Vegetal World Says to Us,” “[o]ur removal from the vegetal world has been accompanied by the loss of language that serves the accomplishment and sharing of life...”

LUCE IRIGARAY: As I write in *To Be Born*, a human being cannot develop as a tree, in continuity with a seed. First, because a human being is conceived by a man and a woman and is only a man or a woman. Furthermore, a human’s growth cannot be merely natural, it also needs to resort to culture for its achievement. The problem is that the cultural models which are ours are not faithful to our nature. Thus, we become split into our body and our mind, our body and our spirit, without being able to develop as a comprehensive being. The most important point is to discover a culture that serves the blossoming of our natural being instead of contributing to its sterilization and repression. To consider us to be individuals in the neuter is an example of this way of acting.

Our culture operates above all through language. It is thus essential to discover a language that can express the living instead of merely naming them in order to seize them through representation(s). Some indications about a possible path on this subject are provided by the text of Heidegger regarding his dialogue with a Japanese master. This text makes it clear that not all cultures use language like ours. However, even in our culture, we can try to develop communication without contenting ourselves with information. This presupposes the favoring of syntactic structures which allow for a dialogue between subjects, and not only about objects. It is also crucial to privilege a discourse which expresses our living being without subjecting it to constructed ‘essences’—for example, a discourse of the here and now taking into account the particularity of our own living being and the one of the other(s), including their sensitive and sensuous aspects.

ALEKSANDER KOPKA: In *Through Vegetal Being* and your other writings, you bring forth the profound function of air and breathing for both our spiritual and natural life. You also describe breathing as the first gesture of life. Could you tell us something more about sharing universal breathing as *the* essential condition of life? How should it be reflected in our laws, rights, and policies? Why has been breathing, as the first gesture of life, forgotten and how can we remind ourselves of it?

LUCE IRIGARAY: It is first a matter of allowing each to breathe in their own way. This requires securing breathable air for all. Caring about the quality of air ought to be the first concern of the persons in charge of a country.

To breathe is the condition for being and remaining living. Unfortunately, this is not acknowledged—by the way, not even by Marx.

It is important that each can be but also must assume breathing by themselves. If that is not the case, some survive thanks to the breathing of others, as it happens too often. We still lack laws, rights, and politics that consider this elemental truth. Citizens ought to have civil rights that they could put forward to the state or any other person in charge regarding the pollution of air, even accusing them of being an accomplice to murder. May what we endure with Covid 19 bring to the attention of those who govern the importance of breathing, a thing that people who became ill from air pollution did not succeed in doing! Perhaps it was possible to ignore that our first need is to breathe because we were thinking of our subjectivity as an abstract mechanism and not as an emanation from our living being. In reality, as I have already said, our culture does not correspond to the cultivation of life but instead to its repression.

ALEKSANDER KOPKA: I would like to end with a question about democracy. Why do you think democracy is the answer for peaceful coexistence between living beings and reconciliation with nature? Is democracy essentially about sharing, and therefore, about sharing the Earth? Furthermore, is democracy primarily an “earth democracy” and an “air democracy”? What kind of actions, in the wake of what evidently became a crisis of democracies around the world (especially regarding the Western political regimes which dub themselves democratic), have to be undertaken for us to move toward liberation, happiness, and the sustainability of life?

LUCE IRIGARAY: I would like to know the context of my work, to which your words refer, to answer more precisely. Surely, we must hope that citizens want to coexist peacefully. Besides an appropriate education, civil law ought to ensure this coexistence through rights that help citizens control their instincts and drives. These rights ought to be respected first by those who claim to govern the country in the name of democracy but who do not hesitate to divide the citizens and propose programs which contribute to such division, as well as to the destruction of the natural world, in order to win an election. Democracy ought to be a manner of organizing and governing the city that allows citizens to live in peace and be happy—making them responsible for that as much as is possible. Respect and care for the Earth and the air must have a share in a democracy, both being essential to the life and the well-being of every citizen.

I think that it is crucial to make citizens aware of their needs, desires, and rights. It would be important that they receive an education on this subject. I appreciate a politician like Gramsci who considers popular education to be one of his main undertakings. In order to vote democratically, citizens need a political training, which most of them lack. Thus, they vote under the pressure of appealing slogans and media discourses, the content of which they do not truly understand. Then, they come into conflict with the decisions of candidates for whom they voted blindly too.

Political programs must take into consideration the well-being of citizens, that is, not only the acquisition or possession of goods but also the development of their being and the quality of life. Encouraging the citizens to content themselves with claims to have more, instead of being more, is not a really democratic strategy. Citizens, then, end in being no one and nothing. And what could mean a democracy without citizens? And yet, I wonder whether we have not reached such a paradoxical situation...

