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# An Interview with Luce Irigaray on Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives and Sexuate Difference

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# An Interview with Luce Irigaray on *Through Vegetal Being*: Two Philosophical Perspectives and Sexuate Difference

## **Abstract**

In this interview the philosopher Luce Irigaray discusses her book *Through Vegetal Being*. In response to questions, she distinguishes the human relationship to the environment and to other human beings. She describes how we must change our manner of relating to nature, beginning with our own: to learning how to coexist as a natural being among others instead of dominating the natural world. We must cultivate our instincts, free ourselves from traditions and elaborate a new education and sociocultural order and it is then that we will perceive that we cannot share with plants and animals all that we can share with another human being.

## **Keywords**

plant philosophy, ecology, sustainability, ethics, design, Luce Irigaray

## **Disciplines**

Architecture | Cultural Resource Management and Policy Analysis | Gender and Sexuality | Historic Preservation and Conservation | Plant Sciences | Race and Ethnicity

## **Comments**

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An interview with Luce Irigaray on *\_Through Vegetal Being. Two Philosophical Perspectives\_* and *Sexuate Difference*

Andrea Wheeler: Thank you very much for allowing me to talk to you about your new book *\_Through Vegetal Being\_* which I enjoyed very much. It was wonderful to read about your early childhood and I recognized the sense of refuge and happiness you found as a child in your garden with its plants and animals. I was lucky that my parents allowed me, as a girl, to experience the environments around my home in the woods, river, fields and do so unsupervised and in relative safety, playing in them with my friends.

The ability of one human being to give life to another, not only physically, but also through education, and spiritually, and thus open a path to fully living, is one of the most touching aspects of your philosophy. However, your approach is indeed different in terms of the ethics you propose toward living beings in that you value the importance of the question of sexuate difference.

This distinction, as I am thinking about what you express in the early chapters about your own relationship to plants and other living beings, is not surprising, based on your female perspective and your history. As an outsider to a culture that privileges all that is masculine or male in terms of relating, and one that too often aggressively refuses the value of having and expressing alternative philosophies (for example, excluding you as the author of critical and constructive alternatives), do you believe that women, or young girls, feel a love of nature more than men or boys do, or just differently? Also, do you think females have a different perspective because their focus may be beneficial and even more necessary for them more than for boys? Do you also think there is a distinction between the natural aspiration of girls and boys to grow and develop in relation to their ecological belonging? Or do you believe that boys may have more difficulty in determining and acting on their relationship with a living world? Do you think we may indeed naturally, rather than only culturally, lose this love of nature when our sexual interest develops in adolescence and later life?

Luce Irigaray: I am not a boy or a man and so cannot decide on what they experience or do not. But I can observe that, in our tradition, the split between cosmos and logos, that is, between the natural world and culture, happened when patriarchal tradition supplanted matrilineal tradition. The conflict between King Creon and Antigone, in the tragedy *Antigone* by Sophocles, embodies the opposition between culture that arises from nature itself and remains faithful to it, and a culture imposed more or less arbitrarily on the natural world. In the latter, women and girls are considered to partake in nature and are enclosed in the family home in order not to corrupt or contaminate the new cultural order. To answer your question in this connection: If a culture in the feminine remained faithful to the natural order, it is certainly because it more suited women.

Boys and men relate more to nature as something external to them, and as a sort of object or objectivity that they have to rule, and even dominate. This probably partly results from their need to separate from nature, and from their mother assimilated to nature, to affirm their masculine identity, but also from the conception of the masculine sex as a tool and an instrument of power more than a sensitive part of their natural belonging.

As I try to make clear in *Through Vegetal Being*, the matter is not only one of adopting an ecological ideology defined by scientific truth or moral laws, but of changing our manner of relating to nature, beginning with our own, of learning how to coexist as a natural being among others instead of intending to dominate the natural world. This presupposes that we become able to dwell in ourselves, that our own living being becomes a home - an oikos - in which we stay while respecting the being of other living beings as their home.

The sexuate belonging of girls and women makes them more able to dwell in themselves and to coexist with others at a natural level. Still it is true that a blind subjection to the masculine sexuate

belonging as it is today can remove them from such an aptitude, to which they sometimes, at least partly, return when becoming pregnant and mothers.

Andrea Wheeler: Being sent back to life, as you describe your experience, simply to live and to live freely, and not to desire power over living things, is so far away from the first impulse to have dominion over nature or raise up a structure. Such a cultivation of relationship, as you describe, with yourself and with the other, has such a very different human impulse than that described by our traditions and how we mostly understand our relationships. At this moment in time, it seems that there is such a fear of violence, not only in Paris, but in America too, especially after the events over the summer and this past week. Our fear for the future, for our society and our world, as experienced in our everyday lives, is one your book addresses in its recognition of the value of living sexual things. However, from your view, and maybe from your experience as a psychoanalyst, can you explain, from where does this fear of engaging properly with a sexual other, and of recognizing sexual difference, arise? There is a fear that despite the rhetoric of radicals within the fields of politics and ecology, still remains and it disguises a desire to sustain the perversity of our socially and ecologically exploitative cultures.

Luce Irigaray: In reality, our culture has claimed to be capable of introducing us into a true human existence by cutting us off from our living belonging. It did not care about the fact that we were born from a union between two differently sexual beings, and that sexualization is the condition of our human existence and development, because it is at the origin of our individuation and the source of our individual and relational energy. Our culture splits us in two parts : a natural part that is left uncultivated and a cultural part which is largely arbitrary regarding life. Hence the question of our sexualization arouses at least two problems. First, although it is a crucial dimension of our living existence, it is not suitable, as it is now, for our individual development and our sociocultural order. Second, as taking place in our culture, our sexualization is subjected to a logic that is abstract and based on dichotomies. What is more, this logic corresponds to a logic in the masculine in which sexualization

subsists only as functions or roles at the service of reproduction and the satisfaction of drives of man.

In a way, we are doubly trapped in a cultural mistake, having neglected the importance of sexuation for the growth of life and for culture. We must, consequently, not only free ourselves from our past tradition, but also cultivate our instincts or drives so as to transform them into ways of elaborating a new education and sociocultural order, which are more respectful of life and of our relationships with other living beings. Most politicians or social leaders do not understand that we need a personal and cultural evolution for embodying the programs that they advocate.

Andrea Wheeler: In gathering our energies and cultivating living energy, you argue that there is a benefit to us in having a love for animal and vegetal beings, and unlike any typical, cultural understanding of love or of our relationship with nature, or indeed understanding of the peace suggested by such a relationship with nature, this relationship is sexuante. It allows us to develop our sexuante belonging. You write that the natural world allows us to grow and develop in ways that are different than those imposed by our cultures. So should we recognize sexuante difference between us, as a difference that is not only sexual, but also how are our ethics distinguish the relationship we have to vegetal beings, animal beings, and the living sexuante human being? Further, does such a differentiated ethic relate to the need for the reconstruction or just the rebuilding of a sexuante culture?

Luce Irigaray : Perhaps, there is partly, but only partly, a misunderstanding in your interpretation of my way of conceiving the role of our sexuante belonging in relation to vegetal and animal beings. I wrote that our sexuante belonging provides us with a peculiar way of being and of dwelling. Taking into account this peculiarity and its limits, instead of aiming at an abstract and undifferentiated universal, allows us to reach an ethics respectful of difference(s), a thing that moral rules do not

favor. Ethics is based on consideration for every being and its world more than morality, which is more imposed from an outside too. Many people, presumedly loving plants and animals, do not worry about their own way of being. They approach them with an apparent generosity, but strating from a human conception of life and existence, thereby uprooting vegetal and animal beings from their own living roots and manner of dwelling. Accepting that we have a peculiar way of conceiving being and existence makes us able to take into consideration this aspect of other living beings. We then perceive that we cannot share with plants and animals all that we can share with another human being, even if, or because of the fact it is different from us. Obviously sexuality is one, but not the only example, of this.

Andrea Wheeler: It was a delight to see Paris in September with you at a time when the season moved from late summer to autumn. The colors and smells have been my favorite always at this time of the year. It was wonderful to experience Parisian culture, the language, the food, bookshops, architecture, parks and the fashions. Can you comment on whether as living humans we can create an ecological and sexuete aesthetic that allows us to reconnect to an ecological and sexuete belonging? Can we build cultural products the affects of which will allow us to reconnect to a natural living and sexuete energy? I ask this question from the perspective of being a teacher of design. You suggest that an experience of the creative energy of natural living things, including within ourselves, is distinct from our experience of made things, so I wonder how we might change this experience to experience living through designed things. For me, it comes through reassessing the experience of our senses, so we might reevaluate the relationship we have with the natural and the built environments. But do you believe a different understanding of aesthetics can shape a different, more sexuete experience and thereby cultivate a different impulse? These are questions that are driving my own inquiries and thinking at the moment.

Luce Irigaray : I hope that my examples will, even indirectly, bring support to you, including as a design teacher. For years, I have bought clothes from the same designer, whose plan is to reintroduce the human being into nature. Never is the stress put on what I must or must not wear, but that the natural matters, even the forms, of these clothes make me feel well in nature, beginning with my own nature. I think that ecological, moralistic discourses, for example, regarding our respect for animals, have a less good and important impact than our experiencing well-being thanks to nature itself. Now clothes represent the first environment of our body. Most of the clothes from this designer touch my skin as a caress, and they bring to my body a really pleasant temperature whatever the weather. They keep alive my love and gratitude towards nature.

Another example has more to do with the way of eating. I became a vegetarian while spending more than two months in the mountains. I did not make a decision, notably an ideological one. It probably occurred because of my desire to be in a closer communion with nature. But in reality, we largely become what we eat and, no doubt, being a vegetarian sent me back to a more natural way of being and developing, leaving the fabricated product that culture had rendered me. Probably it is this return to a more natural existence that called me back to the importance of my sexuate belonging for my life.

Andrea Wheeler: An important part of your argument is searching out a path for yourself to pass on the experience of a natural belonging you have protected and cultivated, and that path is sexuate and forged in relationships. Love can be such an undifferentiated and sexless notion, even as it seems in other non-Western traditions, as for example, the Buddhist practice of compassion for all living beings goes beyond our Western notions of death. So is the real need we have to save us from ourselves and protect the world from the harm we deliver so as to uncover and cultivate the unrecognized forms of love that are properly sexuate?



Luce Irigaray : As I try to make clear in *\_Through Vegetal Being\_*, it is my expulsion from my sociocultural environment and background that forced me to return to nature and my natural being in order to survive and begin to think and behave in a different way. What I experienced then was both very ancient and very new. If I compare it to what happened to Antigone, according to the tragedy written by Sophocles, I must add that I did not, and could not, live the event as a family one and in the context of a matrilineal tradition. I already was a woman exiled from her family and tradition for centuries. And this situation has been in a way more painful, but also more fruitful. Indeed, I have been expelled from the various institutions and circles to which I belonged as a woman asserting her difference with respect to a world presumedly neutral and in the neuter but which was built in accordance with the requirements of a masculine identity and subjectivity.

If I saved my life thanks to a natural environment, it also helped me to recover breathing. I do not believe that I felt only a universal and not a differentiated compassion towards all living beings. That would be true only as a negative imperative : « Do not harm » which is crucial in the traditions to which you allude here. In reality, I experienced also gratitude and love for some or other tree or flower, bird or baby, who contributed to my recovering life and relationships with living beings. Probably, this search for a living communion with others corresponds to a feminine way of being that we have still to discover and cultivate without privileging almost exclusively a maternal love – which, by the way, is not specifically human - as our tradition has done.

Andrea Wheeler: I have always understood architecture as being easier for the male to engage with, while for women, there is a greater struggle to adopt an aesthetic outside of oneself, culturally familiar, but foreign to our sensibilities. Yet the freedom and indeed the opportunities to reject the sensibilities of our built environment are so limited that an escape into wilderness is not really possible. Architecture is a preserve of the masculine it seems, and institutions defend their ethics and impulses. Uncultivated nature is kept out. Yet the expression of nature is one of an architect's

most ardent motivations and does make its presence felt in so much of the most celebrated architecture. If, as you suggest, there is a mode of relation belonging more to the woman, and she can recover this belonging, then that this gives a preference to the cultivation of an interiority in relation to the other, and also a horizontality. Could a new masculinity when reborn in this sexuate relation suggest its own very different structures?

Luce Irigaray : Perhaps we must learn, especially as women, how to develop from the inside without letting ourselves be subjected to a culture largely extraneous to us. Moreover, this culture is in great part reactive, as Nietzsche asserts, in particular with respect to nature and the mother assimilated into nature. A culture suitable for sheltering us and supporting our growing and sharing as living beings is still to come. A woman generally experiences space and time in a way that remains closer to nature than a man, at least when she succeeds in continuing to listen to her own nature and stays faithful to her own self-affection. Instead of spending too much time and energy in criticizing, women could try to discover how to calmly affirm their own peculiarity. As I often remind, when women joyfully claimed their desires in 1968, many important personages of Western culture - for example, Deleuze and Derrida - wanted to be or become a woman. Obviously, this does not correspond to my own desire and plan. But I do think that if women could grow as women and express their peculiarity in a cultural way - notably through works of art – this could help men to free themselves from their subjection to and resentment against the mother as nature, and renounce their domination on them through a supposedly neutral and universal culture. Perhaps they could dare to affirm their own sexuate belonging, not through the power of a sex transformed into a tool, but rather through the peculiarity of their conception of the world, of their way of inhabiting it and of making art. This could give rise not to domination or subjection between living beings but to a more loving and beautiful coexistence between all.