

SHARING THE FIRE

LUCE
IRIGARAY



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Outline of a Dialectics of Sensitivity

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For you for me

*This outline of a dialectics of sensitivity
born of an amorous desire
in search of its becoming incarnate
in us, between us, and in the world*

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1

Hypothesis: Longing for Another Absolute Than Knowledge

Is humanity coming to an end or merely reaching a stage which calls for a radical cultural evolution? This cannot happen through a blindly forging ahead but, rather, through a return to that which can still grant us a rebirth, a development and a flowering that we have neglected until now. In an age in which we are recapitulating and interpreting our history, it would be appropriate to question our way of conceiving of human being itself, the one who is in great part the cause of this history. It could be useful to wonder about what could be the truth of a human being. Does not our conception of the latter appear today as a sort of hypothesis which has supported a cultural construction which is henceforth deeply shaken? Does the subjectivity which underpinned our culture correspond with our real being? And does the objective absolute, to which the human being supposedly longed, fit its real aspirations? If this were the case, why ought our being be kept split in various parts? Is not such a split a symptom of the necessity of pursuing our development in a way which permits our unification?

It seems that the privilege attached to our mental aptitude(s) has been the result of the difficult task of acquiring standing up and gaining mastery of our surroundings in order to satisfy our various needs. To succeed in that,

man has used his additional neurons to the detriment of the cultivation of his physical and sensitive belonging. However, these neurons need energy for functioning, and this energy begins to be lacking. For want of having taken into account the link between his body and his mind, man has become an organism which can no longer function. He looks like a robot which demands an external source of energy for working. Hence his dependence on external energy reserves and the diverse conflicts which arise from that. Hence also the fatal illnesses with which man is today confronted. In reality, man becomes more and more weak, and the countless techniques to which he resorts cannot compensate for his lack of natural energy.

We must thus wonder about the means of recovering the source of our original energy and of cultivating it. We may note that our culture until now has been determined by our needs, including those for supra-sensitive ideals, transcendent beings and moral rules. Perhaps the way of evolving would be to build henceforth culture starting from our desire(s). What is more, do we not need desire as the new basis for an individual and collective culture? Indeed, desire can answer our current lack of energy and the necessity of gathering ourselves together again. Obviously it is then a matter of our desire between living beings, especially between humans, and not of our desire for objects, be they even spiritual ones.

Sharing desire and love with the other(s) and intending to care in this way about the future of nature and humanity might look a little ingenuous. However, is it not a means to recover a source of energy and to cultivate our longing for the absolute without this becoming somehow or other destructive or nihilistic? Is not aiming at the absolute through my desire for the other an opportunity to approach, in a dialectical manner, my aspiration after the absolute without cutting it off from a natural rooting? And also a way of acknowledging that this relation is the origin and the end of a human becoming which must be of my own in order to be shared?

Surprisingly philosophers and moralists, quoting only them, leap over a stage in their view on human becoming—that of the cultivation of our sensitive and sensuous life. They talk about moral duties regarding social or political coexistence but say very little about the desire to be in communion with the other(s), which ought to be the most original link we ought to experience and cultivate towards a common life.

Desire is what allows us to gather ourselves together and gather together with the other(s). But this gathering together does not happen through moral imperatives or supra-sensitive ideals, but through that which compels us to collect ourselves and collect with the other(s). Desire grants us the opportunity to both unify ourselves and unite with the other(s) by what concerns us. It does not impose on us splitting ourselves into various parts, beginning with body, soul and spirit with their respective needs and duties. Desire appeals to our whole being, what is more putting it in touch with itself, with the other(s) and with the world. Desire brings us close to us, to the other, to the world. And such proximity remains linked with our natural belonging while longing for the absolute. Desire aspires after connecting, in us and between us, nature with the most sublime fulfilment.

Desire arises from the void opened in us by taking our difference from the other into account. It contributes to our holding in ourselves, to unifying our self from what is particular to us, but also to longing for the other as the one who is needed for us to become ourselves.

While being faithful to that which is in the beginning, desire endlessly aims at its fulfilment because the absolute after which it aspires can never be completely reached. Desire also connects the most intimate with the most remote. And yet, desire does not overcome opposites, it does not know them. Perhaps contradiction has no sense for it and results from its ignorance, its repression, its being reduced to instinct and drive, or to an abstract energy already cut off from its natural source. Life knows an absolute without opposites and contradiction, something to which the character of Antigone, for example, bears witness. But this absolute requires us to respect difference(s) and each to be faithful to its particularity.

Longing for the absolute takes root in our longing for life. Such longing must evolve in accordance with our own development but it cannot relinquish its natural rooting. That which allows this to happen is the love of the other, a love which is both love for the other and love from the other, and thus presupposes a reciprocity which precedes any moral imperative, and even any conscious decision. Such a love is not separable from desire—as said about Eros by Phaedrus in the *Symposium* of Plato. And desire also needs it to be reciprocal in order to be really human and

able to keep its relation to transcendence and its potential—which is impossible without it being somehow or other equipotential.

Desire acts as a bridge between soma, soul and spirit. It allows our physical matter to be transformed without remaining subjected to a mere natural alternative between growing and decreasing. Desire opens a transcendental horizon, in a simply natural motion, through relating to the other as naturally different. Beyond the fact that desire animates our body with an energy which exceeds vitality and survival, it also increases this energy by communing with another living energy. And the transcendental horizon, which is opened by the respect for another living being as different, permits us to modify the nature of our energy and of our matter itself. Such a process makes us capable of overcoming our subjection to nature while being faithful to it.

In this way we can escape the alternative between growth and decline without having for all that to keep in abeyance our evolution through supra-sensitive ideals. Then we enter another economy and another logic which do not neglect the properties of life and the margin of freedom that a human being has to preserve and cultivate.

Desire is also a means that is granted us to overcome past metaphysics while acknowledging its merits. Longing for the other as a path towards the absolute means that we long for more than being(s)—we long for an incarnate transcendence. And this allows us to surmount some of the main dichotomies at work in our traditional Western philosophy: for example, existence-essence; nature-spirit; sensitivity-conceptuality; being-Being. If desire is that which determines our being present to ourselves, to the world, to the other(s), then most of the dichotomies which supported our past logic lose their usefulness and even their meaning. Indeed, our physical matter is already subjective, and not merely objective, thanks to the desire which animates it; our sexuate identity, which sometimes could appear as an essence, is a crucial element of our existence; sensitive or sensuous attraction for the other, different from us by nature, is a longing for transcendence to quote some of them. Even the opposition between being and becoming is then obsolete, because we cannot be without continuing to carry out our development, notably through relating to the other as transcendent to ourselves.

The contribution of desire to our being, our becoming, and our relating to the world and to the other(s) has not been taken enough into account by our past culture. Desire has too often been considered to be a mere instinct or drive and not the bridge between body and spirit, immanence and transcendence, materiality and spirituality that it represents, above all as a desire for the other as different from us by nature. What is more, the dynamism provided by desire has generally been used without being recognized as such. There is no doubt, for example, that desire is that which maintains the motion towards the absolute in the Hegelian dialectics. And yet, he does not think a lot about the nature of desire, about its true relation to the absolute and its intervention in what he considers to be the absolute of an objectivity corresponding with our subjectivity. And this perpetuates a blindness regarding the truth and the ethics which are necessary for ensuring a possible becoming for ourselves and for the whole world.

For a long time, one of my projects has been to write a book on each of the main elements which constitute the matter of the world and of all the living beings. My book on Nietzsche (*Marine Lover*) tackles the question of water and my book on Heidegger (*The Forgetting of Air*) the question of air. *Elemental Passions* and *Through Vegetal Being* have to deal with our relation to earth. I wondered how to broach the question of fire. At first, I imagined doing that through Marx and the problem of human work in the production of goods. More recently, it became obvious to me that fire concerns above all desire and the way through which our human being can develop beyond a merely natural growth. Desire acts as the sap and the dynamism that we have to acknowledge and cultivate to make blossom and share our human being. Desire is our internal fire, our internal sun. Our tradition has underestimated, and even ignored, the importance of desire for our human accomplishment. It is the case in the Hegelian dialectics, which leaps too quickly from matter to light without lingering enough on the role of desire to pass from our physical to our spiritual belonging. Hegel neglects to consider the necessity of the fire of desire in the transformation of matter, beginning with our own, and of the dialectical motion that such a process and its sharing require.