

LUCE IRIGARAY



An Ethics of Sexual Difference

TRANSLATED BY

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Sexual Difference

Sexual difference is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our age. According to Heidegger, each age has one issue to think through, and one only. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our "salvation" if we thought it through.

But, whether I turn to philosophy, to science, or to religion, I find this underlying issue still cries out in vain for our attention. Think of it as an approach that would allow us to check the many forms that destruction takes in our world, to counteract a nihilism that merely affirms the reversal or the repetitive proliferation of status quo values—whether you call them the consumer society, the circularity of discourse, the more or less cancerous diseases of our age, the unreliability of words, the end of philosophy, religious despair or regression to religiosity, scientific or technical imperialism that fails to consider the living subject.

Sexual difference would constitute the horizon of worlds more fecund than any known to date—at least in the West—and without reducing fecundity to the reproduction of bodies and flesh. For loving partners this would be a fecundity of birth and regeneration, but also the production of a new age of thought, art, poetry, and language: the creation of a new *poetics*.

Both in theory and in practice, everything resists the discovery and affirmation of such an advent or event. In theory, philosophy wants to be literature or rhetoric, wishing either to break with ontology or to regress to the ontological. Using the same ground and the same framework as "first philosophy," working toward its disintegration but without proposing any other goals that might assure new foundations and new works.

In politics, some overtures have been made to the world of women. But these overtures remain partial and local: some concessions have been made by those in power, but no new values have been established. Rarely have these measures been thought through and affirmed by women themselves, who consequently remain at the level of critical demands. Has a worldwide erosion of the gains won in women's struggles occurred because of the failure to lay foundations different from those on which the world of men is constructed? Psychoanalytic theory and therapy, the scenes of sexuality as such, are a long way from having effected their revolution. And with a few exceptions, sexual practice today is often divided between two parallel worlds: the world of men and the world of women. A nontraditional, fecund encounter between the sexes barely exists. It does not voice its demands publicly, except through certain kinds of silence and polemics.

A revolution in thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place. We need to reinterpret everything concerning the relations between the subject and discourse, the subject and the world, the subject and the cosmic, the microcosmic and the macrocosmic. Everything, beginning with the way in which the subject has always been written in the masculine form, as *man*, even when it claimed to be universal or neutral. Despite the fact that *man*—at least in French—rather than being neutral, is sexed.

Man has been the subject of discourse, whether in theory, morality, or politics. And the gender of God, the guardian of every subject and every discourse, is always *masculine* and *pater-*

nal, in the West. To women are left the so-called minor arts: cooking, knitting, embroidery, and sewing; and, in exceptional cases, poetry, painting, and music. Whatever their importance, these arts do not currently make the rules, at least not overtly.

Of course, we are witnessing a certain reversal of values: manual labor and art are being revalued. But the relation of these arts to sexual difference is never really thought through and properly apportioned. At best, it is related to the class struggle.

In order to make it possible to think through, and live, this difference, we must reconsider the whole problematic of *space* and *time*.

In the beginning there was space and the creation of space, as is said in all theogonies. The gods, God, first create *space*. And time is there, more or less in the service of space. On the first day, the first days, the gods, God, make a world by separating the elements. This world is then peopled, and a rhythm is established among its inhabitants. God would be time itself, lavishing or exteriorizing itself in its action in space, in places.

Philosophy then confirms the genealogy of the task of the gods or God. Time becomes the *interiority* of the subject itself, and space, its *exteriority* (this problematic is developed by Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*). The subject, the master of time, becomes the axis of the world's ordering, with its something beyond the moment and eternity: God. He effects the passage between time and space.

Which would be inverted in sexual difference? Where the feminine is experienced as space, but often with connotations of the abyss and night (God being space and light?), while the masculine is experienced as time.

The transition to a new age requires a change in our perception and conception of *space-time*, the *inhabiting of places*, and of *containers*, or *envelopes of identity*. It assumes and entails an evolution or a transformation of forms, of the relations of *matter* and *form* and of the interval *between*: the trilogy of the constitution of

place. Each age inscribes a limit to this trinitary configuration: *matter, form, interval, or power [puissance], act, intermediary-interval.*

Desire occupies or designates the place of the *interval*. Giving it a permanent definition would amount to suppressing it as desire. Desire demands a sense of attraction: a change in the interval, the displacement of the subject or of the object in their relations of nearness or distance.

The transition to a new age comes at the same time as a change in the economy of desire. A new age signifies a different relation between:

- man and god(s),
- man and man,
- man and world,
- man and woman.

Our age, which is often thought to be one in which the problematic of desire has been brought forward, frequently theorizes this desire on the basis of observations of a moment of tension, or a moment in history, whereas desire ought to be thought of as a changing dynamic whose outlines can be described in the past, sometimes in the present, but never definitively predicted. Our age will have failed to realize the full dynamic reserve signified by desire if it is referred back to the economy of the *interval*, if it is situated in the attractions, tensions, and actions occurring between *form* and *matter*, but also in the *remainder* that subsists after each creation or work, *between* what has already been identified and what has still to be identified, and so on.

In order to imagine such an economy of desire, one must reinterpret what Freud implies by *sublimation* and observe that he does not speak of the sublimation of *genitality* (except in reproduction? But, if this were a successful form of sublimation, Freud would not be so pessimistic about parental child-rearing practices) or of the sublimation of the *partial drives in relation to the feminine* but rather of their repression (little girls speak earlier and more skilfully than little boys; they have a better relation-

ship to the social; and so on—qualities or aptitudes that disappear without leaving any creative achievements that capitalize on their energy, except for the task of becoming a woman: an object of attraction?¹

In this possible nonsublimation of herself, and by herself, woman always tends *toward* without any return to herself as the place where something positive can be elaborated. In terms of contemporary physics, it could be said that she remains on the side of the electron, with all that this implies for her, for man, for their encounter. If there is no double desire, the positive and negative poles divide themselves between the two sexes instead of establishing a chiasmus or a double loop in which each can go toward the other and come back to itself.

If these positive and negative poles are not found in both, the same one always attracts, while the other remains in motion but lacks a "proper" place. What is missing is the double pole of attraction and support, which excludes disintegration or rejection, attraction and decomposition, but which instead ensures the separation that articulates every encounter and makes possible speech, promises, alliances.

In order to distance oneself, must one be able to take? To speak? Which in a certain way comes to the same thing. Perhaps in order to take, one needs a fixed container or place? A soul? Or a spirit? Mourning nothing is the most difficult. Mourning the self in the other is almost impossible. I search for myself, as if I had been assimilated into maleness. I ought to reconstitute myself on the basis of a disassimilation. . . .² Rise again from the traces of a culture, of works already produced by the other. Searching through what is in them—for what is not there. What

¹ Cf. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum, de l'autre femme* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), pp. 9–162; trans. Gillian C. Gill, under the title *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 11–129.

² (All ellipses occur in the original French text and do not indicate omissions in the translation.—Tr.)

allowed them to be, for what is not there. Their conditions of possibility, for what is not there.

Woman ought to be able to find herself, among other things, through the images of herself already deposited in history and the conditions of production of the work of man, and not on the basis of his work, his genealogy.

If traditionally, and as a mother, woman represents *place* for man, such a limit means that she becomes *a thing*, with some possibility of change from one historical period to another. She finds herself delineated as a thing. Moreover, the maternal-feminine also serves as an *envelope*, a *container*, the starting point from which man limits his things. The *relationship between envelope and things* constitutes one of the aporias, or the aporia, of Aristotelianism and of the philosophical systems derived from it.

In our terminologies, which derive from this economy of thought but are impregnated with a psychology unaware of its sources, it is said, for example, that the woman-mother is *castrating*. Which means that, since her status as envelope and as thing(s) has not been interpreted, she remains inseparable from the work or act of man, notably insofar as he defines her and creates his identity with her as his starting point or, correlatively, with this determination of her being. If after all this, she is still alive, she continuously undoes his work—distinguishing herself from both the envelope and the thing, ceaselessly creating there some interval, play, something in motion and un-limited which disturbs his perspective, his world, and his/its limits. But, because he fails to leave her a subjective life, and to be on occasion her place and her thing in an intersubjective dynamic, man remains within a master-slave dialectic. The slave, ultimately, of a God on whom he bestows the characteristics of an absolute master. Secretly or obscurely, a slave to the power of the maternal-feminine which he diminishes or destroys.

The maternal-feminine remains the *place separated from "its" own place*, deprived of "its" place. She is or ceaselessly becomes the place of the other who cannot separate himself from it.

Without her knowing or willing it, she is then threatening because of what she lacks: a "proper" place. She would have to re-envelop herself with herself, and do so at least twice: as a woman and as a mother. Which would presuppose a change in the whole economy of space-time.

In the meantime, this ethical question comes into play in matters of *nudity* and *perversity*. Woman must be nude because she is not situated, does not situate herself in her place. Her clothes, her makeup, and her jewels are the things with which she tries to create her container(s), her envelope(s). She cannot make use of the envelope that she is, and must create artificial ones.

Freud's statement that woman is identified with orality is meaningful, but it still exiles her from her most archaic and constituent site. No doubt orality is an especially significant measure for her: morphologically, she has two mouths and two pairs of lips. But she can act on this morphology or make something of it only if she preserves her relation to *spatiality* and to the *fetal*. Although she needs these dimensions to create a space for herself (as well as to maintain a receptive place for the other), they are traditionally taken from her to constitute man's nostalgia and everything that he constructs in memory of this first and ultimate dwelling place. An obscure commemoration. . . . Centuries will perhaps have been needed for man to interpret the meaning of his work(s): the endless construction of a number of substitutes for his prenatal home. From the depths of the earth to the highest skies? Again and again, taking from the feminine the tissue or texture of spatiality. In exchange—but it isn't a real one—he buys her a house, even shuts her up in it, places limits on her that are the opposite of the unlimited site in which he unwittingly situates her. He contains or envelops her with walls while enveloping himself and his things with her flesh. The nature of these envelopes is not the same: on the one hand, invisibly alive, but with barely perceivable limits; on the other, visibly limiting or sheltering, but at the risk of being prison-like or murderous if the threshold is not left open.

We must, therefore, reconsider the whole question of our

conception of place, both in order to move on to another age of difference (each age of thought corresponds to a particular time of meditation on difference), and in order to construct an ethics of the passions. We need to change the relations between form, matter, interval, and limit, an issue that has never been considered in a way that allows for a relationship between two loving subjects of different sexes.

Once there was the enveloping body and the enveloped body, the latter being the more mobile through what Aristotle termed *locomotion* (since maternity does not look much like "motion"). The one who offers or allows desire moves and envelops, engulfing the other. It is moreover a danger if no third term exists. Not only to serve as a limitation. This third term can occur within the one who contains as a relation of the latter to his or her own limit(s): relation to the divine, to death, to the social, to the cosmic. If a third term does not exist within and for the container, he or she becomes *all-powerful*.

Therefore, to deprive one pole of sexual difference, women, of a third term also amounts to putting them in the position of omnipotence: this is a danger for men, especially in that it suppresses an interval that is both entrance and space between.³ A place for both to enter and exit the envelope (and on the same side, so as not to perforate the envelope or assimilate it into the digestive process); for both, a possibility of unhindered movement, of peaceful immobility without the risk of imprisonment.

To arrive at the constitution of an ethics of sexual difference, we must at least return to what is for Descartes the first passion: *wonder*. This passion has no opposite or contradiction and exists always as though for the first time. Thus man and woman,

³ (Irigaray plays on the double sense of *entre*, meaning both "enter" and "between."—Tr.)

woman and man are always meeting as though for the first time because they cannot be substituted one for the other. I will never be in a man's place, never will a man be in mine. Whatever identifications are possible, one will never exactly occupy the place of the other—they are irreducible one to the other.

"When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new, or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be, that causes us to wonder and be surprised; and because that may happen before we in any way know whether this object is agreeable to us or is not so, it appears to me that wonder is the first of all the passions; and it has no opposite, because if the object which presents itself has nothing in it that surprises us, we are in nowise moved regarding it, and we consider it without passion." (René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, article 53).⁴

Who or what the other is, I never know. But the other who is forever unknowable is the one who differs from me sexually. This feeling of surprise, astonishment, and wonder in the face of the unknowable ought to be returned to its locus: that of sexual difference. The passions have either been repressed, stifled, or reduced, or reserved for God. Sometimes a space for wonder is left to works of art. But it is never found to reside in this locus: *between man and woman*. Into this place came attraction, greed, possession, consummation, disgust, and so on. But not that wonder which beholds what it sees always as if for the first time, never taking hold of the other as its object. It does not try to seize, possess, or reduce this object, but leaves it subjective, still free.

This has never existed between the sexes since wonder maintains their autonomy within their statutory difference, keeping a space of freedom and attraction between them, a possibility of separation and alliance.

⁴ *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931; reprinted Dover, 1955), 1: 338.

This might take place at the time of the first meeting, even prior to the betrothal, and remain as a permanent proof of difference. The *interval* would never be *crossed*. Consummation would never take place, the idea itself being a delusion. One sex is not entirely consumable by the other. There is always a *remainder*.

Up until now this remainder has been entrusted to or reserved for *God*. Sometimes a portion was incarnated in the *child*. Or was thought of as being *neuter*. This neuter (in a different way, like the child or *God*?) suggests the possibility of an encounter but puts it off, deferring it until later, even when it is a question of a secondary revision [*après-coup*]. It always stays at an insurmountable distance, a respectful or deadly sort of no-man's-land.⁵ no alliance is forged; nothing is celebrated. The immediacy of the encounter is annihilated or deferred to a future that never comes.

Of course, the neuter might signify an alchemical site of the sublimation of "genitality," and the possibility of generation, of the creation of and between different genders and genres. But it would still have to be receptive to the advent of difference, and be understood as an anticipation from this side and not as a beyond, especially an ethical one. Generally the phrase *there is* upholds the present but defers celebration. There is not, there will not be the moment of wonder of the *wedding*, an ecstasy that remains *in-stant*.⁶ The *there* is remains a present that may be subject to pressure by the god, but it does not form a foundation for the triumph of sexual fecundity. 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 reexamine our own history thoroughly to under-

⁵ (In English in the original text.—Tr.)

⁶ (*Instante* is rendered here as "in-stant" to underscore Irigaray's emphasis on the term's root meaning, standing within the self, as opposed to "ecstasy," standing outside the self.—Tr.)

stand 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 the 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.

The consequences of the nonfulfillment of the sexual act remain, and there are many. To take up only the most beautiful, as yet to be made manifest in the realm of time and space, there are *angels*. These messengers who never remain enclosed in a place, who are also never immobile. Between God, as the perfectly immobile act, man, who is surrounded and enclosed by the world of his work, and woman, whose task would be to take care of nature and procreation, *angels* would circulate as mediators of that which has not yet happened, of what is still going to happen, of what is on the horizon. Endlessly reopening the enclosure of the universe, of universes, identities, the unfolding of actions, of history.

The angel is that which unceasingly passes through the envelope(s) or container(s), goes from one side to the other, reworking every deadline, changing every decision, thwarting all repetition. Angels destroy the monstrous, that which hampers the possibility of a new age; they come to herald the arrival of a new birth, a new morning.

They are not unrelated to sex. There is of course Gabriel, the

angel of the annunciation. But other angels announce the consummation of marriage, notably all the angels in the Apocalypse and many in the Old Testament. As if the angel were a representation of a sexuality that has never been incarnated. A light, divine gesture (or tale) of flesh that has not yet acted or flourished. Always fallen or still awaiting parousia. The fate of a love still torn between here and elsewhere. The work of a love that is the original sinner, since the first garden, the lost earthly paradise? The fate of all flesh which is, moreover, attributable to God!⁷

These swift angelic messengers, who transgress all enclosures in their speed, tell of the passage between the envelope of God and that of the world as micro- or macrocosm. They proclaim that such a journey can be made by the body of man, and above all the body of woman. They represent and tell of another incarnation, another parousia of the body. Irreducible to philosophy, theology, morality, angels appear as the messengers of ethics evoked by art—sculpture, painting, or music—without its being possible to say anything more than the gesture that represents them.

They speak like messengers, but gesture seems to be their "nature." Movement, posture, the coming-and-going between the two. They move—or stir up?—the paralysis or *apatheia* of the body, or the soul, or the world. They set trances or convulsions to music, or give them harmony.

Their touch—when they touch—resembles that of gods. They are imperious in their grace even as they remain imperceptible.

One of the questions which arises about them is whether they can be found together in the same place. The traditional answer is no. This question, which is similar to and different from that of the co-location of bodies, comes back to the question of

⁷See Luce Irigaray, "Epistle to the Last Christians," in *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

sexual ethics. The mucous should no doubt be pictured as related to the angel, whereas the inertia of the body deprived of its relation to the mucous and its gesture is linked to the fallen body or the corpse.

A sexual or carnal ethics would require that both angel and body be found together. This is a world that must be constructed or reconstructed. A genesis of love between the sexes has yet to come about in all dimensions, from the smallest to the greatest, from the most intimate to the most political. A world that must be created or re-created so that man and woman may once again or at last live together, meet, and sometimes inhabit the same place.

The link uniting or reuniting masculine and feminine must be horizontal and vertical, terrestrial and heavenly. As Heidegger, among others, has written, it must forge an alliance between the divine and the mortal, such that the sexual encounter would be a festive celebration and not a disguised or polemical form of the master-slave relationship. Nor a meeting in the shadow or orbit of a Father-God who alone lays down the law, who is the immutable spokesman of a single sex.

Of course, the most extreme progression and regression goes under the name of God. I can only strive toward the absolute or regress to infinity under the guarantee of God's existence. This is what tradition has taught us, and its imperatives have not yet been overcome, since their destruction brings about terrible abandonments and pathological states, unless one has exceptional love partners. And even then . . . Unhappiness is sometimes all the more inescapable when it lacks the horizon of the divine, of the gods, of an opening onto a beyond, but also a *limit* that the other may or may not penetrate.

How can we mark this limit of a place, of place in general, if not through sexual difference? But, in order for an ethics of

sexual difference to come into being, we must constitute a possible place for each sex, body, and flesh to inhabit. Which presupposes a memory of the past, a hope for the future, memory bridging the present and disconcerting the mirror symmetry that annihilates the difference of identity.

To do this requires time, both space and time. Perhaps we are passing through an era when *time must redeploy space*? A new morning of and for the world? A remaking of immanence and transcendence, notably through this *threshold* which has never been examined as such: the female sex. The threshold that gives access to the *mucous*. Beyond classical oppositions of love and hate, liquid and ice—a threshold that is always *half-open*. The threshold of the *lips*, which are strangers to dichotomy and oppositions. Gathered one against the other but without any possible suture, at least of a real kind. They do not absorb the world into or through themselves, provided they are not misused and reduced to a means of consumption or consummation. They offer a shape of welcome but do not assimilate, reduce, or swallow up. A sort of doorway to voluptuousness? They are not useful, except as that which designates a *place*, the very place of uselessness, at least as it is habitually understood. Strictly speaking, they serve neither conception nor jouissance. Is this the mystery of feminine identity? Of its self-contemplation, of this very strange word of silence? Both the threshold and reception of exchange, the sealed-up secret of wisdom, belief, and faith in all truths?

(Two sets of lips that, moreover, cross over each other like the arms of the cross, the prototype of the crossroads *between*. The mouth lips and the genital lips do not point in the same direction. In some way they point in the direction opposite from the one you would expect, with the "lower" ones forming the vertical.)

In this approach, where the borders of the body are wed in an embrace that transcends all limits—without, however, risking engulfment, thanks to the fecundity of the porous—in the most

extreme experience of sensation, which is also always in the future, each one discovers the self in that experience which is inexpressible yet forms the supple grounding of life and language.

For this, "God" is necessary, or a love so attentive that it is divine. Which has never taken place? Love always postpones its transcendence beyond the here and now, except in certain experiences of God. And desire fails to act sufficiently on the porous nature of the body, omitting the communion that takes place through the most intimate mucous membranes. In this exchange, what is communicated is so subtle that one needs great perseverance to keep it from falling into oblivion, intermittency, deterioration, illness, or death.

This communion is often left to the child, as the symbol of the union. But there are other signs of union which precede the child—the space where the lovers give each other life or death? Regeneration or degeneration: both are possible. The intensity of desire and the filiation of both lovers are engaged.

And if the divine is present as the mystery that animates the copula, the is and the *being* in sexual difference, can the force of desire overcome the avatars of genealogical destiny? How does it manage this? With what power [*puissance*] does it reckon, while remaining nevertheless incarnate? Between the idealistic fluidity of an unborn body that is untrue to its birth and genetic determinism, how do we take the measure of a love that changes our condition from mortal to immortal? Certain figures of gods become men, of God become man, and of twice-born beings indicate the path of love.

Has something of the achievement of sexual difference still not been said or transmitted? Has something been held in reserve within the silence of a history in the feminine: an energy, a morphology, a growth and flourishing still to come from the female realm? An overture to a future that is still and always open? Given that the world has remained aporetic about this strange advent.

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Wonder:

A Reading of Descartes,

The Passions of the Soul

We need to reread Descartes a little and remember or learn about the role of movement in the passions. We should also think about the fact that all philosophers—except for the most recent ones? and why is this so?—have always been physicists and have always supported or accompanied their metaphysical research with cosmological research, whether it concerns the macrocosm or the microcosm. It is only lately that this grounding of research has been abandoned. Is this because an autonomous epistemology has been set up in the sciences?

This scission between the physical sciences and thought no doubt represents that which threatens thought itself. Splitting our life, our bodies, our language, our breath into several worlds. Dispersing us into atoms or circuits of energy which no longer find common ground. Neither primary philosophy nor God provides a roof for our potential to dwell as mortals. And often we survive by regressing to schemas prior to *ideation*, the patient work of the architecture of ideality: sociofamilial stratifications of desire in the form of the *ideal ego* or the *ego ideal*, which bring about a return to religiosity, slogans, publicity, terror, etc. All forms of passively experienced passions in which the subject is enclosed, constrained, deprived of its roots, whether vegetal and earthly or ideal and heavenly. Sap no longer

circulates between the beginning and the end of its incarnation. And there is no *window*, no sense remaining open on, or with, the world, the Other, the other. In order to dwell within it, transform it. What is lacking there in terms of the passions is *wonder*.

"When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be, that causes us to wonder and be surprised; and because that may happen before we in any way know whether this object is agreeable to us or is not so, it appears to me that wonder is the first of all the passions; and it has no opposite, because if the object which presents itself has nothing in it that surprises us, we are in no wise moved regarding it, and we consider it without passion." (René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, art. 53, p. 358).¹

Wonder is the motivating force behind mobility in all its dimensions. From its most vegetative to its most sublime functions, the living being has need of wonder to move. Things must be good, beautiful, and desirable for all the senses and meaning, the sense that brings them together. And, if one admits that one's senses are hierarchized (and in space-time), it matters for "man" to find a vital speed, a growth speed that is compatible with all his senses and meanings, and for him to know how to stop in order to rest, to leave an interval between himself and the other, to look toward, to contemplate—to *wonder*. Wonder being an action that is both active and passive. The ground or inner secret of genesis, of creation? The place of the union or the alliance of power and act. Perhaps man is at the end of his growth? Or thinks he is? Is he turning back on himself to complete a cycle, as do Nietzsche and Heidegger?

¹ Page references following quotations from René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, are to *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, vol. 1, trans. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1931; reprinted, Dover, 1955). (Following the usage of Haldane and Ross, Descartes's term *l'admiration* is rendered as "wonder."—Tr.)

But this turning back results either in regeneration by means of reimplantation in fertile ground—man having exhausted his resources would rest in order to replenish his land—or else in a series of increasingly accelerated turns. This ends up purifying the good of the bad, or destroying the whole. As long as we are embodied, we cannot go beyond a certain rhythm of growth. We must always keep on accelerating and braking. Both. With and without the world. Both. With and without the other. Both. And doesn't the machine unceasingly threaten to destroy us through the speed of its acceleration?

Unless there is wonder? Can we look at, contemplate, wonder at the machine from a place where it does not see us?

Still, the other—he or she—can look at us. And it is important for us to be able to wonder at him or her even if he or she is looking at us. Overcome the spectacle, the visible, make a place for us to inhabit, a reason and a means of moving, a way of stopping ourselves, of going forward or backward through wonder.

This first passion is indispensable not only to life but also or still to the creation of an ethics. Notably of and through sexual difference. This other, male or female, should *surprise* us again and again, appear to us as *new*, *very different* from what we knew or what we thought he or she should be. Which means that we would look at the other, stop to look at him or her, ask ourselves, come close to ourselves through questioning. *Who art thou? I am and I become* thanks to this question. Wonder goes beyond that which is or is not suitable for us. The other never suits us simply. We would in some way have reduced the other to ourselves if he or she suited us completely. An *excess* resists: the other's existence and becoming as a place that permits union and/or through resistance to assimilation or reduction to sameness.

Before and after appropriation, there is wonder. It is set apart from rejection, which expresses itself notably through contradictory positions [*par les contradictoires*]. That which precedes suitability has no opposite. In order for it to affect us, it is

Wonder

necessary and sufficient for it to surprise, to be new, *not yet assimilated or disassimilated as known*. Still awakening our passion, our appetite. Our attraction to that which is not yet (en)coded, our curiosity (but perhaps in all senses: sight, smell, hearing? etc.) vis-à-vis that which we have not yet encountered or made ours. The same as us, as myself.

Attracting me toward, wonder keeps me from taking and assimilating directly to myself. Is wonder the time that is always covered over by the *present*? The bridge, the stasis, the moment of *in-stance*? Where I am no longer in the past and not yet in the future. The point of passage between two closed worlds, two definite universes, two space-times or two others determined by their identities, two epochs, two others. A separation without a wound, awaiting or remembering, without despair or closing in on the self.

Wonder is a mourning for the self as an autarchic entity; whether this mourning is triumphant or melancholy. Wonder must be the advent or the event of the other. The beginning of a new story?

"To wonder is united esteem or disdain according as it is at the greatness of an object or its smallness that we wonder. And we may thus esteem or despise ourselves, from which come the passions, and then the habits, of magnanimity or pride, and of humility or baseness." (Art. 54, p. 358; translation modified).

The object is no longer altogether unknown. It is esteemed for its size, and this size determines the quality of wonder, which is no longer pure. It has entered into the world of opposites, of contraries, and not into the opening of a new space-time. It has become energy *tied* to the dimension of the other. And not a mobilization of new energies which are still blind to their horizon, or qualities.

Moreover, here Descartes informs us about his passions: that which is great inspires esteem, magnanimity, even pride; that which is small inspires disdain, humility, even baseness. For

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Descartes, there is no magnanimity vis-à-vis smallness. This can be understood as an attempt to reduce to smallness that which has disappointed our wonder, or as the inability to admire the *seed*, that which is still being born, still becoming. Can this also be interpreted as the first determining of passion in terms of the quantitative? Yet sexual difference is not reducible to the quantitative even though it is traditionally measured by such standards: by *more* or *less*.

There remains the mother, who is magnanimous toward the little one. There also remains the fact that man continually wants woman to be a mother and only a mother, loves her as if he were still very small while esteeming what is very great, possibly inventing it, becoming proud of it to the point of forgetting who he is. And his becoming.

Which interrupts the flow of time. For most passions are turned toward the future, and if they break off the path or the bridge to the past, they become lost in time. They lose themselves in an evil infinity, rather than remaining in-definite, always unlimited, taking as their limits those present in their encounter with the world, the object, the other, the God (if the subject does not create him solely to close up his world). Wandering in space and in time, the passions risk losing one of their number, the substrate of the qualities of the others, of certain others: desire. Desire would be the vectorialization of space and time, the first movement *toward*, not yet qualified. Taking as its momentum the subject's passion or the object's irresistible attraction. Sometimes more on one side, sometimes more on the other, it is not yet frozen in a predicate which would split the world in two.

In a way, wonder and desire remain the spaces of freedom between the subject and the world. The substrate of predication? Of discourse? Which often reverts to itself rather than leave the intention and the direction open to the other. Does speaking to the other, especially two-way predication, ever happen? Given our style of predication? In which the subject becomes the mas-

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ter of the world, of objects, of the other. In fact Descartes puts the predicate with the passions of the subject, whereby the object becomes no more than the result of the alchemy of the subject's passions. The attractive nature of the object is taken from it. Possibly, it will pass through the presentation that the other makes of it.

Except in the experience of wonder? And perhaps in *desire*, which is already secondary for Descartes. Wonder being the moment of illumination—already and still contemplative—between the subject and the world.

"Wonder is a sudden surprise of the soul which causes it to apply itself to consider with attention the objects which seem to it rare and extraordinary. It is thus primarily caused by the impression we have in the brain which represents the object as rare, and as consequently worthy of much consideration; then afterwards by the movement of the spirits, which are disposed by this impression to tend with great force towards the part of the brain where it is, in order to fortify and conserve it there; as they are also disposed by it to pass thence into the muscles which serve to retain the organs of the senses in the same situation in which they are, so that it is still maintained by them, if it is by them that it has been formed." (Art. 70, p. 362).

Descartes situates his place of inscription solely in the brain. Is wonder determined by surprise, the suddenness of the impact of rare and extraordinary objects that come to inscribe themselves in a still untouched place in the brain? Which is tender and not yet hardened by past impressions, themselves often troubled and incapable of being affected, imprinted, due to these repetitions. Wonder marks a new place, and the movement of the spirits tends toward this new place of inscription to strengthen and conserve it. Indeed: "they are also disposed by it to pass thence into the muscles which serve to retain the organs of the senses in the same situation in which they are, so that it is still maintained by them, if it is by them that it has been formed." Wonder would derive its force from the surprise and the storage of some-

thing new. It would not change anything in the heart or the blood, which are tied to good and evil, to positive or negative determinations of the thing. It would remain a purely cerebral impression and a stake in knowledge, purely a question and a striving toward the answer to the question of *who* or *what* is the object of wonder. Before even knowing whether this object corresponds or not to my body's good—which would be a matter for the heart and the blood—wonder is the appetite for knowledge of who or what awakens our appetite.

Its force derives from the fact that the appearance of something or someone new modifies the movement of spirits in an unexpected manner. This fact is specific to this passion and is also encountered in other passions because of the role that wonder plays in them. The force of the movement comes from its beginning. Being at the start of its trajectory, the movement has greater force than a movement that increases regularly and as such, ceaselessly risks being deflected, according to Descartes. Wonder's force also derives from the *untouched* nature of the passion's place of inscription, a characteristic that increases the amplitude of excited movements. Thus, Descartes explains, the sole of the foot is insensible to our weight when we are walking normally, but it is unbearably irritated when tickled.

"And we may say more particularly of wonder that it is useful, inasmuch as it causes us to learn and retain in our memory things of which we were formerly ignorant; for we shall only wonder at that which appears rare and extraordinary to us, and nothing can so appear excepting because we have been ignorant of it, or also because it is different from the thing we have known; for it is this difference which causes it to be called extraordinary. Now although a thing which was unknown to us, presents itself anew to our understanding or our senses, we do not for all that retain it in our memory, unless the idea which we have of it is strengthened in our brain by some passion or else by the application of our understanding which our will determines to a particular attention and reflection. And the other passions may serve to make

us remark things which seem good or evil; but we have only wonder for those which appear but seldom. We also see that those who have no natural inclination towards this passion are usually very ignorant." (Art. 75, p. 364).

For Descartes, that which is different is stimulating because it is rare and extraordinary. The beginning of the position of the subject as such still welcomes as desirable that which it does not know, that which it ignores or which remains foreign to it. *Sexual difference* could be situated there, but Descartes does not think of that. He is content with affirming that difference attracts. And stimulates memory.

Whereas the repetition of a thing undoes memory, unless it is accompanied by some passion, or our understanding makes a particular effort.

And certain passions help us notice good or bad things, but wonder alone guides us toward *rare* things. And those who have no inclination toward this passion are very ignorant. Women, according to received opinion? Do they lack this directly speculative access to the object, to the other?

But, if to wonder is a proof of intelligence and involves intellectual aptitudes, especially memory, it happens that we can wonder excessively or rashly, through a lack of intelligence. Which can take away or pervert the use of reason. And this primary passion, which has no opposite, would have to remain a passion of youth. It would be fitting to "to free ourselves of it as much as possible." For, if the will can supplement wonder by enforcing understanding, the cure for excessive wonder can only operate through the "knowledge of various matters" and the "consideration of all those which may appear the most rare and strange" (art. 76, p. 365). So as not to remain fixed on a rare object, it is appropriate to turn voluntarily toward *several* objects. So as not to be attached to one *unique* woman, is it desirable to scatter oneself among *several*?

The question of wonder and love remains. Why would these passions be separated? Do we love with the heart and blood and

not through thought? Do we wonder with the head and not with the heart? Is it a matter of physiology, perhaps of Descartes's? For he describes the passions in the language of a physiologist. Would he differentiate between men and women on this point? Situating the passions at the junction of the physical and the psychological, he constructs a theory of the *ego's* affects which is close to Freud's theory of the drives. He does not differentiate the drives according to the sexes. Instead, he situates wonder as the first of the passions. Is this the passion that Freud forgot? A passion that maintains a path between physics and metaphysics, corporeal impressions and movements toward an object, whether empirical or transcendental. A primary passion and a perpetual crossroads between earth and sky, or hell, where it would be possible to rework the attraction between those who differ, especially sexually. A sort of platform or springboard for the regression of investment without engulfing, annihilation, or abolition by the other or by the world.

Could Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* signify something of a return to wonder? To a passion of pure knowledge, pure *light*? Without passing through the blood, determining good and evil, the heart and its affects, according to Descartes. Before and after acts of opposition, there would still be wonder: pure inscription, pure movement, pure memory. Even pure thought? The only *woman* whom Nietzsche can love? In a permanent form: *eternity*. The only woman with whom he wishes to have children (cf. "The Seven Seals" in *Zarathustra*). Situating woman in the place of the first and last passion. A wonder that lasts. A bridge between the instant and eternity. An attraction and return all around the unexplored, all barriers down, beyond every coast, every port. Navigating at the center of infinity, weightless. A movement lighter than the necessities of the heart, of the affect? A movement of dance or flight? Leaving the earth, its security, to navigate through fluids—marine, aerial, celestial. The passion of movement toward. Through? Which would never stop. Not even at *astonishment*, as Descartes would say. Astonishment being a kind of stupor which paralyzes. It pushes the spirits in

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the cavities of the brain toward the place that is wondered at, sometimes excessively, and in such a way that they stay occupied with keeping this impression and do not pass on from there into the muscles, nor are even deflected in any way from the first traces in the brain. Which means that the body stays immobile, like a statue, that of the first object there remains only the initial aspect that presented itself, and that it is not even possible to acquire new knowledge of it. An *excess of wonder* which makes one think of the shattering effects of adult love or of the permanent traces with which the child is marked without being able to be rid of them. Incapable of more wonder, of opening up to other landscapes, of moving toward new objects. Of rejuvenating one's brain, Descartes would think. Of losing one's gravity, Nietzsche would write. In which the stake is to wonder again and again without ever stopping. To steer incessantly toward the unpublished. Also to turn over everything that has already been impressed, printed, in order to liberate its impact and find its impetus on this side and beyond. The "object" of wonder or attraction remaining impossible to delimit, im-pose, identify (which is not to say lacking identity or borders): the atmosphere, the sky, the sea, the sun. That which he designates as woman-eternity, an other who is sufficiently open, cosmic, so that he can keep on moving toward her. Not the eternal feminine of images or representation(s). But a woman-mother who keeps on unfolding herself outwardly while enveloping us? And toward whom he moves, without ever getting there, without distinguishing between inside and outside. Going again and again *toward her within her*? In a movement that precedes even desire? Which protects the movement's lightness, its freedom, its continually new impulsion. Always for the first time.



Wonder is not an enveloping. It corresponds to time, to space-time before and after that which can delimit, go round, encircle. It constitutes an *opening* prior to and following that

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which surrounds, enlaces. It is the passion of that which is already born and not yet reenveloped in love. Of that which is touched and moves toward and within the attraction, without nostalgia for the first dwelling. Outside of repetition. It is the passion of the first encounter. And of perpetual rebirth? An affect that would subsist among all forms of others irreducible each to the other. The passion that inaugurates love and art. And thought. Is it the place of man's second birth? And of woman's? A birth into a transcendence, that of the other, still in the world of the senses ("sensible"), still physical and carnal, and already spiritual. Is it the place of incidence and junction of body and spirit, which has been covered over again and again, hardened through repetitions that hamper growth and flourishing? This would be possible only when we are faithful to the perpetual newness of the self, the other, the world. Faithful to becoming, to its virginity, its power of impulsion, without letting go the support of bodily inscription. Wonder would be the passion of the encounter between the most material and the most metaphysical, of their possible conception and fecundation one by the other. A third dimension. An intermediary. Neither the one nor the other. Which is not to say neutral or neuter. The forgotten ground of our condition between mortal and immortal, men and gods, creatures and creators. In us and among us.

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