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“Irigaray and Plato – Unlikely Bedfellows”

Dr Mahon O’Brien
Senior Lecturer in Philosophy
University of Sussex
mahon.o-brien@sussex.ac.uk

ABSTRACT: Luce Irigaray has devoted considerable energy to wrestling with some key figures in twentieth century phenomenology. Since the topic for this special issue is the relationship between phenomenology and ancient philosophy, I plan in the following to look at Irigaray's reading of Plato, given the centrality of carnality, sexuation and embodiment, not just to her own project, but the manner in which she invokes the same notions as part of her critique of Plato along with a number of twentieth century phenomenologists.

Keywords: Irigaray, Plato, Phenomenology, Socrates, Eros

“Irigaray and Plato – Unlikely Bedfellows”¹

Luce Irigaray has devoted considerable energy to wrestling with some key figures in twentieth century phenomenology. Since the topic for this special issue is the relationship between phenomenology and ancient philosophy, I plan in the following to look at Irigaray’s reading of Plato, given the centrality of carnality, sexuation and embodiment, not just to her own project, but the manner in which she invokes the same notions as part of her critique of Plato along with a number of twentieth century phenomenologists. Irigaray has been arguing for a revitalized conception of what it means to be human and the kind of world and communities needed to accommodate such beings for some time now. In recent work such as *Sharing the Fire* and *To Be Born* she returns to some perennial themes associated with this aspiration. In particular, Irigaray has fastened on the monocular focus of the Western tradition when it comes to its failure to acknowledge sexuate difference. She has successfully diagnosed the patriarchally over-determined nature of that tradition masquerading behind a façade of neutrality in ways that continue to open up interpretive and critical possibilities in terms of reading the canon today. As Irigaray provocatively summarises:

Only certain oriental traditions speak of the energizing, aesthetic, and religious fecundity of the sexual act: the two sexes give each other the seed of life and eternity, the growing generation of and between them both. We must re-examine our own history thoroughly to understand why this sexual difference has not had its chance to develop, either empirically or transcendently. Why it has failed to have its own ethics, aesthetic, logic, religion, or the micro- and macrocosmic realization of its coming into being or its destiny. It is surely a question of the dissociation of body and soul, of sexuality and spirituality, of the lack of a passage for the spirit, for the god, between the inside and outside, the outside and the inside, and of their distribution between the sexes in the sexual act. Everything is constructed in such a way that these realities remain separate, even opposed to one another. So that they neither mix, marry, nor form an alliance. Their wedding is always being put off to a beyond, a future life, or else devalued, felt and thought to be less worthy in comparison to the marriage between the mind and God in a transcendental realm where all ties to the world of sensation have been severed.²

¹ I am grateful to the anonymous referees and to the editors for their constructive feedback on earlier drafts of this paper.

² Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 14 – 15.

Irigaray, at times, sees Plato as one of the arch culprits in terms of the cultivation of these tendencies in the Western tradition despite opening the door for the possibility of reading Plato as more of an ironist in this regard. And, according to Irigaray, the same tendencies that (what I would call) Plato's anti-corporeal irony unwittingly fostered have polluted and corrupted our philosophical understanding ever since. However, what is not perhaps made clear in Irigaray's own work is the importance of distinguishing between Plato and Socrates and the rich interpretive possibilities available to us if we begin to see many of the dialogues as attempts by Plato to criticise Socrates. Given the centrality of sexuate identity, erotics and relationality to Irigaray's confrontation with the phenomenological tradition – if we can identify a coordinate series of views in Plato when it comes to some of the same issues, a new avenue for future comparative work emerges.

In casting her critical gaze over the work of a range of twentieth century phenomenologists, Irigaray diagnoses a recurring failure to acknowledge the importance of sexuate difference. There is a tendency to bracket sexuate difference from their varying conceptions of Dasein, the perceiving body, and/or the self/other relationship. But who ordained this bracketing, what appears at times, indeed, to be a kind of foreclosure? Irigaray's various confrontations with phenomenologists always tends to follow this particular pattern of criticism. For Irigaray, for all of their progress over some of their predecessors, they remain guilty of a certain (and all too familiar) type of foreclosure. Specifically (though not exclusively) there is a bracketing of sexuate difference in terms of how they think about the human being and this bracketing itself belongs to a longstanding tradition which has its roots, in Western philosophy, in Plato. The attempt in what follows to rehabilitate Plato, in the context of Irigaray's critique, is designed to demonstrate that Plato stands as a viable and important resource to rethink some of these issues for both Irigaray and phenomenology. Irigaray looks to provide a more holistic conception of the human being – one that points the way to a new kind of living, a new world. She will go so far as to suggest that we need to be born anew as

such beings. However, is it possible that Plato had already opened the door for these ideas and the need for more than the patriarchal gesture of foreclosure and anti-corporeality in his dialogues – not least through the subversion of Socrates and the Socratic method in the dialogues? There is a need to think beyond the monological and to embrace the dialogical, the interaction between two and the celebration rather than the suppression of difference. One needs to acknowledge the irreducibility of what is different and to avoid the reductive, assimilative, domineering tendencies of the Socratic method and to proceed rather with the intermediary, the uncertain; to encourage the interplay of masculine and feminine, to see the body and mind as conjoined, the need for metaphor, play and myth in our philosophical quests, untethered by the hyper-theoretical and philosophically restrictive moorings of the Socratic method.³

As part of the argumentative strategy of the paper, we will appropriate some ideas and arguments found in Stanley Rosen's famous monograph on the *Symposium* – a dialogue which receives special attention in Irigaray's work. Drawing on some of the ideas and arguments in Irigaray and Rosen, along with my own reading of a number of Plato's dialogues, my aim is to show that both Irigaray and Plato can be seen as philosophical allies, jointly criticizing a certain archetype of the philosopher epitomized by the character of Socrates in a range of dialogues – most especially Plato's *Symposium* and *Phaedo*. This attempt relies, in turn, on a characterization of Socrates as *the* unerotic philosopher in ways that leave him open to all kinds of criticisms.⁴ Of

³ Anne van Leeuwen offers a succinct summary of Irigaray's views in this regard: "thinking is reduced to the status of monologue: the thinking or speaking the same way, in the same language to the other of the same. . . . To understand language dia-logically would require the existence of two beings, two kinds of logic, two ways of thinking, two ways of speaking and listening that could not be subsumed within one unifying, synoptic whole. Yet it is precisely these conditions of genuine dialogue that this univocal interpretation of identity cannot support."

The mono-logical model of thinking and Being, this mono-logical phenomenological ontology is decisive, according to Irigaray, for the elision of carnality from the history of Western metaphysics." Van Leeuwen, "Sexuate difference, ontological difference: Between Irigaray and Heidegger, 119 – 120.

⁴ The inspiration for this characterization is derived from some of Stanley Rosen's provocative insights and interpretations of Socrates in his book on Plato's *Symposium*. See Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*.

course, the interpretation offered herein involves an implicit critique of Irigaray's own interpretation of Plato since she herself does not distinguish between Socrates and Plato for the purposes of her critique of the latter. However, it seems to me that much of what Irigaray wants to say in terms of criticizing Socrates remains viable when recast as criticisms which, to some extent, Plato himself can be seen to be making – various other differences notwithstanding. As I argue in what follows, Irigaray's criticisms of Socrates, even though she doesn't appear to distinguish between Socrates and Plato, are sufficiently nuanced as to point in the direction of the interpretation of Plato which I will try to defend against what one might characterise as more 'orthodox' readings which conflate the views of Plato and Socrates in the dialogues.

I don't mean to be overly prescriptive in this brief series of reflections on a character, named 'Socrates', in a series of fictional dialogues written by Plato. Notwithstanding, I do want to try to stitch together a series of depictions that Plato offers of this character which constitute a vision of the philosopher that Plato himself, and I think certainly Irigaray, would want to call into question. I subscribe to the (admittedly controversial) view that a significant number of Plato's dialogues are fairly obvious critiques of Socrates as much as anything else.⁵ Granted some will be quick to rejoin that the views Socrates defends appear to change from one dialogue to another and that this is best understood as mirroring or tracking Plato's own philosophical development.⁶ However, the same respondents have to explain why, in that case, Plato would use the same character as a mouthpiece for his 'later' views, for example, when that very character defended contrasting views in some of the earlier dialogues. This is to assume that Plato's 'earlier' views were closer to Socrates' own and so Socrates is a mouthpiece for Plato's fledgling views in the early dialogues and then, following his idealistic epiphany, Plato decides to use the same character to espouse his idealism in later

⁵ Dominic Scott's recent study of Plato's *Meno* makes a compelling case for this type of interpretive approach. See Scott, *Plato's Meno*.

⁶ I am inclined to agree with Jacob Klein's salutary warning on this issue. See a discussion of this along with Klein's view in footnote 28 below.

dialogues. But that just strikes me as rather improbable and uncharacteristically sloppy for such a careful writer of philosophical dialogues. Would it not have been considerably less confusing to choose a different character to represent Plato's mature views if they had moved so far away from those of the protagonist of the 'early' dialogues? A simpler hermeneutic strategy, I believe, is to think of the dialogues as a sustained critique of an evolving approach to philosophy represented by a character undergoing this intellectual and philosophical development. The Socrates of the early dialogues appears to fixate on precise definitions and the Socratic method. The Socrates of the later dialogues appears to endorse a different kind of philosophical approach – peddling what is often characterized as Platonic idealism. However, one can see this as Plato allowing the character in the dialogues to delve progressively deeper into the philosophical implications of the 'early' approach – through the middle and later dialogues. This is further consistent with the idea that Plato is regularly critiquing Socrates in the dialogues – early, middle and late.

This brief excursus concerning the unity of Plato's dialogues is undertaken simply to establish a context for the comparisons between Irigaray's reading of the *Symposium* and the interpretation of other dialogues I wish to examine in what follows – specifically Plato's *Phaedo*. If one approaches these dialogues as attempts by Plato to criticise Socrates, then the intersections with Irigaray's analyses are conspicuous. A number of Rosen's insights concerning the *Symposium* are helpful in making this case and can be developed further by looking at some corresponding ideas in my own interpretation of the *Phaedo*. We are effectively exploring a series of accounts of a somewhat stilted and curmudgeonly old philosopher who has not learned the lessons that Diotima tried to teach him as a young man!⁷

⁷ Adriana Cavarero's fascinating interpretation of Plato's *Symposium* is relevant here. Despite the richness of Cavarero's interpretation in other regards, her approach to Plato remains somewhat flatfooted in that she simply conflates Socrates' recounting of Diotima's apparent advocacy for Platonic idealism with Plato's own views in this regard. So, on the one hand, Plato *is* credited with wanting somehow to retrieve the maternal – she describes his position as “transitional, since it does not emphasize the figure of woman as castrated male, and almost suggests the opposite, namely a sort of

I should stress that even though I do want to argue that Plato is inviting us to think critically of this caricature of the philosopher represented by the character of Socrates, I also believe that he would want to underline the need for philosophy to tackle and challenge the mores and presuppositions of the day. However, if we consider the possibility that both the *Meno* and the *Republic*, for example, are attempts, both at the level of theory in the first instance and at the level of practice in the second, to show how ill-suited the science of human affairs might be to the kind of philosophical approach that requires the demonstrative approach of the exact sciences – then that itself would require that a city needs to be made safe for the various philosophical gadflies who are constantly looking to put our conventional wisdom concerning the way we should live together as citizens to the test. The hostility and acerbity of Socrates the interlocutor in many of the dialogues would need to soften along with the attitude of the citizens who are taken to task in the same dialogues⁸ – citizens who will ultimately put the philosopher to death.⁹ There is a need for mildness; one must avoid the posture of either ideologue, dogmatist or fanatic since all presuppose that their views are set in stone in the manner of universal, demonstrable truths vouchsafed by proofs that begin with a Socratic definition or Aristotelian axiom. If the science of human affairs cannot be

‘womb envy’ which manifests itself in the masculine mimesis of maternity”. Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, 103. Nevertheless, Cavarero’s account lacks the subtlety and nuance of Irigaray’s approach in one important regard. Irigaray notices that Diotima appears to betray the early promise of her account and reverts instead to a rather anaemic idealism. Irigaray further notes that this is a version of Diotima’s teaching recounted by an older Socrates who may well be misrepresenting her words. And, as I argue in this paper, we simply must take some of the other dramatic and rhetorical features of the dialogue into account. As a youth, Socrates failed to understand Diotima’s teaching. As an older man, he states confidently that he is ‘certain’ of that which he failed to grasp as a younger man – a rather bizarre proclamation from someone who normally professes his philosophical ignorance. Finally, the account of erotics he unfolds appears to dovetail with the views of the unerotic philosopher which we find again in *Phaedo*.

⁸ To borrow a compelling characterization of an aspect of the dialogues from Scott – this is where we might see Plato as putting the historical Socrates ‘on trial’. See Scott. *Plato’s Meno*..

⁹ Wendy Brown’s interesting interpretation of Socrates and Plato intersects with my own views in places. However, for the most part, her characterization of Socrates as an interlocutor is at odds with my own. Brown underlines what she takes to be the ‘effeminate’ nature of Socrates as interlocutor in the dialogues where I would argue that by and large we find Socrates to be abrasive and, as Rosen opines, ‘cruel’. See Brown, “‘Supposing Truth Were a Woman...’: Plato’s Subversion of Masculine Discourse,” 594-616.

thought to be based on such axioms, however, then citizens, including philosophers, need to be called to a conversation, a dialogue – where no one adopts the role of chairman, fanatic or ideologue – rather where all are simply participants. The concomitant need for openness, playfulness, poetry, myth and metaphor indicate that at the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition, which Irigaray has successfully diagnosed as patriarchal in the extreme, Plato stands as an outlier of sorts to a tradition that he is simultaneously seen to have inaugurated. If that case can be successfully made, then he remains a valuable resource for a philosophy that wishes to restore the role of the fecund, carnality, embodiment and sexuation and the need to proceed otherwise than according to the strictures ultimately imposed by the Socratic method.

Coffin-ripe Philosopher

In a dialogue (*Phaedo*) that dramatically (and fictionally) re-enacts the final hours of Socrates' life – we are witness to a rather unusual death scene. The dialogue is often celebrated as a testament to Plato's unwavering admiration for his teacher's courage in the face of death and his commitment to the pursuit of philosophy to the very end of his life. This in turn perpetuates the idea of the *Phaedo* as some kind of encomium to Socrates – the philosophical Messiah, a paean to philosophical martyrdom, if you will. I want to put pressure on this depiction however and suggest that, even here, we have a portrait of Socrates as the unerotic philosopher *par excellence* in ways that Plato was already drawing attention to in *The Symposium* and is rounding out in the *Phaedo* with a demonstration as to just how detached this philosophical figure is from the carnal, from the corporeal, from love and thus, ultimately, from the human. After all, portraying a Socrates who defends the notion of the immortality of the soul with less than watertight arguments is to damn with faint praise indeed. And, when we consider Socrates' confident proclamation that true philosophy is a preparation for dying and for death, we have to wonder exactly how this sits with the antecedent claims concerning the importance of Eros in *The Symposium*. After all, to strip Eros

of carnality, corporeality, sensuality, fecundity and the interaction necessary for generation seems a perverse celebration of self-abnegation indeed.¹⁰ Has Socrates himself, at the beginning of the *Phaedo*, not even learned the lesson of the painful restraints on his legs that are removed as he sits on what will shortly be his death-bed? Where previously he experienced pain where his limbs were bound, he now feels pleasure at the release. Socrates opts instead to conjure up a highly abstract theory of opposites, and a dream-world of pure reason out of the most ordinary corporeal experience.

What could be the purpose of characterizing (or perhaps misrepresenting) Socrates in the dialogues in the various ways that Plato sometimes does? One possible answer, and, I would submit, a rather near-sighted one, is that Socrates is, on many occasions, simply a mouthpiece for whatever views Plato subscribed to at the time that the dialogue was composed. However, that is just not something that I find convincing at all – not least given the fact that even in the very dialogues that commentators adduce as proof for this type of interpretation, Socrates articulates all manner of views which Plato simply would not subscribe to. This interpretative strategy is complicated further by the fact that Socrates is clearly not the protagonist in all of the dialogues nor is it obvious that he always represents Plato's own views.¹¹ It is also hard to fathom why Plato would deliberately opt to use Socrates as a mouthpiece for his idealism in his later work when he has already depicted Socrates as someone committed to a very different approach to philosophy in earlier dialogues.¹² I would argue that it makes more sense to suppose that Plato was frequently offering a caricature of a philosopher and not necessarily, as is often assumed, one that he meant to

¹⁰ Granted, one could argue that it is Diotima herself who is guilty of this exsanguination of Eros. Cavarero sees Diotima as a mouthpiece for Plato's idealism and thus recapitulates the orthodox approach to Plato in this regard. Irigaray leaves the door open for some of the moves I make in this paper, however, by underlining the fact that this is the account reported by Socrates which doesn't quite chime with the more promising version of the account attributed to Diotima earlier on in the dialogue.

¹¹ *Symposium*, *Parmenides*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, *Timaeus*, *Critias* and the *Laws* are all worth recalling here.

¹² See footnote 28 for further discussion of this.

endorse. He may well be thought to be offering up an example of the philosopher that he is inviting the reader to subvert. Not least when we suddenly learn that in the days leading up to his death that Socrates is wondering as to whether he has in fact been wrong all along concerning art and poetry and whether he should have been composing poetry instead of pursuing philosophy – as he has been in the lead up to his execution.¹³

When we consider further the dreadful, desperate urgency of the situation this character faces in the *Phaedo* – then the demeanour of this person facing their death like some kind of machoistic martyr, mingling heroism and indifference, begins to strike us as somewhat odd. Is there, perhaps, a deliberately heavy-handed machismo and braggadocio to this? Alcibiades offers us a relevant caricature in the *Symposium* – Socrates as the man who is incapable of intoxication – the ultimate drinking man’s hero, a warrior without fear, and yet, is it bravery when one feels no fear?¹⁴ Socrates is depicted as an unfeeling rock of a human being who treads across the frozen ground unshod because he is insensible of cold – a man who cares not for the ignominy and pain suffered by those who happen across his path only to be ‘conquered’ and humiliated by his speeches and his scorn. Are we, in fact, being presented with the picture of a *flawed* philosopher, a philosopher who, while he insists that he is certain of nothing except erotics, seems to have certainty about something that doesn’t admit of certainty in that way?

Consider the brusque, dispassionate way he dismisses his wife and child so that he can be left to talk in peace about the nature of opposites and the forms during the final hours before his death.

We found Socrates recently released from his chains, and Xanthippe—you know her—sitting by him, holding their baby. When she saw us, she cried out and said the sort of thing that women usually say: “Socrates, this is the last time your friends will talk to you and you to

¹³ For an interesting discussion of Socrates’ views on art and poetry, see the introduction to Stanley Rosen’s commentary on Plato’s *Republic*. Rosen, *Plato’s Republic: A Study*.

¹⁴ Again, it is worth noting that these are characterizations which are at odds with the depiction of Socrates offered by Brown in the article cited above.

them.” Socrates looked at Crito. “Crito,” he said, “let someone take her home.” And some of Crito’s people led her away lamenting and beating her breast. (*Phaedo*, 60a)

Does this sound like a man who has understood the humane, that we are more than disembodied souls but are flesh and blood and carnality and lust and longing, joy and melancholy – all the while brimming with needs and desires, not least, the desire for the affections of others? Socrates appears to be solely concerned with the disembodied contemplation of the Forms – but is this the lesson he *should* have learned from Diotima? Are these the actions of a man that understands anything about love, about life? Are these actions we might have expected Plato himself to recommend? Does this imagined philosopher understand nothing yet of the manner in which he is bound by his body, how he *is* his body. Has he not learned the lessons of the bonds around his legs? Where once he felt pain, he now feels pleasure! And as he luxuriates in the pleasure of release, as he enjoys the sensations of the body, his feet planted firmly on the earth in front of him, that same body that he depends upon for life and for thought and for love – he will be only too willing to relinquish it to oblivion for the sake of the dream of disembodied pure thought – like the theoretical person of Book X of Aristotle’s *Ethics* but without the crucial qualification from Aristotle

However, the happy person is a human being, and so will need external prosperity also; for his nature is not self-sufficient for study, but he needs a healthy body, and needs to have food and the other services provided. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1178b33-36)

Aristotle does not try to completely suppress our humanity and the needs of the body. Insofar as the theoretical person of Book X is pursuing the highest activities, they will reach out toward the absolute, the ‘divine’, in accord with the most divine element in them. Insofar as this person is a human being, however, they will require all of the other things the human being depends on. For all its putatively sterile, sober analysis then, Aristotle’s science of human affairs appears far less anaemic than the highly sterile world of the philosopher we are presented with here. Instead of breaking bread with loved ones, and savouring what is left of life, Socrates decides to conjure out of the experience of releasement from bonds, out of the earlier state of being bound, a highly abstract

theory of opposites which, in turn, evolves into a theory concerning the immortality of the soul and the concomitant notion of the eternal Forms. Instead of embracing the bodies of his wife and child, instead of enjoying the sound of their voices and touch for these final hours – he dismisses them so that he can retreat into the ethereal, rarefied air of a philosophy which has been purged of any trace of the erotics of Diotima except for the terminus of the erotic ascent.

Unerotic Philosopher

In the *Symposium*, we find Socrates confidently proclaiming at the beginning of the dialogue that the only thing he is certain of is erotics. The wisest of all philosophers, and for no other reason but that he knows that he doesn't know anything, that is, the only thing that he claims to be certain of is his ignorance, claims to be 'certain' of the doctrine of Eros. Perhaps Socrates is so assured for the simple reason that he never has in fact understood the limitations of the Socratic method, of the need for the role of the intermediary and the willingness to proceed when one does not have absolute certainty. In many of the dialogues, it is the other interlocutors, like Meno, that claim to be certain and Socrates claims to be perplexed. Is this itself a hint that Socrates is someone to be deconstructed in the *Symposium*? Furthermore, given that Plato seems to resist the demands that Socrates places on us, might we not see Plato as himself killing that which he loves – namely his master, his teacher? Rosen offers the following keen observation on the *Symposium*

Philosophy has been, if not subordinated to, then transmuted by poetry. The dialogue contains almost no trace of Socratic conversation in the usual sense (except for a brief interlude with Agathon). Instead, there is a mythical account of a youthful conversation with a woman, a stranger, a prophetess: Diotima. And even here the conversation is subordinated to Diotima's monologue. As if this were not enough, the drunken Alcibiades takes us into his bedroom to confess the attempted seduction of Socrates, a confession that plays a crucial role in his revelation of Socrates' unerotic nature. Those who insist upon being 'pleased' by a Platonic dialogue have failed to assess properly the significance of these two conversations. As a youth, Socrates required an explanation of the work of Eros (201b1 – 6). As a mature man he is, according to Alcibiades, immune, if not to the charm of Eros, certainly to its power.¹⁵

¹⁵ Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, xvii.

In terms of the positive doctrine which Irigaray endorses in Diotima's account – she herself notes Diotima's playful goading of the unerotic Socrates who continually fails to grasp her teaching:

She continues to laugh at his going to look for his truths beyond the most obvious everyday reality, at his not seeing or even perceiving this reality. At the way his dialectical method already forgets the most elementary truths. At the way his discourse on love neglects to look at, to be informed, about the amorous state. Or to inquire about its cause.¹⁶

In a related claim, Rosen opines

There is obviously a difference between Socrates and Plato with respect to writing. Are we to infer a coordinate difference between the two with respect to Eros? If the answer is yes, does this mean that the Platonic dialogues are poems (seeds sown in the garden of letters)?¹⁷

Is the fact that the philosopher facing his death is suddenly wondering as to whether he should have been composing poetry all along a hint? Before he lapses back into his abstract metaphysical enterprise.

Think for a moment of Plato's most famous dialogue – the *Republic*. When we consider that we are supposedly thinking of justice in the individual soul 'writ large' – what then are the consequences for the picture of the individual soul? Does the description of a man who shuns his wife and child in favour of philosophical idealism and the forms in the *Phaedo* chime with the image of a city that would take children from their parents and insist on having wives in common – a regime that would rusticate everyone over the age of ten?¹⁸ Is this not a nightmare? If this is the dream of reason, is it also a nightmare from which we are meant to awake – a hideous dream-world of artifice and sterility?

¹⁶ Irigaray. *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 26.

¹⁷ Stanley Rosen, *Plato's Symposium*, xx.

¹⁸ See Plato, *Republic*, 540e3 – 541a6.

What of Socrates the interlocutor? We are only too aware of his trickery, his caustic wit, his abrasiveness, his sarcasm. Rosen underlines the ‘cruelty’ of Socrates as an interlocutor, the aggressiveness he displays in his conversations with others and the ease with which he will embarrass and humiliate those he disagrees with. He compares himself to a midwife, and yet, on many occasions, the only part of the process which he seems to relish is the pain and misery endured by those he tends. And in terms of the birth involved, he only allows a certain kind of thought to be born – complete and utter perplexity as soon as one realizes that one’s prejudices are only that and the perverse notion that the only way to begin an inquiry is to begin from a position of absolute certainty.¹⁹ And thus, even the image of birth that he offers us removes the carnal, the human, the procreative – restoring the process to the realm of the otherworldly, the eternal, the non-human world of the ideas which this world only serves to obfuscate and suppress. There is no joy in giving birth to the new – the human, the body, flesh, discovery and delight, all of these are relegated in favour of what was *always* true, what was true independent of our ability to remember it and thus Socrates celebrates the diminishment of the embodied human being, a cumbersome vessel, on his quest to recollect or recognize the absolute, the mind-independent, the a priori. Meno’s paradox seemingly succumbs to a philosophical necromancer masquerading as midwife – the unerotic philosopher who induces the birth of a diabolical thought, a thought of pure reason that makes the passions once again a slave to it rather than the reverse! The embodied human then recast as some kind of lapsed sinner in an almost Catholic vision of the sublime – a vision that would mortify away any trace of the flesh, of the in-between, the imprecise, any trace of the erotic journey. And if this is in fact something that Plato is trying to undermine, then we can see that part of his own philosophical vision concerning the philosophical significance of Eros is consonant with Irigaray’s

¹⁹ We don’t have the space to develop this line of thought further by looking at Irigaray’s highly original and provocative interpretation of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave. However, and without doing justice to the originality and richness of Irigaray’s interpretation, I would argue that once one distinguishes again between Plato and the character of Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*, the same interpretive strategy we have been pursuing in this paper can be applied to Irigaray’s criticisms of Plato in *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

own express concerns. Her criticisms of Socrates then can be construed as **compatible with** views that Plato himself might be thought to have embraced and this in turn opens up new avenues for philosophical comparison.

The characterization of the philosopher in Plato's *Phaedo* clearly resonates with some of these ideas. It is the business of the philosopher to practice for dying and for death insofar as death, Socrates claims, is the ultimate aspiration for the philosopher – the separation of the body and soul where the pure disembodied soul can now soar to new heights of philosophical reflection unencumbered with the irksome impediments of the flesh along with its appetites, weaknesses and desires

And indeed the soul reasons best when none of these senses troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure, but when it is most by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it in its search for reality. (*Phaedo*, 65c5)

And it is then that the soul of the philosopher most disdains the body, flees from it and seeks to be by itself? (*Phaedo*, 65d1)

Socrates now returns to his theory of opposites, as part of a famous and crucial set of arguments in this dialogue. And yet, we might bear in mind the manner in which the young Socrates was reprimanded for remaining too beholden to the notion of contraries or opposites in the *Symposium* as Diotima tried to explain the notion of intermediary states and the role that correct opinions can sometimes play in terms of how we secure certain kinds of knowledge.²⁰ Here we have Socrates – on his deathbed, not as a result of infirmity or illness, but rather defiantly willing his own death (the death of his body at least) and *still* adhering to his theory of opposites. Not only that; his arguments are porous at best. Is Plato playing games with this image of Socrates then – a Socrates who suddenly composes poetry at the beginning of this death scene and who is now using less than

²⁰ We find further references to the importance of correct opinions in both *Meno* and the *Republic*. To complicate matters further, Socrates, who at times concedes the efficacy of correct opinions, continually reverts to his insistence on absolute knowledge and exact definitions in the same dialogues.

watertight arguments to try and defend a theory of opposites upon which his argument for the immortality of the soul will rely.²¹ Again, we wonder if Diotima's lessons concerning generation and love have simply fallen on the deaf ears of a philosophically flatfooted dogmatist.

Do we say that there is such a thing as the Just itself...And the Beautiful, and the Good?. . . And have you ever seen any of these things with your eyes?. . . Or have you ever grasped them with any of your bodily senses? I am speaking of all things such as Bigness, Health, Strength, and in a word, the reality of all other things, that which each of them essentially is. Is what is most true in them contemplated through the body, or is this the position: Whoever of us prepares himself best and most accurately to grasp the thing itself which he is investigating will come closest to the knowledge of it?. . . Then he will do this most perfectly who approaches the object with thought alone, without associating any sight with his thought, or dragging in any sense perception with his reasoning, but who, using pure thought alone, tries to track down each reality pure and by itself, freeing himself as far as possible from eyes and ears and, in a word, from the whole body, because the body confuses the soul and does not allow it to acquire truth and wisdom whenever it is associated with it. Will not that man reach reality, Simmias, if anyone does? (*Phaedo*, 65c5 -66a7)

And later again

Because every pleasure or pain provides, as it were, another nail to rivet the soul to the body and to weld them together. It makes the soul corporeal, so that it believes that truth is what the body says it is. As it shares the beliefs and delights of the body, I think it inevitably comes to share its ways and manner of life and is unable ever to reach Hades in a pure state; it is always full of body when it departs, so that it soon falls back into another body and grows with it as if it had been sewn into it. Because of this, it can have no part in the company of the divine, the pure and uniform. (*Phaedo*, 83d4 – 83e3)

So Socrates, certain of erotics, as he confidently proclaims at the beginning of *The Symposium*, when on his deathbed, still has no need for the love of bodies. He begins again at the *end* of the erotic ascent without any sense of the importance of the journey/process itself.

Let us recapitulate briefly the depiction of Socrates that we find in the *Symposium*. It is most telling that Socrates fails at the outset to understand the nature of the intermediary. And even though he will invoke the importance of correct opinions in the famous dialogue on virtue (*Meno*), a

²¹ Socrates begins to speak of 'life' and 'generation' and insists that life can only have come from death – it must have originated in its opposite state. We don't have the time or space to examine this argument in depth here. Suffice it to say that it is a rather unconvincing argument at best.

notion lifted directly from the *Symposium*, he nevertheless insists on beginning from a position of absolute certainty in that dialogue and reverts to that position at the end. He identifies absolute ignorance as the only alternative to absolute certainty and fails to appreciate the importance of the ‘in-between’ in terms of how one begins to ask questions. And, having listened to Diotima chart the course from the love of the beautiful young body – ascending eventually to something like the pure form of beauty – one can see that Socrates has fastened on the ultimate goal but without seemingly having realized the importance of the journey. Socrates begins with the terminus even in his quotidian dealings in the Agora – in the realm of the commonplace or everyday. Not only that, we hear Alcibiades bemoan the fact that Socrates ‘conquers’ others with his speeches instead of generating beautiful speeches in them and that he has done so ‘at all times’.

Consider again Socrates’ claim at beginning of the *Symposium* –

‘No one,’ Socrates said, ‘will cast a vote against you, Eryximachus. For I would surely not beg off, as I claim to have expert knowledge of nothing but erotics.’ (*Symposium*, 177d6 – 177e)

Thus Socrates, the wisest person in all of Greece, and wise only insofar as he knows that he knows nothing, a fact confirmed to him when he went looking for expert knowledge among the experts only to find that they thought they had knowledge where they had none, claims to have expert knowledge concerning erotics. We have to wonder as to what the implications of this claim might be. After all, Socrates suggests in other places that he lacks any philosophical knowledge or wisdom except insofar as he knows that he doesn’t know anything. The central philosophical questions that need to be addressed include such things as virtue and, yet, at the beginning of the *Meno* Socrates describes himself as being utterly perplexed when it comes to virtue. The *Meno* begins with the eponymous character asking Socrates whether or not virtue can be taught, or how else it is acquired or whether indeed it is something people have by nature. Socrates professes his unmitigated

ignorance regarding virtue and its acquisition in a manner which *seems* somewhat at odds with his confident rejection of Meno's expanded version of this paradox half way through the dialogue:

I myself, Meno, am as poor as my fellow citizens in this matter, and I blame myself for my complete ignorance about virtue. If I do not know what something is, how could I know what qualities it possesses? Or do you think that someone who does not know at all who Meno is could know whether he is good-looking or rich or well born, or the opposite of these? (*Meno*, 71b)

We do not seem to be able to begin our inquiries into virtue on the basis of axiomatic, necessary principles, certainly none that Socrates himself has been able to discover. Moreover, Socrates insists that he “never yet met anyone else who did know” what virtue is, and that is a crucial concession. Socrates knows of no person, himself included, who can provide a definition of virtue. That being so, we must ask ourselves, how, exactly, precise, technical definitions are supposed to function as the appropriate launching pad for ethical inquiry? In other words, how can that be the underlying philosophical aspiration when, from the outset, the wisest person in all of Greece knows of no one, past or present, who can offer such a definition, that is, when such a goal itself is rendered more or less impossible? Furthermore, when the search for first principles fails, Socrates begins to speak of the role of correct opinions and how these themselves are a form of knowledge. But, is this simply another piece of trickery from Plato since the dialogue suddenly ends with Socrates again insisting that exact definitions and absolute first principles are the only way to proceed?²² Moreover, in a

²² Shaun O'Dwyer challenges Irigaray's criticisms of Plato in a 2006 article in *Hypatia*. (See O'Dwyer, “The Unacknowledged Socrates in the Works of Luce Irigaray,” 28 – 44.) However, his views in terms of the shortcomings of Irigaray's interpretations don't really converge with my own interpretation at all since O'Dwyer wants to argue that Irigaray's criticisms of Socrates should instead be seen as applying to Plato's mature, metaphysically loaded thought where the earlier ‘Socratic’ dialogues remain immune from Irigaray's criticisms. The argument here is motivated by a more or less unquestioned subscription to the orthodox reading of the dialogues as tracking the intellectual development of Plato from the ‘early’ Socratic dialogues, where Plato imitates the philosophical method of his teacher, to the ‘later’ dialogues where Plato presents his own views. O'Dwyer concedes at one point that it is not uncontroversial to try and distinguish between Socratic and Platonic thought on the basis of the dialogues in the way that he does. However, in the end, on the basis of a rather reductive reading of a passage from Aristotle, he takes it as given that the difference between Platonic and Socratic thought can be construed in precisely the manner that he has already presumed to be true. In distinguishing between the Socrates of the ‘early’ dialogues and the ‘Socrates of the ‘Platonic’ dialogues commentators (including O'Dwyer) tend to inadvertently block the continuity between dialogues that are artificially segregated into ‘early’, ‘middle’ and ‘late’ periods. Moreover, failing to highlight that continuity and the way that some of the early dialogues lead to certain kinds of developments in later

dialogue on the erotic, the philosophical impulse par excellence, Socrates claims to have expert knowledge, to be certain. Is it not at least *possible* that Plato is playing games with us? Is this a hint as to the fundamentally *unerotic* nature of Socrates? When we realize that Socrates claims to be certain rather than perplexed, does that mean we need to look beyond what Socrates says and the overly technical, theoretical way he revises Diotima's positive doctrine (as alluded to by Irigaray) and reconsider the dialogue as a whole?

Irigaray underlines Socrates' own ignorance concerning erotic love. In terms of erotic striving – she quotes Diotima's claim to the effect that the action involved is an “engendering in beauty, with relation to body and to soul”. However, she notes that Socrates understands nothing about this – “He understands nothing about fecundity of body and soul.” She goes on to quote Diotima again “*The union of a man and a woman is, in fact, a generation; this is a thing divine; in a living creature that is mortal, it is an element of immortality, this fecundity and generation*”.²³ But Irigaray is again quick to note Socrates' shortcomings here remarking that Socrates appears not to have even heard Diotima since he makes nothing of it while Diotima in turn proceeds to “accentuate the procreative aspect of love.”²⁴ Irigaray correctly identifies what appears to be a tension then or certainly a disappointing tendency in Diotima's account which betrays the positive promise of her

dialogues blocks some crucial interpretive possibilities. The Socratic insistence on precise definitions and certainty is something that we can see the same character probe in more depth in other dialogues. The middle dialogues can then be fruitfully read as teasing out the implications of Socrates' thought and indeed subverting it. In that way, *Symposium*, *Phaedo* and *Meno* can be read as critiques of the idealism which Socrates' early insistence on precise, universal definitions leads to. Otherwise we do Plato something of a gross injustice in that we subject his dialogues to rather literal interpretations and assume that Plato himself simply had not experienced the kind idealistic epiphany in the early dialogues that some commentators believe he had undergone by the time of his mature period. With respect to the chronological question, that is, the question as to whether or not the designations ‘early’, ‘middle’, ‘late’ signify a corresponding ‘development’ in Plato's thought, I am inclined toward the view of commentators who have called into question the philosophical significance of this system of demarcation. Jacob Klein, in his famous commentary on Plato's *Meno*, urges us not “to become obsessed by the view that the chronology of the Platonic dialogues implies a ‘development’ in Plato's own thinking and that an insight into this development contributes in a significant way to the understanding of the dialogues themselves;” Klein, *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, 9.

²³ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 24

²⁴ Ibid, 25

earlier characterizations of love. However, she remarks at a number of junctures that this is also a recounting of her teachings by a Socrates who, I want to suggest, has been characterized as fundamentally unerotic by Plato. Perhaps, in terms of taking the entire dramatic context of this and other dialogues into consideration, Plato is inviting us to explore the possibility that Socrates is not best placed to understand the erotic striving of philosophy and the concomitant playfulness required. Perhaps this is not, as Irigaray suggests a number of times, the most reliable testimony. As Irigaray writes

This error in method, in the originality of Diotima's method, is corrected soon afterward only to be confirmed later. Of course, once again, *she is not there. Socrates relates her words.* Perhaps he distorts them unwittingly or unknowingly.²⁵

Carnal procreation is subordinated to the engendering of beautiful and good things. Immortal things. This, surprisingly enough, is the view of Diotima. At least as translated through the words of Socrates.²⁶

Again, there is a point of intersection here between these criticisms and a positive reading of the *Symposium*:

one must wonder whether the doctrine of the mature Socrates is a doctrine of Eros, regardless of whether or not it is more profound than that of poets. According to Diotima, the first step in the erotic ascent is to 'head for beautiful bodies. . .one must love one body and generate beautiful speeches therein' (210a4-b6). But apparently Socrates does not love bodies. It looks as though the testimony of Alcibiades contradicts Socrates' claim to be a student of Diotima. The assertion that it is unnecessary for the philosophical Eros to begin in accord with Diotima's instruction is on the whole a gratuitous assumption, or one that contradicts the general tenor of her teaching. And can we not agree that love of the human body is an essential step in the understanding of the human soul? If Socrates is from the outset disconnected from human beings, do not a great many puzzling features of his behaviour in the Platonic corpus become considerably clearer, including the cruelty of so many of his interrogations?²⁷

In terms of the importance of the erotic ascent (the journey) Irigaray reminds us

To attain this sublime beauty, one must begin with the love of young men. Starting with their natural beauty, one must, step-by-step, ascend to supernatural beauty: from beautiful bodies pass to beautiful occupations, then to beautiful sciences, until one reaches that sublime

²⁵ Ibid, 27.

²⁶ Ibid, 31.

²⁷ Rosen. *Plato's Symposium*, xviii.

science which is supernatural beauty alone, which allows the isolated knowledge of the essence of beauty. This contemplation is what gives the meaning and savor of life.²⁸

There appears to be a failure then on Socrates' part to appreciate the importance of fecundity, of the carnal, and this becomes clear in his unfolding of Diotima's teaching and is obvious again in the figure and disposition of the older Socrates facing death. Irigaray observes that Diotima's account is inconsistent and speculates as to whether the fact that her views are being rehearsed by Socrates may involve a distortion. This intersects with the interpretation that I am trying to defend whereby Plato is read as subverting the character of Socrates in the dialogue along with the philosophical approach he remains committed to – one that clearly misinterprets the thrust of Diotima's own account and betrays the early promise of that account as noted by Irigaray. When one considers the manner in which Eros is deployed as the philosophical impulse par excellence by Plato – one wonders whether this could in fact have profound implications for the interpretation of Plato as anaemic idealist? If, for example, the *Symposium* is part of a sustained critique of the fundamentally unerotic nature of a certain kind of philosopher, as evidenced by his immunity to beautiful bodies in his maturity along with his complete ignorance of erotics in his younger days, then perhaps this is a playful suggestion by Plato that philosophy requires much more than the rigor and exactitude of a certain Socratic style presented in the dialogues. Plato's putative anti-corporeality (i.e. denigration of the body and all things bodily) is something that Irigaray and others have tracked through the history of Western philosophy, and questions concerning embodiment, carnality and sexuate identity remain at the forefront of her confrontation with phenomenology today. Irigaray has certainly offered a distinctive take on some of these issues, but, again, situates her critique in a sweeping analysis of the history of Western philosophy beginning with Plato. Demonstrating Plato's capacity to absorb Irigaray's concerns, and to see him engaged in a critique of a

²⁸ Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 32.

philosophical approach which Irigaray sees as problematic, opens up some very interesting interpretive doors in terms of the role that carnality, embodiment, eros, desire and the material were playing in his conception of the philosophical landscape. Recalibrating our understanding of Plato's views in this regard, therefore, offers us a rich new repository of philosophical resources for comparative work by shedding light on the possibilities that were available in Plato's dialogues all along.

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