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Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy

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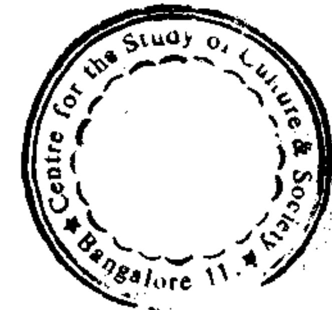

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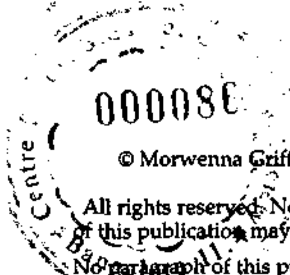

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Luce Irigaray's Critique of Rationality

Margaret Whitford

This paper is about a feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray, whose work raises particular difficulties for the Anglo-Saxon reader unfamiliar with the Continental tradition of philosophy.[1] In attempting to elucidate, with reference to its context, one of the strands of her critique of Western metaphysics, I hope to make her work more accessible for discussion to a wider readership. I must emphasise that this paper is only attempting to deal with one aspect of Irigaray's thought and will inevitably touch on issues that I won't have space to develop.

The work of Irigaray raises questions about the edifice of Western rationality. I would like here to approach these questions indirectly, to clarify their import by means of a detour through the concept of the imaginary. The term *imaginary* as a noun is current in French theoretical work, but not in English (except via Lacan, who gives the Imaginary, with a capital I, a major role in his theory). Like its English cognate, *imagination*, however, it is rich in connotations and operates differently in the different conceptual frameworks of the different authors who use it (authors as varied as Sartre, Bachelard, Barthes, Lacan, Castoriadis, Althusser). My view is that Anglo-American feminists have tended to assimilate, and then dismiss Irigaray's work too quickly, in part because the concept of the imaginary has not been closely examined. Either the imaginary has been ignored altogether, in which case Irigaray is mistakenly described as a biological essentialist (Sayers, 1982, p. 131; 1986, pp. 42–8), or else it has been interpreted as purely and simply a Lacanian concept, in which case the conclusion is that Irigaray has misunderstood or misread Lacan, and has not taken on board the implications of his theory (see Mitchell and Rose, 1982, pp. 54–6; Rose, 1985, pp. 136, 140; Ragland-Sullivan, 1986, pp. 273–80). In either case, the challenge to the Western conception of rationality

has largely been ignored. I will suggest that the implications of this challenge cannot be clearly seen if one merely looks at Irigaray through a Lacanian window.

I will begin (first section) with a description of the difference between the male and the female imaginary as characterised by Irigaray, without at this point trying to say what exactly the imaginary is, or to explain or account for the elements in the description. I will then (second section) examine the evolution of the concept of the imaginary in Irigaray's work, and its origins in psychoanalytic theory. This section will clarify the initial description of the imaginary and show what is meant by the claim that rationality is imaginary. Finally, in the third section, I will return to the categories of male and female as applied to the imaginary, and argue that Irigaray does not see them primarily as empirical categories, but as reconceptualisations which might help us change and transform our society in a direction which is less inimical to women. Although Irigaray is not what is commonly thought of as a political philosopher, I would like to suggest that it might be useful to see her work as a contribution to political philosophy, in so far as she is dealing with the issue of *change*: how to alter women's status in Western society.[2] For as she writes in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985c), 'There is no simple manageable way to leap to the outside of phallogocentrism, *nor any possible way to situate oneself there, that would result from the simple fact of being a woman*' (p. 162). The problem with which she is dealing, then, is that of creating the conditions in which change can take place. Her aim, I believe, is not to formulate a programme, but to set a process in motion.

THE SYMBOLISM OF MALE AND FEMALE

There have been a number of discussions recently, which I shall not attempt to summarise here, about whether it makes sense to talk of the 'maleness' of philosophy (see Harding and Hintikka, 1983; Lloyd, 1984; Grimshaw, 1986, ch. 2). Very briefly, the argument concerns what it would mean to describe philosophy, or rationality, as male. Lloyd, for example, argues that 'our ideas of Reason have historically incorporated an exclusion of the feminine, and . . . femininity itself has been partly constituted through such processes of exclusion' (p. x). Grimshaw suggests that conceptions of masculinity are built into certain philosophical theories, arguing, for

example, that Kant defines moral worth in such a way that women – as described by him elsewhere – are incapable of it (pp. 42–5). From the point of view that concerns me here, the problem is that conceptions of rationality seem to have been based upon exclusion models. Male–female symbolism has been used 'to express subordination relations between elements of a divided human nature' (Lloyd, p. 28) and reason, conceptualised as transcendence, in practice came to mean transcendence of the feminine, because of the symbolism used, despite the fact that 'it can of course be pointed out that mere bodily difference surely makes the female no more appropriate than the male to the symbolic representation of "lesser" intellectual functions' (Lloyd, p. 32).

Irigaray's work constitutes an attack upon such exclusion models, drawing for its symbolism on psychoanalysis, of which Irigaray is critical, but to which she is also indebted. There is a view in psychoanalytic theory, based on clinical evidence, that psychic health may be conceived of, unconsciously, as a state in which both parents, i.e. both the male and the female elements, are felt to be in creative intercourse within the psyche. Along these lines, then, Irigaray argues that for rationality to be fertile and creative, rather than infertile and sterile, it must not be conceived of as transcending or *exclusive of* the female element. The model is that of a creative (sexual) relationship in which the two elements in intercourse bring forth offspring, rather than a domination–subordination model in which one part of the self is repressing another part (as reason may be said to dominate the passions, for example). For Irigaray, the conceptualisation of rationality is inseparable from the conceptualisation of sexual difference; thus the imbalance in the symbolisation of sexual difference is a clue to other forms of imbalance that have far-reaching consequences: sexual difference is 'a problematic which might enable us to put in check the manifold forms of destruction of the world . . . Sexual difference could constitute the horizon of worlds of a fertility which we have not yet experienced' (Irigaray, 1984, p. 13). Ideas of fertility/sterility, creation/destruction, health/sickness (e.g. sclerosis) form part of her vocabulary, and reflect the ethical dimension of her analysis.

What is meant by male and female in this context? Although the terms are sometimes used to refer to biological males and females, it is much more common to find the pair being used as a kind of basic and fundamental symbolism (of which Genevieve Lloyd gives many examples in the history of philosophy and Alice Jardine (1985) in

contemporary French thought). I shall keep the terms male and female (without inverted commas) for their symbolic use, and use the terms men and women to refer to social or biological categories.

Irigaray would argue that rationality in the Western tradition has always been conceptualised or symbolised as male. She adds a psychoanalytic dimension to this – which I will explain further in the second section – by making a connection between the morphology of the body and the morphology of different kinds of thought processes. It must not be assumed that the body here is the empirical body; symbolism (or representation) is selective;[3] and it is clear from *Speculum* (1985b) that Irigaray is talking about an 'ideal morphology' (p. 320), in which the relationship to anatomy is metaphorical, somewhat schematic, a 'symbolic interpretation of . . . anatomy' (Gallop, 1983, p. 79). Anticipating, one might say that it is an *imaginary anatomy*. So she can say that in the phallomorphic sexual metaphoricity (*Speculum*, p. 47) of Western rationality, there is 'no change in morphology, no detumescence ever' (ibid., p. 303). Western rationality, governed by the male imaginary, is characterised by: the principle of identity (also expressed in terms of quantity or ownership); the principle of non-contradiction (in which ambiguity, ambivalence or multivalence have been reduced to a minimum); and binarism (e.g. nature/reason, subject/object, matter/energy, inertia/movement) – as though everything had to be either one thing or another (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 313). All these principles are based upon the possibility of individuating, or distinguishing one thing from another, upon the belief in the necessity of stable forms.[4] An equation is made between the (symbolic) phallus, stable form, identity and individuation. Irigaray explains in *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985c) that the logic of identity is male, because it is phallomorphic:

> The *one* of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning . . . supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of *at least two* (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself (p. 26).

For the female imaginary, there is no 'possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is being touched' (ibid., p. 26). The possibility of individuating is absent; woman '*is neither one nor two*' (ibid., p. 26):

> Perhaps it is time to return to that repressed entity, the female imaginary. So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is *plural*. (Ibid., p. 28)

> But if the female imaginary were to deploy itself, if it could bring itself into play otherwise than as scraps, uncollected debris, would it represent itself, even so, in the form of *one* universe? (Ibid., p. 30)

It is not that the female is unidentifiable, but that there is 'an excess of all identification to/of self' (*Speculum*, p. 230). The principle of non-contradiction does not apply. The female imaginary is mobile and fluid: 'a proper(ty) that is never fixed in the possible identity-to-self of some form or other. It is always *fluid*' (*This Sex*, p. 79). In *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* (1984), the undifferentiated maternal feminine is described as that which underlies 'all possibility of determining identity' (p. 98). Like the womb, it is the 'formless, "amorphous" origin of all morphology' (*Speculum*, p. 265, trans. adapted).

The reader will note the correspondence between the descriptions of the male and female imaginary, and the Pythagorean table of opposites, described by Aristotle in the *Metaphysics* (986a). On this table, Genevieve Lloyd (1984) comments.

> In the Pythagorean table of opposites, formulated in the sixth century BC, femaleness was explicitly linked with the unbounded – the vague, the indeterminate – as against the bounded – the precise and clearly determined. The Pythagoreans saw the world as a mixture of principles associated with determinate form, seen as good, and others associated with formlessness – the unlimited, irregular or disorderly – which were seen as bad or inferior. There were ten such contrasts in the table: limit/unlimited, odd/even, one/many, right/left, male/female, rest/motion, straight/curved, light/dark, good/bad, square/oblong. Thus 'male' and 'female', like the other contrasted terms, did not here function as straightforwardly descriptive classifications. 'Male', like the other terms on its side of the table, was construed as superior to its opposite; and the basis for this superiority was its association with

the primary Pythagorean contrast between form and formelessness. (p. 3)

This correspondence between the imaginary (a concept deriving in the first instance from psychoanalytic theory) and the ontological categories of the pre-Socratics, is not, of course, accidental. I will suggest later, in the third section, that the male and female imaginary should be seen as political rather than psychoanalytic categories. I interpret the female imaginary, for example, not as an essentialist description of what women are really like, but as a description of the female as she appears in, and is symbolised by, the Western cultural imaginary. And I interpret Irigaray's work as a Derridean attempt to deconstruct the pair in order to undermine its constraining power, beginning by privileging the subordinate element.[5]

THE IMAGINARY

In this section, I shall trace briefly the development of the concept of the imaginary in Irigaray's work. It seems to me that there is a shift between *Speculum* and the work which follows it; the initial fairly cautious appropriation of the term in a relatively uncontroversial way is succeeded by a bolder and more extensive deployment with much more far-reaching connotations. The points to which I want to draw particular attention in this paper are:

(a) the importance of the imaginary body in philosophy;
(b) the introduction of the notion that the imaginary may be male or female;
(c) the description of rationality as imaginary.

As most readers of French theory know by now, the imaginary is a psychoanalytic concept developed by Lacan in his reading of Freud. The concept, if not the term, is introduced by Lacan in his article entitled, 'The Mirror Stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience' (Lacan, 1977, pp. 1-7). The Imaginary is a developmental moment in the formation of the Ego or 'I': the baby, whose experience of its body until then had been fragmented and incoherent, is enabled, by means of a mirror (or an image of itself mirrored from a parental figure or figures) to see a reflection of itself as a whole body or unity, with which it can then

identify 'in anticipation' (p. 4). However, it must be stressed that Lacan's Imaginary has its origins in Freud's theories of the Ego and of narcissism (see Rose, 1981; Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986, ch. 2), and for my purposes here, it is the Freudian corpus which is more pertinent.

Freud does not use the term Ego entirely consistently (see the editorial comments in Freud, 1923, pp. 7–8), but it is possible to pick out three strands which shed light on Irigaray's concept of the imaginary. Firstly, the Ego is something which develops: 'a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start; the ego has to be developed' (Freud, 1914, p. 77). Freud (1923, p. 17) describes it as 'a coherent organization of mental processes'. Thus the unity of personal identity is constructed out of a preceding state of lack of organisation of mental processes, which is described variously by psychoanalysts as undifferentiation, fragmentation and so on. (Lacan describes identity as illusory.) What is important is that it is not given from the beginning of life, but is developed in the context of the profound and literally life-giving relationship with the parental figure(s), and is thus completely suffused with affect. Since it is something which develops, it is therefore capable of modification under certain conditions in later life (such as psychoanalysis).

Secondly, the Ego is not equivalent to consciousness; part of the Ego is unconscious (Freud, 1915, pp. 192–93; 1920, p. 19; 1923, pp. 17–18). Thirdly, the Ego is a bodily Ego. This third point needs explaining in some detail. Freud's comment that 'the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego' (Freud, 1923, p. 26) is expanded by a later footnote as follows: 'I.e. the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly from those springing from the surface of the body. It may thus be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body, besides . . . representing the superficies of the mental apparatus' (ibid.) Freud describes at several points how in phantasy, the ego represents its activities (mental or physical) to itself as equivalents of bodily activities. Probably the most well-known example of this is the identification whereby gifts or money (gold) or babies are equated with faeces (see Freud, 1905, pp. 186 and 196; 1908a, pp. 173–4; 1908b, pp. 219–20; 1917, pp. 128ff. and pp. 130–3). These equations or identifications may be shifting and provisional, or they may stabilise during the course of a person's development into a particular set of characteristics, as Freud describes in his paper 'Character and Anal Erotism' (Freud, 1908a).[6]

A more pertinent example of phantasy here is Freud's essay on 'Negation', in which the intellectual faculty of judgement (such as the capacity to assign truth or falsity to an assertion) is traced to this very primitive type of thinking in which everything is perceived/conceived on the model of the body:

> The *function* of judgement is concerned in the main with two sorts of decisions. It affirms or disaffirms the possession,by a thing of a particular attribute; and it asserts or disputes that a *presentation* has an existence in reality. The attribute to be decided about may originally have been good or bad, useful or harmful. Expressed in the language of the oldest – the oral – instinctual impulses, the judgement is: 'I should like to eat this', or 'I should like to spit it out'; and, put more generally: 'I should like to take this into myself and to keep that out.' That is to say: 'It shall be inside me' or 'it shall be outside me'.
>
> (Freud, 1925, pp. 236–7)

To judge that something is true is, in phantasy, to swallow it or to incorporate it; to judge that something is false is to spit it out or to expel it.[7] Freud comments on the way in which a repressed thought may return in the form of a negative assertion: 'That is *not* what I was thinking', which is a kind of phantasy expulsion of the forbidden or repressed thought.

This is not a reductive account; to show the origins of conceptual thought in bodily phantasy does not entail any judgement about the truth or falsity of that thought. Phantasy is neither true nor false, and truth and falsity are judgements which belong to a different order and are governed by different rules. And further, as Freud (1908b) shows in his paper on the sexual theories of children, phantasmatic representations are not necessarily accurate perceptions of biological or social processes, but *interpretations* of them. These unconscious (mis)representations can coexist in the mind with the knowledge acquired at a later stage, providing, for example, an affective substratum which determines a person's attitude towards that later knowledge. (I will return to this point in the third section.)

The Freudian account of the (bodily) Ego and its relation to more intellectual activities in (unconscious) phantasy is explicitly subsumed by Lacan under the explanatory concept of the Imaginary: 'the symbolic equation [e.g. money=faeces] . . . arises

from an alternating mechanism of expulsion and introjection, or projection and absorption, that is to say, from an imaginary game' (Lacan, 1975a, p. 96, trans. Rose, 1981, p. 139).[8] Thus what pre-Lacanian psychoanalysis describes as unconscious phantasy, Lacan describes as imaginary (though he then goes on to build a much more complicated edifice on the Imaginary and its relation with the Symbolic and the Real).

Let us return now to Irigaray. In *Speculum*, she takes over the term imaginary, and applies it to what psychoanalysis had previously called unconscious phantasy. At one point, for example, she attributes anachronistically the imaginary to Freud himself: 'elsewhere, Freud insists that in the childish imaginary the production of a child is equated with the production of feces' (p. [illegible]), or refers to Freud's 'imaginary economy' (p. 101). At another point she describes gold, penis and child as terms interchangeable with excrement 'in the current imaginary of any "subject"' (p. [illegible]). When she refers to Lacan, it is not so much to argue with him as to play with his concepts. She talks at some length in *Speculum* about the mirror (the concept of the imaginary was first introduced and developed in Lacan's theory of the mirror stage), but rather than giving an alternative account of women's psychosexual development, as might at first appear, she is offering a critique, or deconstruction, of a dominant conceptualisation or representation of sexual difference. Taking Lacan's mirror as an image of representation in the West, she asks him why he used a flat mirror, 'in that the flat mirror reflects the greater part of women's sexual organs only as a hole' (*Speculum*, p. 89, note): there is no penis, there appear to be no sexual organs, and 'she' appears to be defective. For the exploration of women's sexual specificity, a different sort of mirror (literal or figurative) might be needed – a speculum or a concave mirror.[9] Elsewhere she suggests that women are the components of which the mirror is made (*This Sex*, p. [illegible]).

This is a point about conceptualisation, not about women. It is not so much that Irigaray is disputing Freud's or Lacan's theories, since she is in any case making use of their theories herself; it is rather that in *Speculum* she is psychoanalysing the psychoanalysts, analysing *their* imaginary, i.e. the unconscious phantasy underlying the Freudian or Lacanian explanatory systems. Her interpretation is that Freud's account of sexuality is anal, and that in the Freudian phantasy, the stage in which children are *believed* to be born through the anus (*see* e.g. Freud, 1908b), continues to underlie his

theorisation. Freud's model of sexuality is male, according to Irigaray, quoting Freud, 'we are . . . obliged to recognise that the little girl is a little man' (Freud, 1933, p. 118). And since his phantasy is anal, a phantasy in which the specificity of women continues to remain unrecognised, women can *only* appear in this scenario as defective males.

But the point is also that an anatomical difference is perceived in the light of the conceptual frameworks available. In an important transition, Irigaray goes on to argue that this is not an example of the individual phantasy of any particular philosopher/psychoanalyst, but that speculation itself in the West is dominated by anality; sexuality and thinking, in an imaginary operation, have become equated both with each other and with one and the same bodily activity. The imaginary jumps, then, out of the domain of the technically psychoanalytic into the domain of social explanation,[10] and becomes a social imaginary signification which, as explained by another psychoanalyst and social critic, Castoriadis (1975), has almost unlimited extension.

> Compared with individual imaginary significations, [social imaginary significations] are infinitely vaster than a phantasy (the underlying schema of what is referred to as the Jewish, Greek, or Western 'world-picture' has no bounds) and they have no precisely located existence (if that is to say one can ascribe to the individual unconscious a precisely located existence).
>
> (pp. 200–1)[11]

By appropriating the term imaginary for his particular version of Freudian theory, Lacan was colonising a term which was already in current use in aesthetics and literary criticism, and changing its meaning radically. Irigaray, in a similar fashion, wrests Lacan's concept out of its Lacanian context in order to extend its significance: the imaginary emerges from its relatively subordinate position in *Speculum*, to become, in *This Sex* and *Éthique*, one of the key notions of an ambitious *social* critique.

To put it as succinctly as possible, the problem as defined by Irigaray is that the female has a particular function in symbolic processes: to subtend them, to be that which is outside discourse. Using the language of bodily phantasy and of the representations of the female body, one could say that 'She functions as a *hole* . . . in the elaboration of imaginary and symbolic processes' (*Speculum*,

p. 71). Any organisation of the real, whether it be linguistic, social or individual, is an organisation which carves out of an undifferentiated continuum a set of categories which enable the real to be grasped. But it is impossible to organise the world in this way without residue. The emergence of distinctions, determinate identities or social organisations always implies something else, that original state of non-differentiation from which they have emerged (Castoriadis's magma[12]), such as a pre-social nature[13] or the unconscious.[14] This outside, which is non-graspable in-itself, since it is by definition outside the categories which allow one to posit its existence, is traditionally conceptualised as female (the unlimited or the formless of the pre-Socratics). Within this sexual symbolism, the determinate, that which has form or identity, and so *ipso facto* rationality, belongs to the other *half* of the pair, and is therefore male.

Referring to this traditional conceptualisation, then, Irigaray describes women as a 'residue' (*This Sex*, p. 114), or as a 'sort of magma . . . from which *men*, humanity, draw nourishment, shelter, the resources to live or survive for free' (*Éthique*, p. 102). In *Speculum*, she had already described this 'outside' of discourse as the womb (*le matriciel*), and by extension the maternal body: 'formless, "amorphous" origin of all morphology' (p. 265, trans. adapted); in *Éthique* she adds that the undifferentiated maternal/feminine underlies 'all possibility of determining identity' (p. 98). Or women are described as resembling the unconscious: 'Thus we might wonder whether certain properties attributed to the unconscious may not, in part, be ascribed to the female sex, which is censured by the logic of consciousness' (*This Sex*, p. 73).

The unconscious is a realm in which the laws of identity and non-contradiction do not apply. So when Irigaray writes that for the female imaginary too, the laws of identity and non-contradiction (A is A, A is not B) do not apply either, it may sound like a dangerously irrationalist description of women that merely reinforces a traditional denigration. The practical value of these principles, without which rationality would be inconceivable, is so evident that it appears unquestionable. The logic of identity is the prerequisite of any language or any society at all. However, the point is that there will always be a residue which exceeds the categories, and this excess is conceptualised as female:

> In other words, the issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of

> which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women . . . do not claim to be rivalling men in constructing a logic of the feminine that would still take onto-theo-logic as its model, but that they are rather attempting to wrest this question away from the economy of the logos. They should not put it, then, in the form 'What is woman?' but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side. (*This Sex*, p. 78)

The reader may remember the definition of the female in *Speculum* as 'an excess of all identifications to/of self' (p. 230)

From Irigaray's point of view, she is not *prescribing* what the female should be, but *describing* how it functions within Western imaginary and symbolic operations, *in order to* show how what is taken to be the unalterable order of reality (discursive or otherwise) is in fact *imaginary* and therefore susceptible to change. So she comments on Lacan that:

> The topology of the subject as it is defined by certain theoreticians of psychoanalysis (cf. the *Écrits* of Jacques Lacan . . .) . . . would use the symbolisation of the feminine as a basis or basement for the (masculine) subject. (*Éthique*, p. 103)

Any particular organisation is taken to be the real in an imaginary operation, since the real cannot be grasped without the framework of a set of categories. However, if one takes the imaginary to be equivalent to the real, and implies for example that the real is co-extensive with the categories of discourse, then of course the only possibilities for change will be permutations within the same set of categories; no totally different reorganisation could emerge.[15] Her objection to Lacan, then, is the way in which he takes a particular discursive organisation to be unchangeable:

> What poses problems in reality turns out to be justified by a logic that has already ordered reality as such. Nothing escapes the circularity of this law. (*This Sex*, p. 88)

This *ahistorical* (*This Sex*, pp. 100 and 125) conflation of the present categories of Western discourse with the real, thus eliding the question of social change, is Lacan's *imaginary* (*This Sex*, p. 99), which is also the imaginary of Western metaphysics. For,

> we note that this 'real' may well include, and in large measure, a *physical reality* that continues to resist adequate symbolization and/or that signifies the powerlessness of logic to incorporate in its writing all the characters of nature. (*This Sex*, pp. 106–7, trans. adapted)

Her particular argument against Lacan is that he excludes in advance the possibility of any real social change, because he does not ask the question about the relationship between real women and Woman – or awoman (*l'afemme*) as he prefers to say since 'the woman does not exist' (Mitchell and Rose, 1982, p. 167). For the problem for real women is that although they may be symbolised as the outside, they are not *in fact* outside the society they live in, and its symbolic structures.

In summary, then, Irigaray begins with an analysis of the imaginary of Western philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse (*Speculum*), aiming to show that the conceptualisation of sexual difference in this discourse is governed by an imaginary which is anal, that is to say which interprets sexual difference as though there were only one sex, and that sex were male (women are defective men). For our culture, identity, logic and rationality are symbolically male, and the female is either the outside, the hole, or the unsymbolisable residue (or at most, the womb, the maternal function). In *This Sex* and *Éthique*, Irigaray goes on to argue that the imaginary is not confined to philosophers and psychoanalysts, but is a social imaginary which is taken to be the real, with damaging consequences for women, who, unlike men, find themselves 'homeless' in the symbolic order. Unlike Lacan, she does not believe this imaginary to be fixed and unalterable; like Castoriadis, she is arguing that radical transformations in the social imaginary *can* take place, and that a new and previously unimaginable configuration could take shape.

In 1966, in an early paper on the imaginary, she referred to 'the impossible return to the body' (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 15). In *Éthique*, she deplores the modern neglect of the body, and emphasises the fact that 'man's body is the threshold, the porch, of the construction

or his universe(s)' (p. 99). Is there a contradiction here? Not if one remembers that the relation to the body is always an imaginary or symbolic one; it is the *real* body, like the real of the world, which is always out of reach. The importance of the imaginary body is that it underlies Western metaphysics, in which the subject is always identified as male. Thought is still, as it were, in the anal stage; sexual difference does not yet exist in the social imaginary of the West;[16] the female body is symbolised as outside. 'But this fault, this deficiency, this "hole", inevitably affords woman too few figurations, images or representations by which to represent herself' (*Speculum*, p. 71).

There might be another problem here. Since Lacan describes identity as imaginary, and if identity, according to Irigaray, is male (as described in the first section), the problem arises: either the idea of a female imaginary is self-contradictory, or the female imaginary in so far as it attributes identity to the female populace, would still fall within the parameters of male thought, would be a male definition of the female. I think Irigaray's answer to that would be that precisely what we need to analyse is the unconscious of Western (male) thought, i.e. the female imaginary. Not until this repressed imaginary has been more adequately symbolised will we be able to articulate the relation between male and female elements in a different way. Which leads on to the question of strategy and the final section.

THE POLITICS OF MALE-FEMALE SYMBOLISM

I hope to have shown in the previous section that Irigaray's imaginary, although a concept which derives from psychoanalysis, cannot be understood in purely psychoanalytic terms, but also has an irreducible social dimension which makes its anatomical reference a symbolic or cultural one. She is not referring to a direct and unmediated relation to the body, but to an imaginary and symbolic representation of the body, an 'ideal morphology' which, as she puts it, leaves residues that are unsymbolised (or in which the female body may be symbolised as residue). I now want to conclude by discussing briefly the implications of using male–female symbolism to describe rationality as male and the female as unconscious/magma/residue in what might appear to be a symbolically retrograde move. Is it not politically dangerous to regard women as the irrational, or as the unconscious of culture?

The problem is that one cannot alter symbolic meanings by *fiat*.[17] One cannot simply *reverse* the symbolism; and it is not enough to claim that women are in fact rational, since that is not the point. (The point is the relation of women to the symbolic structures which exclude them.) Irigaray's own strategy is mimicry, or mimesis:

> One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus begin to thwart it . . . To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to locate the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible', of 'matter' – to 'ideas', in particular to ideas about herself that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: recovering a possible operation of the feminine in language. (*This Sex*, p. 76, trans. adapted)

She insists though that mimesis is only a strategy (*This Sex*, p. 77), not a solution. And again, to understand her strategy, I think we need to refer back to the psychoanalytic model.[18]

In the individual psyche, unconscious phantasy is determining to the extent that it remains unconscious. When, in the psychoanalytic process, it achieves an access to consciousness via language (what Irigaray refers to as symbolisation or 'the operations of sublimation'), it becomes possible to effect a shift or change in the phantasy which enables the analysand to change and brings about real transformations in the personality, in the direction of greater flexibility and creativity, and less rigidity or repression.[19] I would suggest that one way to read Irigaray is to see her as conceiving of her work as initiating a process of change at the level of the social unconscious (or imaginary), by offering interpretations of the 'material' offered by society in its philosophical or metaphysical discourse:

> This process of interpretive rereading has always been a *psychoanalytic undertaking* as well. That is why we need to pay attention to the way the unconscious works in each philosophy, and perhaps in philosophy in general. We need to listen

> (psycho)analytically to its procedures of repression, to the structuration of language that shores up its representations, separating the true from the false, the meaningful from the meaningless, and so forth. (*This Sex*, p. 75)

These interpretations would verbalise the unconscious phantasy and begin the process of lifting the repression, a process which, on the model of psychoanalysis, might lead to change. On this reading of Irigaray, what is described as the female imaginary is not the essential feminine, common to all women, but a place in the symbolic structures.

In the first section, discussing the development of the Ego and its phantasies, I pointed out that the individual Ego, in psychoanalytic theory, is said to take shape in the context of a relationship with parental figures. Putting this another way, one might say that the acquisition of one's knowledge of the world is passionately motivated. Later, epistemology loses touch with its sources. This is precisely Irigaray's diagnosis of what has gone wrong with the rationality of the West. In *Éthique*, she suggests:

> contrary to the usual methods of dialectic, love should not have to be abandoned in order to become wise or learned. It is love which leads to knowledge [*science*] . . . It is love which leads the way, and is the path, both. (pp. 27–8)

As I indicated earlier, for Irigaray the conceptualisation of rationality is inseparable from the conceptualisation of sexual difference. The scission of epistemology from its sources is linked to a model of rationality (symbolised as male) in which the symbolic female is dominated or repressed, and 'transcended'. Irigaray suggests that this has led to the apotheosis of rationality – modern technology – and to apparently unstoppable processes of destruction.

To describe rationality as male is not to restrict rationality to men. Rather it is to argue against exclusion models of rationality, as Irigaray states more or less explicitly:

> What has been needed, in effect, is a discourse in which sexuality itself is at stake so that what has been serving as a condition of possibility of philosophical discourse, or rationality in general, can make itself heard. (*This Sex*, p. 168)

Exclusion is a process governed by the male imaginary (i.e. identity, or A is A, involves exclusion: A is not B); another way of putting it is to say that it is the way the male imaginary deals with sexual difference. What is important is that rationality is categorised by Irigaray as male, not in order to oppose it, which would be self-defeating, but in order to suggest a more adequate conceptualisation, in which, in psychoanalytic terms, the male does not repress or split off the female/unconscious, but acknowledges or integrates it. For the psychoanalytic model, the relation between the different parts of the person, however they are named: reason/passions, body/mind, superego/ego/id, consciousness/unconscious, need not be a clear-cut one; the boundaries may fluctuate, there may be a possibility of intercommunication which is not necessarily experienced as threatening or overwhelming. In Irigaray's terms, the sexual relationship (i.e. the relationship between the symbolic male and the symbolic female) should ideally be like a chiasma, in which each could offer a *home* (*lieu* or *sol*) to the other (*Éthique*, p. 16), in 'exchanges without identifiable terms, without accounts, without end' (*This Sex*, p. 197).

In her capacity as analyst of the social psyche, Irigaray can only offer interpretations, not programmes or solutions. But if one remains within her symbolism, one might say that the creative source for change lies in the unconscious, the magma, the outside – and therefore precisely in the female.

NOTES

Note on the translations. References to *Speculum* and *This Sex Which Is Not One* are taken from the available English translations (Irigaray, 1985b and 1985c respectively) except where otherwise indicated. Translations from *Éthique de la différence sexuelle* and *Parler n'est jamais neutre* (Irigaray, 1984 and 1985a respectively) are my own.

1. Alice Jardine (1985), in her impressive book on woman-as-effect in modern French theory, *Gynesis*, points out the problems of trying to read French theory out of context. A further problem is the term 'feminist'. Since many French women theorists see 'woman' as a metaphysical concept, they are reluctant to call themselves feminist because of the unacceptable theoretical implications of this term (see Jardine, pp. 19ff. and p. 82).

2. Irigaray indicates the 'political' aspect of her work as follows: 'Every operation on and in philosophical language, by virtue of the very nature of that discourse – which is essentially political – possesses implications that, no matter how mediate they may be, are nonetheless politically determined' (*This Sex*, p. 81).
3. Cf. Freud's account of hysterical symptoms, which do not correspond to neuro-physiological pathways but to symbolic or phantasmatic patterns: '*hysteria behaves as though anatomy did not exist or as though it had no knowledge of it*' (Freud, 1893, p. 169).
4. '*The object of desire itself*, and for psychoanalysts, *would be the transformation of fluid to solid*? Which seals – this is well worth repeating – *the triumph of rationality*. Solid mechanics and rationality have maintained a relationship of very long standing, one against which fluids have never stopped arguing' (*This Sex*, p. 113). (Irigaray's italics). See also 'Le sujet de la science est-il sexué?' (Irigaray, 1985a, pp. 307–21), and 'Éthique de la différence sexuelle' (Irigaray, 1984, pp. 113–24, trans. in Moi, 1987), for an account of the 'maleness' of the human and physical sciences.
5. For an account of Derrida's deconstructive method, see his *Positions* (1981), title interview, and also Wood (1979). See also Moi (1985), pp. 138ff., for a brief account of Irigaray's use of Derrida.
6. For a moving and almost entirely non-technical account of the operations of unconscious phantasy and their possible effects on the personality and activities of adult life, see Milner (1969).
7. See Wollheim (1973), pp. 189–90.
8. Lacan's Imaginary is, of course, a much more far-reaching notion than this remark indicates. It should be pointed out that, as various Lacan commentators have indicated, Lacan's terms and concepts are not completely stable (Bowie, 1979, p. 122; Benvenuto and Kennedy, 1986, p. 102); they are mutually self-defining, and their implications alter in different contexts. I am not attempting here to do justice to the differences between Lacan's Imaginary and Irigaray's imaginary, but these differences are crucial, since as I pointed out in an earlier paper (Whitford, 1986, p. 4), Irigaray appears to be ignoring Lacan's essential distinction between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, and conflating the two. This strategy needs much more careful examination than it has so far received; in passing, I would just point out that Irigaray's position is that 'from a feminine locus nothing can be articulated without a questioning of the symbolic itself' (*This Sex*, p. 162). Any discussion of her differences with Lacan would need to take into account the fact that she is attempting to go *beyond* Lacan, and is not simply missing the point.
9. The deconstruction of the 'mirror' is central to *Speculum*, so I have not attempted to document it with page references.
10. In *Speculum*, Irigaray is dealing with the history of Western philosophical discourse. In *This Sex* and *Éthique*, however, particularly the latter, the social implications of her work become more apparent.
11. My translation. An English translation of part of the work from which this quotation is taken, in which Castoriadis puts forward his theory about the imaginary institutions of society, can be found in Castoriadis (1984). The complete English translation (Polity Press, 1987) was not available at the time the present book went to press. Castoriadis gives as examples of social imaginary significations: religious belief (Castoriadis, 1975, pp. 196ff., trans. pp. 23ff.), reification (in slavery or under capitalism) (pp. 197ff., trans. pp. 23ff.); the modern bureaucratic universe and its pseudo-rationality (pp. 222ff.). To call social institutions like slavery or capitalism 'imaginary' might give the misleading impression that they are 'all in the mind'. Castoriadis stresses that 'the social imaginary, as we understand it, is more real than the "real"' (p. 197, trans. p. 24). The problem is rather that 'society lives its relation with institutions in the form of the imaginary; . . . it does not recognize the institutional imaginary as its own product' (p. 184, trans. p. 15). I should like to thank Dr Jay Bernstein of the University of Essex, for drawing my attention to Castoriadis's work on the imaginary.
12. 'A magma is that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist organisations, but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by an ensemblist composition (finite or infinite) of these organizations . . . We assert that everything that can be effectively given – representations, nature, signification – exists in the mode of a *magma*; that the social–historical institutions of the world, things, and individuals, in so far as it is the institution of the *Legein* and the *Teukhein*, is always also the institution of identitary logic and thus the imposition of an ensemblist organisation on a first stratum of givenness which lends itself interminably to this operation. But also, that it is never and can never be *only* that – that it is also always and necessarily the institution of a magma of imaginary social significations. And finally, that the relation between the *Legein* and the *Teukhein* and the magma of imaginary social significations is not thinkable within the identitary–ensemblist frame of reference – no more than are the relations between *Legein* and representation, *Legein* and nature, or between representation and signification, representation and world, or 'consciousness' and 'unconscious' (Castoriadis, 1975, pp. 461–3, trans. in Howard, 1977, p. 297). Howard provides a useful introduction to Castoriadis's ideas.
13. 'In any case, the attempt to find an existent state of nature cannot, in principle, succeed. This is not a problem of the limitations of our existing knowledge (the possibility of an as-yet undiscovered people living in a purely natural state). The reason why it cannot succeed is . . . that the term "nature" is in the end defined only by reference to the social, as that which is the non-social' (Brown and Adams, 1979, p. 37).
14. See Castoriadis (1975), pp. 372ff. for a discussion of the essential heterogeneity of the unconscious on the one hand and the logic of identity on the other.
15. Lacan, for example, writes: 'There is no pre-discursive reality' (Lacan, 1975b, p. 33). Cf. Castoriadis's criticism of Lacan (Castoriadis, 1975, pp. 7–8). Castoriadis's point is that from a Lacanian perspective, it becomes impossible to understand the emergence of a social

organisation that did not previously exist. This is not a question of an (impossible) return to a prediscursive reality, but of the possibility of creation *ex nihilo*. In this context, see MacIntyre's point about the unpredictability of future inventions (MacIntyre, 1981, ch. 8).

16. This is Irigaray's interpretation of Lacan's view that there is no relation between the sexes since 'woman does not exist' (see Mitchell and Rose, 1982, pp. 137–71). Irigaray's discussion is in 'Così fan tutti' (Irigaray, 1985c, pp. 86–105).
17. The traps of the symbolism that one inherits are usefully discussed in Lloyd (1984), ch. 7.
18. In a recent article I have developed this argument in more detail (Whitford, 1986).
19. In the technical language of Freud's metapsychology, this point is expressed as follows:

> the conscious presentation comprises the presentation of the thing plus the presentation of the word belonging to it, while the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone. The system *Ucs.* contains the thing-cathexes of the objects, the first and true object-cathexes; the system *Pcs.* comes about by this thing-presentation being hypercathected through being linked with the word-presentations corresponding to it. It is these hypercathexes, we may suppose, that bring about a higher psychical organization and make it possible for the primary process to be succeeded by the secondary process which is dominant in the *Pcs.* . . . A presentation which is not put into words, or a psychical act which is not hypercathected, remains thereafter in the *Ucs.* in a state of repression. (Freud, 1915, pp. 200–1)

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8

Feminism, Feelings and Philosophy

Morwenna Griffiths

Women are more emotional than men, or such is the commonly held belief in present day Western society. But is the belief true? And does it matter? The answers are not easy ones to find because the meaning of the statement is so unclear. It might mean, for instance, that women are less in control of their emotions, or it might mean that they feel things more deeply, or that they are more irrational than men. None of these statements necessarily implies any of the rest – though they often come as a package. Indeed, the statement that women are more emotional than men has no clear meaning. However, it has a considerable political force because it is used to justify or explain the position of women. The usual justification/explanation runs: since women are more emotional they are less suited to public life. But this is not the only possible political use of the statement. It has been taken up recently by some feminists and used in celebration of women's values and as a criticism of men and their personal, moral or social arrangements. In other words, feminists have stood the argument on its head. It now goes: since men are so unemotional, they are unfit to run public life.

In this article I shall examine what lies behind this difference of opinion. I shall begin by looking further at commonly held beliefs about emotions and feelings and how they relate to various groups in our society. I then go on to look at recent feminism and show that the relationships it assumes to hold between emotion and reason, mind and rationality, feelings and bodies, are not those which are usually assumed in recent mainstream Western philosophy, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon analytical tradition. If these feminist conceptions of emotion and feeling are right, they constitute a significant criticism of that philosophy and I shall argue that this criticism is justified. I shall then go on to make a suggestion about how these negative criticisms may have positive implications