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Feminist Challenges to Conceptions of God: Exploring Divine Ideals

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Abstract This paper presents a feminist intervention into debates concerning the relation between human subjects and a divine ideal. I turn to what Irigarayan feminists challenge as a masculine conception of 'the God's eye view' of reality. This ideal functions not only in philosophy of religion, but in ethics, politics, epistemology and philosophy of science: it is given various names from 'the competent judge' to the 'the ideal observer' (IO) whose view is either from nowhere or everywhere. The question is whether, as Taliaferro contends, my own philosophical argument inevitably appeals to the impartiality and omni-attributes of the IO. This paper was delivered during the APA Pacific 2007 Mini-Conference on Models of God.

Keywords Apotheosis · Divine motivation theory · Divine women · Epistemic practice · Ideal observer · Idealization · Impartiality · Irigaray · Male-neutral · Philosophical imaginary · Testimonial sensibility · Transcendence · Virginity · Virtue epistemology

The present paper aims to challenge conceptions of a divine ideal against which human subjects measure their ethical points of view. I locate my own position at the interface of debates concerning the positioning of a first-person human subject in relation to a third-person divine ideal in Anglo-American philosophy of religion and Continental feminist philosophy. My critical point of departure is Luce Irigaray's feminist challenge to what she sees to be a masculine conception of God; her alternative is for women to become divine (Irigaray 1993, 2002), or for 'a divine in the feminine' (Irigaray 2007). Irigaray's provocative accounts of divinity are having a profound impact on feminist philosophers and certain theologians. The poetic or, some would say, slippery style of Irigaray's French psycholinguistics finds expression in sexually differentiated conceptions of the divine, including accounts of 'divine women,' and of becoming divine as women and as men (Jantzen 1998; Martin 2000).

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In the 2007 session of the APA Pacific Division Mini-Conference on Models of God, I initiated a feminist intervention into discussions on the nature of the relation of human subjects to a divine ideal. The third-person ideal has been given various names from 'the competent judge' to 'the ideal observer' whose view is either from everywhere or from nowhere. Philosophers of religion are not alone in treating the ideal observer as omniscient and impartial. In popular philosophical jargon, 'the God's eye view' has become another name for the ideal perspective of contemporary epistemology, ethics and philosophy of religion. However, feminist philosophers of religion have challenged this ideal point of view for its gender-blind partiality; feminist standpoint epistemologists are also notable for challenging the class-blindness of the ideal. The ideal agent may be male-neutral, that is, unwittingly masculinist and create an oppressive situation for women and some men (Anderson 1998, 2005).

Why have Anglo-American philosophers found it necessary to establish an ethically significant perspective on human subjects informed by God's omniscient and impartial point of view? It is helpful to mention two examples of constructive, contemporary attempts in philosophy of religion to modify, and then, defend the ideal-conception of God. Charles Taliaferro's ideal observer theory requires not only the impartiality and omniscience, but the omni-percipience of the God's eye view. Linda Zagzebski's divine motivation theory requires the ideal motives represented by a moral exemplar who, in the Christian case, is the one supreme exemplar: God (in Christ). A feminist challenge to each of these can be formulated in the terms of Irigarayan psycholinguistics. Yet, for my part today I would like to focus critically upon the latter feminist position as much, if not more than the former. The question is whether my own philosophical arguments inevitably appeal to the impartiality of the ideal observer.

In contemporary philosophy, serious issues are being raised concerning the nature and role of personal perspectives in the ethical and epistemological formation of human subjects. These issues are also significant for subject formation by religious knowledge and practice. The crucial question of this subject formation (for me) is: Do we require the divine to achieve a third-person perspective on the reality and truth of the human subject's knowledge, ethics and religion? Alternatively in Zagzebski's terms, do we require the divine as an ideally motivated (virtuous) agent to establish a mutual exchange between first and second-person perspectives? Irigaray and Zagzebski each seem to challenge – for different reasons – the exclusive view of the ideal observer-God for its problematic third-person perspective on human subjects. Irigaray objects to this privileged perspective on gender-grounds and Zagzebski objects on value-grounds, since the requirement is an exemplar whose motives are ideal for all ethical subjects. Yet I wonder whether Irigaray at least falls into a similar trap as the masculinist philosopher who defends a gender-exclusive ideal observer of reality when she seeks the ideal (horizon) as a divine in the feminine.

Irigaray: A Pivotal Figure for Feminists Today

It is fair to say that Irigaray wants women to be able to transcend, in the sense of going beyond, the self-enclosed space in which they have been trapped by the imaginary of western philosophy. This philosophical imaginary forms and is formed

by the metaphors and conceptual imagery which are latent in the books written by western philosophers and other men of ideas (Le Doeuff 2002). Feminists like Irigaray who follow Simone de Beauvoir identify immanence (*en-soi*) metaphorically as the prison of the female body which must be transcended to become *pour-soi*. However unlike Beauvoir, Irigaray proposes that women should become divine: women are to gain their own gendered subjectivity by becoming a divine in the feminine; in this way, a female divine constitutes the ideal horizon for sexual difference. An anticipated consequence of Irigaray's becoming divine is the possibility of mutual recognition for women and men, whereby love between two different subjects would become 'love to you' (Irigaray 1996). However, in previous essays I have raised significant questions concerning the possibilities for Irigaray's divine women (Anderson 2006a,b, 2007). Most significant here is that Irigaray's preoccupation with the imagery of auto-affection, of virginity (representing fidelity to self) and of apotheosis (representing the transformation of oneself into a divine subject) can easily undermine self-transcending relations between human subjects.

Those feminist conceptions of God which build upon Irigaray tend to assume that once each subject becomes divine, then men and women will achieve relations of symmetry and reciprocity. Yet nowhere is this achievement evident or the assumption justified. Instead the asymmetry of a woman's relations to man continues to plague the Irigarayan divine: she remains trapped within the inevitable self-enclosure of a divine in her own image and, more than likely, within an ethical solipsism. As far as I can tell, Irigaray fails to configure any successful formation for self-transcending relations to and with others.

My contention for feminist philosophers has been similar to Irigaray's insofar as women need to get beyond what has been conceived to be the prison of their own bodily immanence. The fundamental task is to have women and men recognize themselves as subjects who are autonomous, yet relational in formative ethical practices and in new discursive religious formations. However, I insist that this task is not to become divine subjects, or to achieve a God's eye point of view. Even if we inevitably seek the latter, the crucial awareness is that the ideal horizon, whether a view from nowhere or a view from everywhere, is unachievable. Recognition of this limitation makes all the difference. Instead of becoming a third person, ideal observer, or a divine ideal, the fundamental task for any human subject is to recognize the ways in which true transcendence actually connects us in solicitude to others and to the self as another. In fact, the significant point is simple. Human subjects self-transcend all of the time, often unwittingly. In this light solicitude is the real grounding for attention to the intrinsic goodness of each and every subject. In religious terms this original attention to one another has the potential to develop a collective reality: we might find, so to speak, 'God amongst us.' Yet notice that this reality is neither a wholly transcendent nor a fully knowable ideal.

The challenge to the above comes from post-modern, Irigarayan critiques of modern philosophy of religion. Yet ironically these Irigarayan critiques have relied upon a fixed hierarchy of gender ideals that arguably derives from pre-modern theology, especially Roman Catholic Mariology (Beattie 2004). These portraits of divine women and men have been further coloured by a sweeping rejection of Enlightenment values as 'irredeemably secular' (Milbank 1992; Ward 1999). As a

result, unwittingly or not Irigaray's philosophy of a divine in the feminine has supported contemporary 'post-secular philosophy' (Blond 1998).

To situate my own position here, I reject the post-modern and post-secular problematic as a serious distortion of our contemporary situation that is inevitably shaped both negatively and positively by Enlightenment philosophies. In other words, over and against a reduction and virtual rejection of modern philosophy including Anglo-American philosophy of religion, I contend that critical engagement with Enlightenment philosophers provide a better, if not historically necessary way to rethink the pre-modern categories of fixed gender ideals. Feminist philosophers who depart from Irigaray and from post-secular philosophy can, then, learn from the reflective critical openness[1] of contemporary feminist epistemology, including secular perspectives on personal and social reality (Anderson 2004). To repeat, an earlier pleading:

> To recognize the motivation to know is first represented by Eve – in whom we have personified a misplaced mistrust of women – we need to imagine her social identity differently. And then, we need to develop a reflective critical openness to the testimonies of those who, like Eve, symbolically and literally, have lacked rational authority (Anderson 2004, p. 92).

In other words, intellectual virtues such as reflective critical openness need to be cultivated, if contemporary (feminist) philosophers of religion are to be critically and socially informed. Openness to critical interaction and imaginative self-reflection build upon the self-transcending relations that make up our everyday practices as well as new cultural formations. Furthermore, I continue to maintain that

> Incorporation of reflexive critical openness into philosophy of religion means thinking more effectively by shaping our epistemic practices with the help of the philosophical capacities for reflective, imaginative and interactive understanding. We seek to listen to the testimonies of those who are not merely trusted because of certain, largely exclusive social markers of rational authority, but because the informant genuinely acquires and offers a true account of the matter, whether of religious experience, practice or belief (Ibid., p. 90).

Knowledge and ethics in philosophy of religion can no longer be built upon any naïve assumption concerning neutral or direct access to truth. Philosophers need to develop cognitive capacities that work to avoid male-neutral bias, but also to recognize the range of qualities of trustworthy knowers. More generally in philosophy of religion, the epistemic practice of mutually interactive dialogues between men and women, but also between different religious and secular philosophers should be a normative strategy that does not always give privilege to the ideal perspective of traditional theism.

[1] I am indebted for the conception of this intellectual virtue to Fricker (2003): reflective critical openness is cultivated as a cognitive disposition by developing capacities for testimonial sensibility; that is, sensibilities concerning who to believe and how to avoid unfair stereotypes, especially stereotypes that have rendered women untrustworthy knowers. For an account of reflective critical openness in feminist philosophy of religion, see Anderson (2004, pp. 89–92 and 98–98).

The Formation of Divine Ideals

The transformation of subjectivity by way of divinity has been a strategy for developing feminist philosophy of religion (Jantzen 1998; cf. Anderson 2006a,b). Yet I continue to have serious reservations about female apotheosis and, more generally, the transformation of human subjects into the divine. In what sense is apotheosis achievable? And is this goal a prudential task for men or women? It is not simply a question of the transformation of oppressive relations between male and female subject positions in western philosophy. Irigaray's goal is to establish new relations that take into account sexual difference. Yet positing an irreducible difference between masculine and feminine bodily origins does not necessarily overcome the asymmetry of male and female subjects. Even if a sexually specific bodily formation and a feminine ideal establish sexual difference, these Irigarayan 'natural' and 'transcendental' conditions might not overcome oppressive relations.

One historically significant dimension of oppression continues for women in philosophy. The philosophical imaginary that shapes philosophy's gendered practices continues to devalue and dis-inherit women who as feminine are not imagined to have ideas of their own. The imaginary exclusion and real subordination of women's ideas cannot be undone by the apotheosis of a woman alone, especially if this means a language in the shape of female bodies. Instead this psycho-sexual imaginary must be transcended, in the sense of transformed by moving beyond what have been misogynist practices. Instead of real, concrete and positive changes in our thinking and acting, feminist philosophers continue to be inhibited by both the deification of a woman's bodily nature and the self-deification of the female psyche. Deified women do not help, but in fact hinder the transformation of oppressive relations in philosophical practices.[2]

In today's jargon, feminist philosophy is not about creating divas. In fact Irigaray herself would probably agree with this. Yet the constant danger for those who seek to 'become divine' (*à la* Irigaray 1993) is destabilizing a woman's self-worth with either perniciously sacrificial or dangerously ethereal deifications. Instead of such deification (or false transcendence) I suggest that true transcendence would mean the recognition of the intrinsic goodness of persons: each person would move outside of herself to the right degree.

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, Irigaray's psycholinguistics place the source of female degradation, of a woman's bodily immanence and psychological subordination to men, in the loss of virginity, implying a violent and damaging sexual encounter. For Irigaray, preserving female virginity symbolically, if not literally, enables a simple apotheosis: virginity ensures a fidelity to self (Martin 2000). Yet valuing the female threshold in preoccupation with one's own virginity could prevent one from seeing what is actually there *outside* of oneself. Although Irigaray's work on love aims to see the other, obsession with one's own female or male virginity obscures the concrete everyday reality of self-transcendence for women who give up their virginity as a matter of course, as mothers, lovers, or simply put, as sexually active – and this is without the intervention of the all powerful God.

[2]For a critical literary exploration of what it would be like to be immortal, in a way deified by timelessness, see Beauvoir (2003).

Irigaray's psychosexually specific and subversive miming of the philosophical statements of the canonized western male philosophers on divinity are provocative – and often metaphysically and epistemologically significant. For example, Irigaray's miming of female self-affection confronts the philosophical paradox of the Kantian self who is both active and passive in bringing intuitions under concepts. The decisive difference between Irigaray's mime of self-affection and Kant's empirical and transcendental subject(s) remains the deification by which Irigaray seeks to render the female subject both sensible and transcendental. Ironically Irigaray's sensible transcendental seems both too disembodied, since deified as transcendent virgin (or construed to be a third-person divine ideal) and too gender-specific, since deified as feminine sensibility (or construed to be a first-person divine in the feminine) to achieve its sensible and transcendental horizon. Instead of the impossible achievement of a divine ideal – or indeed, instead of a 'personal fantasy' of virginity – I propose that self-transcendence in practical actions has a better chance to connect each of us with one another in concrete exchanges of mutual goodness. This could mean ethical interaction between autonomous, second-person perspectives.

Personal Perspectives and Moral Exemplars

As seen above, a danger with Irigaray's feminism of sexual difference is to mask what exactly is going on when talking about a divine in the feminine. Consider an example from her feminist theology. A gender specific anxiety exists over the Irigarayan (or post-secular) claim to apotheosis of Mary as Christ's mother: the story of Mary's annunciation and assumption creates a mythical exemplar. This Mariology subordinates a woman's practical reasoning about goodness in relation to herself and to other selves, to the man-God[3]: the exemplar consents to her divine role as the mother of God's son. This means consent to an omnipotent God who is given a masculine role as the ultimate authority in determining her choice to give birth to the divine. If compelled by an all-powerful God, her choice is determined in the strongest sense. Mary's story as the ultimate exemplar of apotheosis for the God-mother creates a haunting attraction in the ambiguity of a virgin mother's consent.

As an avowedly Protestant and Kantian feminist philosopher of religion, I would challenge any mysterious, potentially mystifying statements about Mary as the moral exemplar for women in becoming divine. Irigaray's distinctive feminist gloss on Mary's story is that the virgin woman freely consents to become pregnant and to give birth to a divine son; roughly, a woman talks to a man-God and agrees with him before giving up her virginity. This gloss includes a conception of virginity, which when kept in tact, constitutes a woman's bodily integrity as her self-worth. Consistent with Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference, this Mariology gives each woman a choice in belonging to herself as a body-psyche unity and in preserving her

[3]This claim should be seen in relation to a counter-claim concerning the profound significance that the Virgin Mary has had for women in the history of Christianity and could have for feminist philosophy of religion. For criticism of the position taken in the present paper, and strong defence of Mariology, including Irigaray's contribution on the Virgin Mary, see Beattie (2004, pp. 107–122).

dignity as a divine-mother. In the terms of Irigaray, virginity becomes the transcendental condition for giving birth to the divine; this virginity is supposed to be true of men as the divine father-son, as well as women who have the possibility of becoming the divine mother-son incarnation.

However, despite these positive reconfigurations of virginity as a fidelity to self, a bodily integrity and a transcendental condition for giving birth to the divine, the consenting virgin continues to generate the traditional dangers for women – and arguably for Christ-like men – in deifying an impossible sexual ideal. Whether a woman suffers or refuses to suffer in silent consent to privileging the incarnation of a divine (man) in her own body, the Virgin Mary continues to give ethical and metaphysical ground for patriarchal oppression.[4] Notwithstanding the best intentions in reconfiguring Mary in the form of a woman's heroic suffering in freely consenting to the God-man's act of transcendence, this distinctive female bodily formation, uncritically accepted by an innocent mother and a faithful lover, adversely affects women not just as individuals, but as a collectivity.

Irigaray's vision of female apotheosis represents the sort of illusion which such women philosophers as Beauvoir and most recently Michèle Le Doeuff, have uncovered and decisively criticized (Beauvoir 1997; Le Doeuff 2003, 2006; Anderson 2007). Basically, the criticism is that a debilitating obsession with self-image de-stabilizes Irigaray's sensible transcendental in the erotic account of female mystical experiences and of female consent to virginity. If this criticism sticks, then the danger becomes the pernicious patterns that block the reciprocity of subjects in love, especially blocking the capacity to be mutually self-giving and self-making with another sexuate – i.e. physically and psychologically belonging to the male or female – subject. Solipsism would also block a collective historical awareness of other women who have and do struggle on behalf of all women to transform the conditions of their subordination. Today, for instance, philosophical thinking (by feminists at least) needs to be able to challenge divine ideals which re-enforce 21st century forms of self-harm, masochistic or sado-masochistic abuse due to hatred of one's non-ideal sexually specific body.

We face the question of reality. What is the object or independent reality to which Irigaray's concept of becoming divine points? Is it a first or third person perspective on social or historical reality? In other words, does Irigaray propose a feminine version of a God's eye view? If so, can this be the perspective of a third-person knower who accurately testifies to the ethics (e.g. virtues) shaped by a specific social reality? Alternatively, does her perspective claim a false transcendence, which like the God's eye point of view, betrays the situatedness – even the bias – of its own gendered perspective. If so, then like the God's eye view, Irigaray's divine horizon (as an ideal feminine perspective) is not impartial but rather female-neutral as opposed to male-neutral. *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (1998) contains my first argument against Anglo-American philosophers of religion for their mistaken, male-perspective on reality. Although Irigaray openly admits to a feminine divine, she equally wrongly assumes that the divine ideal should be the goal for women's subjectivity, for

[4]For a sustained defence of the symbolic meaning of Mary for contemporary Roman Catholic Theology, see Beattie (2002) For a concise theological and feminist defence of the profound role that can be played by Mary's virginity on several levels of interpretation, see Beattie (2004, pp. 111–113 and 115–118)

achieving autonomy and sovereignty for all women. In this light, she seems to create the same sort of problem for the other gender that the ideal observer theory creates: an oscillation between the first-person partial perspective and the third-person ideal perspective.

I conclude that such idealizations of a gendered divine remove the masculine or feminine subject from reality. A better proposal for both men and women would be a second-person exchange whereby persons in dialogue acknowledge their partial perspectives, reasons and desires. Zagzebski advocates an appropriate alternative:

> ...a model for responding to the diversity of moral beliefs according to which the ideal perspective on the self is neither the first-person perspective nor the third-person perspective of an impartial observer. It is the perspective on oneself that one gets from close interaction with others, particularly those others who are wise and who know us intimately. I call this the second-person perspective (Zagzebski 2004, 372).

Zagzebski goes on to defend,

> ...the second-person perspective involves an encounter between two persons' first-person perspectives where **each of them understands and appreciates the other**. Each also has a first-person perspective on the other's first-person perspective, which the other can then come to understand and appreciate. This model assumes ideal conditions of communication, which we are rarely able to enjoy. Nonetheless, I do not think that the less-than-ideal conditions that we actually face falsify the point of the model. They just make it more complicated and more difficult to apply (ibid., p. 375; emphasis added).

Zagzebski's second-person perspective may not have all the answers. Yet this move in a significant new direction for philosophers who attempt to bring epistemology and ethics together in creating a virtue epistemology (Anderson 2004). Consideration of the second-person – as above "an encounter between two parties' first-person perspectives" – rather than an exclusive preoccupation with an impossible third-person ideal would be grounded in everyday acts of self-transcendence in relation to another self.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested both feminist and non-feminist challenges to the traditional masculine, or male-neutral conception of a transcendent God as omniscient, impartial, omni-percipient, yet without a body. These challenges recommend a thorough re-assessment of the role of the third-person perspective, its objectivity and impartiality. We need to clarify if, and possibly when this perspective should be sought. Whether an idealization of personal perspectives, or an integration of more and more personal perspectives, the divine ideal struggles with both in coherence and its own impossibility?

Taliaferro has modified the ideal observer theory, defending its coherence, possibility and even its inevitability for thinking in philosophy of religion (Taliaferro 2005a,b). Yet to conclude I turn to Bernard Williams' criticism of Peter Singer's

ideal observer. Let us reflect upon the significance of this criticism for our implicit or explicit appeals to a divine ideal:

> the project of trying to transcend altogether the ways in which human beings understand themselves and make sense of their practices could end up... dangerously close to the risk of self-hatred. **When the hope is to** improve humanity to the point at which every aspect of its hold on the world can **be justified before a higher court, the result is** likely to be **either self-deception**, if you think that you have succeeded, **or self-hatred and self-contempt** when you recognize that you will always fail. The self-hatred, in this case, is a hatred of humanity (Williams 2006, p. 152; emphasis added).

The crucial distinction for me is the nature of transcendence: can we maintain thinking and acting shaped by self-transcendence without an appeal to debilitating forms of either masculine transcendence or feminine immanence?

To retrace the argument in this paper: if the God's eye point of view remains exclusively the perspective of a masculine, sovereign subject who transcends the body and its partiality, then a problem of immanence persists for women. Irigaray and Beauvoir before her have demonstrated the philosophical and personal dangers in trapping women in bodily immanence. However the response to this in seeking new forms of female transcendence-immanence has its own dangers. There is the inevitable failure of an overly idealized transcendence – and the obscurity of Irigaray's sensible transcendental (Anderson 2007). Women are easily imprisoned in the immanence of their own body and psyche, but men also easily fall into self-deception – surely, this is an old lesson taught by Beauvoir – supposedly to Jean-Paul Sartre (Beauvoir 1997).

Today I see serious problems in the Irigarayan revival of an orthodox Christian form of gendered deification: that is, deification of man as the Father-Son and of woman as the virgin Mother. Post-secular philosophy simply returns us to the degrading aspects of a masculine transcendence and a deified feminine immanence. My contention has been that deification of the female body-psyche is not ultimately better than its denial: neither seems to render the wisdom of mutual interaction possible for women and men. We can easily recognize the danger in re-enforcing 21st century forms of self-harm and abuse. Nevertheless, self-deception and/or self-hatred due to a general lack of self-knowledge, including the limitations on personal, relational knowledge, continue to plague conceptions of divine subjects, notably as diva.

In the end, I urge further exploration of the ways in which divine ideals shape our ethical, social and material relations. For the sake of women and men of all kinds, we must not fail to find more realistic ethical-knowers who reveal the self-transcending nature of a truth that could be mutually recognized – through self-reflection, imaginative and interactive understanding – and then, constructively enacted.

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