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Is there a place for sexual difference in Ernesto Spinelli's existential phenomenological psychology? An Irigarayan response to the work of Ernesto Spinelli

Aloysius Joseph

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IS THERE A PLACE FOR SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN
ERNESTO SPINELLI'S EXISTENTIAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL
PSYCHOLOGY? AN IRIGARAYAN RESPONSE TO THE WORK OF
ERNESTO SPINELLI

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Psychology Department
of the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Aloysius Joseph

December 2007

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IRIGARAYAN RESPONSE TO THE WORK OF ERNESTO SPINELLI

By

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ABSTRACT

IS THERE A PLACE FOR SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN ERNESTO
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Dissertation supervised by Suzanne Barnard, Ph.D.

My critique begins with the philosopher-psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray's claim that all inter-subjective relations are subtended by sexual difference, and that forgetting this is ignoring a foundational aspect of human relations. For Irigaray, sexual difference is not mediated by biology or some ontological difference that culture identifies as "man" or "woman," but a particular relation to the body and to language that structures inter-subjectivity. I draw from the work of Ernesto Spinelli, as he is a contemporary scholar-practitioner of existential phenomenological psychology who is particularly attuned to the constitution of inter-subjectivity in therapeutic praxis. I began with Spinelli's critique of contemporary psychotherapy as "an ally of dominant cultural assumptions" (Spinelli, 2001, p. 18). Using Irigaray's psychoanalytic and deconstructive reading of Western

metaphysics, I demonstrate that Spinelli's theory and practice actually reinforce certain cultural assumptions concerning sexual difference. This blind spot in his praxis prevents Spinelli from realizing certain inter-subjective possibilities in his work with clients; namely, the possibilities afforded by articulating a sexually specific other. I arrived at this conclusion based on my analysis of his theory and practice vis-à-vis an Irigarayan understanding of sexual difference. My analysis showed that he fails to listen to the sexuate nature of embodiment in his therapeutic praxis. Using Irigaray, I suggest that Spinelli's existential psychotherapy can benefit from paying attention to a perceptual and a sensory economy in therapy that is rooted in the client's sexuate body and history. Such a nuanced attunement will allow the therapist to look for creative ways to "*spatialize perception* and make *time simultaneous*" (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 155) in therapy. I propose that by paying attention to a different economy of language subtended by an Irigarayan understanding of sexual difference, Spinelli's version of existential psychotherapy will not only be revitalized, but will also continue to challenge the cultural assumptions of our time.

DEDICATION

To Carol, my friend & wife and to Rachel, my daughter

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Chapter 1

The question of sexual difference

Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our 'salvation' if we thought it through.

- Luce Irigaray,
An Ethics of Sexual Difference, p. 5

1.1 Introduction

In a report on the film industry, titled “The Princess Paradox,” James Poniewozik (*Time*, April 5, 2004) points out, “Hollywood’s newest Cinderella stories seek to inject some feminist messages into the age-old fantasy” (p. 72) of every girl’s desire to be a princess. Poniewozik’s observations are based on movies like *The Prince and Me* (Martha Coolidge, 2004), *Ella Enchanted* (Tommy Haver, 2004), *Shrek 2* (Andrew Adamson & Kelly Asbury, 2004), and *A Cinderella Story* (Mark Rosman, 2004). He defines the celluloid Cinderella in the following manner:

[T]o succeed on both the feminist and the fantasy level, the new Cinderella has developed rules and conventions as strict as a Joseph Campbell template. She should be pretty, but in a class-president way, not a head-cheerleader way. She should be able to stand up for herself (recall the *Crouching Tiger* moves of *Shrek*’s Princess Fiona). She must be socially conscious – a result, says Meg Cabot, author of the *Princess Diaries* books, of Princess Diana’s charitable work. And she should

above all not want to be a princess – at least until she changes her mind. In *Diaries, Prince and Ella*, it's not the girl who must prove herself worthy of princesshood; princesshood must prove itself worthy of the girl.... You just need a feisty girl, a prophylactic dose of skepticism and a fabulous ball gown – about which no ambivalence is necessary. (2004, p. 74)

The injection of feminist messages into the age-old fantasy/ideal of girls becoming princesses is not, it seems to me, a paradox but simply a clever and opportunistic reworking of the age-old patriarchal fantasy of what a girl should become: a princess. This reworked fantasy integrates qualities such as equality, beauty, and social consciousness into the process of becoming a princess, with the condition that Cinderella still falls in love with a man and goes to the ball. This strategy of simply decorating the patriarchal ideal of woman/femininity with a few feminist accessories not only works via its seductive appeal for many girls and women, but also because the roles played by women in Hollywood's new Cinderella stories, are not (as Jacobson, a top Disney executive observes) "toxic or repellent to men" (Poniewozik, 2004, p. 74). For example, women are portrayed as powerful but willing to forfeit their power to reap the rewards of traditional femininity. Both Poniewozik and Jacobson's observations point to the reality of patriarchal fantasies continuing to haunt and delimit what constitutes woman.

Although overlooked by many in psychology, the influence of the media on cultural values and norms associated with femininity cannot and should not be ignored. The media influences cultural practices by

incorporating patriarchal ideals into the images of femininity; it additionally influences the images of men that are offered up to women as “desirous,” and the heterosexual, “masculine” desire from which women are encouraged to see and experience themselves. Because these images have persisted to varying degrees over time, the underlying structure of phallogentrism appears to remain unchallenged in many important ways.

1.2 Phallogentrism and sexual difference

Phallogentrism can be understood as the use of one particular model of subjectivity – the male subject – as the norm by which “all others are positively or negatively defined” (Grosz, 1989, p. 105). The masculine as the central term defines meaning and social relations. So, for instance, difference within social relations is understood in male or phallic terms. In this phallogentric economy, women for example, are seen as lesser than men (“penis envy”) and are seen to experience a lesser or ineffective way of knowing (“they are emotional”) than men. Because patriarchal ideals and fantasies remain unchallenged within a phallogentric structure, the question of sexual difference – in other words, the acknowledgment of two sexes, two bodies, two forms of desire, and two ways of knowing – gets eclipsed. By the use of the word, “eclipsed,” I am drawing from the literary meaning of the term as used to describe the astronomical event that happens when one celestial object moves into the shadow of the other. The overshadowed object does not cease to exist, but is hidden from

view. When sexual difference is understood in phallogentric terms, the term “woman” becomes secondary, marginalized, eclipsed. In the absence of a non-phallic understanding of sexual difference (difference understood as pure difference, difference not in relation to a pre-given norm), what it means to become woman continues to be measured against a “neutral” (gendered masculine) subject. As a result, the opportunity to rethink the former on its own terms becomes forfeited. The sad consequence is that the story of what it means to be woman continues to be rewritten as “his-story.” One of the most important “his-torical” influences in the Western philosophical legacy inherited by modern psychology is the work of Renè Descartes. In the following section, I will address the link between the Cartesian legacy and sexual difference.

1.3 Cartesian legacy and sexual difference

The term “Cartesian” denotes certain important elements of the modern philosophy of Renè Descartes, particularly those arguments he deploys towards reconciling the philosophical problem of the subject’s apprehension of the object. My interpretation of Descartes’ philosophy is influenced by the work of existential phenomenologist Hans Cohn (1997). In his book, *Existential Thought and Therapeutic Practice: An Introduction to Existential Psychotherapy* (1997), he succinctly outlines the Cartesian legacy. Descartes employed a method of radical doubt; that is, he systematically doubted everything in the world. His aim was to arrive at something that was absolutely

certain, the existence of which could not be doubted, in order to build a reliable system of knowledge. Through this method, he arrived at one and only one thing that could not be doubted: his own thinking. This conclusion is encapsulated in his statement, "*Cogito ergo sum*" (I think therefore I am), where the *cogito* is consciousness, self, the thinking thing (*res cogitans*). As the *cogito* needs nothing else to exist, the body (*res extensa*) becomes expendable and superfluous.

By separating the mind from the body, Descartes established the ground for a reliable system of knowledge; however, Western metaphysics also paid a significant price with the separation of the mind from the body. This means that anything that is other to the *cogito* suffers the same fate; that is, while the *cogito* and all that it stands for is privileged, anything other than the *cogito* suffers the fate of becoming marginalized.

In her book, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz (1994) discusses the price paid by the body in Western metaphysics as a consequence of the privileging of the mind over the body. She observes, "The body either is understood in terms of organic and instrumental functioning in the natural sciences or is posited as *merely* extended, *merely* physical, an object like any other in the humanities and social sciences" (p. 8). While the reduction of the body to the position of an object is, in and of itself, philosophically problematic, it also impacts the status of whatever else gets represented by the body. Within the Cartesian economy, the subject's relation to the body becomes instrumental; the body serves as a

conduit or vessel for the subject in its various projects. In its role as conduit, the body is constituted as a passively resistant object which requires animation for the subject's projects; its constitutive role in the process of knowing is elided.

The Cartesian split also carries implications for sexual difference. This is so because "woman" and the feminine have been associated with the body and embodiment since the beginning of Ancient Greek philosophy. Philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray (1985a) critiques Descartes' treatment of the body as *res extensa* as yet another installment in this philosophical compulsion toward repetition of "the same." It should be noted that the Cartesian economy of mind-body relations is in line with the Platonic-Augustinian tradition of aligning "higher" functions to the "soul" and the "lower" functions to the "body" and that by subjugating the latter to the former, sameness and stability was insured.

Irigaray addresses Descartes' work from the perspective of subjectivity vis-à-vis sexual difference. Pointing out the many consequences of what it means to be woman within the Cartesian framework, she notes, "The 'I' thinks, therefore this thing, this body that is also nature, that is still the *mother*, becomes an extension of the I's disposal for analytical investigations, scientific projections, the regulated exercise of the imaginary, the utilitarian practice of technique" (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 186). The body's association with nature not only within the Cartesian framework, but also within certain interpretations of Freud, and the body's association with the

mother (as being *more* corporeal, *more* natural because of her link to reproduction and biology), continue to justify social inscriptions of women as objects to be used, controlled and/or domesticated. Within this Cartesian metaphysical structure, “woman” belongs to the side of the “other” – disposable, expendable and superfluous – while “man” takes the subject position as the *cogito* – certain, necessary and indispensable. Grosz (1994), as well, notes the close parallel between the Cartesian split of the mind and body and the male/female opposition:

The male/female opposition has been closely allied with the mind/body opposition. Typically, femininity is represented (either explicitly or implicitly) in one of two ways in this cross-pairing of oppositions: either mind is rendered equivalent to the masculine and body equivalent to the feminine (thus ruling out women a priori as possible subjects of knowledge, or philosophers) or each sex is attributed its own form of corporeality. (p. 14)

The link of the female with the body comes with a price for women: loss of subjectivity and reduction to the position of the object. Within such an economy, when women are linked to their bodies, what it means to be woman gets coded in biological terms, which in turn restricts her role within the social and economic orders. For example, when women are seen as naturally linked to reproduction and maternity and/or assumed to be prone to “hormonal” irregularities, their suitability for roles that are thought above all to require “rational judgment” and authoritative presence (e.g. the Presidency, or the Head of the Armed Services) is rendered suspect. Thus, the reduction of women to the position of objects and, hence,

the “objectifying” representations that emerge within such orders, is based on seeing women as being closer to their bodies than men. Such a positioning of women is also coextensive with patriarchal claims that link women’s “affinity” to the body with women’s “weakness” – women are seen as more susceptible to the vicissitudes of the body – to biological cycles, to psycho-somaticization, to difficulties separating and/or maintaining “clear boundaries.” The implications of such alliances are that for man to be man, he needs to disavow the body and its affiliations. The Cartesian split perpetuates a perception of the body as a product of a raw, brute, passive nature that needs to be civilized and polished by culture. The body is seen as an impediment or an obstacle, instead of as a cultural interweaving and reciprocal production of the “subjective” and the “natural.”

Grosz (1994) observes that the implications of such patriarchal (and misogynist) views gained strength from the belief that “women’s bodies are presumed to be incapable of men’s achievements, being weaker, more prone to (hormonal) irregularities, intrusions, and unpredictabilities” (1994, p. 14). This misogynist thinking sanctioned patriarchal myths and practices that attributed the purely conceptual order to be the prerogative of men. Women were therefore deemed unfit to enter the conceptual order and, by extension, the social and political orders, due to their proximity to the body. Their role (as objects) was to satiate the corporeal needs of men. Men’s corporeal needs are often disavowed and projected on to women.

Thus with the advent of the Cartesian split, based on the disavowal of nature/body/woman, a symbolic division was introduced. This division allocated the cultural, intelligible and the “transcendental” to the masculine and the material, corporeal, sensible, and “natural” to the feminine. With this symbolic division, women are severed from their own becoming as they are prevented access to culture. This loss of subjectivity, resulting from the link with the object and the body, has produced consequences for women within the biological, interpersonal, religious and social realms. For instance, the oppression of women was based on the biological justification that their capacity of either bearing or raising children makes them less able to engage in the social roles that are virtually granted to men at birth. In the essay, “When Descartes met the fitness babe: Academic Cartesianism and the late Twentieth-Century Cult of the Body,” Leslie Heywood (1999) observes that the preoccupation of women with their bodies within the contemporary culture (evidenced, for example, in the proliferation of low-fat diets, weight loss programs, gym memberships, liposuctions, etc.) is one manifestation of the legacy of Cartesianism. Heywood argues:

If, as an inheritor of the canonical Western tradition, she (woman) internalizes a worldview that is male ... [she] almost cannot do otherwise than develop a preoccupation with her body, since that body has made her the negative other of culture. (1999, p. 273)

Positioned as the “negative other” of culture, she will continue to subjugate her body through strict control and mastery in order to live up to her internalized (male) worldview.

In the next section, I take up how the existential phenomenological tradition confronted the problematic of the Cartesian tradition, particularly the inheritance of the Cartesian subject and its implications for the mind-body division. I also discuss the similarities and differences between existential phenomenology and the psychoanalytically-informed philosophy of Irigaray in terms of their understanding of embodiment vis-à-vis the motif of sexual difference.

1.4 Existential phenomenology and sexual difference

Existential phenomenology developed out of the critique of Cartesian metaphysics posed by, thinkers such as Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre. While their emphases and styles of thought diverged in important ways, their philosophies all challenged the pervasive and prevalent model of the Cartesian subject, particularly in its disembodied, de-contextualized and universal aspects. To begin with, existential phenomenology underscores the significance of the fact that the subject who doubts is always already embodied. Luijpen and Koren (1969) explicate this concept, of a corporeal interrelatedness of “mind,” “body,” and “world,” as follows: “Without the body and the world, however, the subject is not what he is, a human subject; the subject

needs what he himself is *not* – the body and the world – in order to be a subject” (1969, p. 33). Since mind and body always already exist as a meaningful and interrelated event, the Cartesian attempt to (re)connect them is redundant. One implication of this discovery is that the foundational mode of relationship is not one of knowledge but of existence; however, existence is given to us in and through lived experience. Existential phenomenologists focus on the articulation of embodied lived experiences and attempt to establish the conditions of possibility for the experiences to emerge as a series of meaningful and interrelated events.

What is common to Existential Phenomenology and Irigaray’s psychoanalytically-informed philosophy is that both are curious about the subject’s place within the imaginary. While I will elaborate on this term later (as understood within the psychoanalytic discourse), for now, the term imaginary can be understood as follows: while always already structured by language and discursive practices, the imaginary is rooted in the subject’s relationship to an image of his/her body. Both Merleau-Ponty and Irigaray are interested in the pre-discursive experience of the subject (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p. 130; Irigaray, 1993a, p. 151), as the articulation of lived experience is always already infused by specific meanings existent in culture. The term pre-discursive experience refers to the moment before logic-bound language frames the meaning of the experience (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 10-14). Both are interested as well in understanding how and why certain subject-relevant cultural meanings become dominant, while

others remain latent. While existential phenomenology, however, acknowledges the social, political, historical and cultural engendering of the subject, it typically neglects to address the particular significance of embodied sexual difference and its constituting role. In other words, existential phenomenology fails to recognize that the factors constituting our lived experience are themselves derivative of a collective and shared discourse that is framed by a phallogentric economy of relations. To illustrate this, I will explore a statement from the praxis of Ernesto Spinelli, a leading existential phenomenological therapist, whose praxis I will examine in depth in my subsequent chapters. In the context of attending to one of his patient's anxiety about growing old, Spinelli states, "How each of us deals with our death anxiety is likely to be as varied and unique as our experience of being alive" (1997, p. 10). While this assumption is valid from an existential phenomenological perspective, it overlooks the fact that the "experience of being alive" is different for men and women, beyond simple "individual difference," but is marked by our "sexuation." By the use of the term "sexuation," I refer in part to the constitution of the body, which should "not evoke a precultural, presocial, or prelinguistic pure body but a body as social and discursive object, a body bound up in the order of desire, signification, and power" (Grosz, 1994, pp. 18-19). I would also add that this term characterizes our taking up a position as a subject vis-à-vis the symbolic order (that which governs our inter-subjective relations). If our sexuation is "inherited" (e.g. the manner in which I gesticulate with my hands,

brought to my attention by a family member, is an unintended, embodied identification with my father) then it is crucial to develop a critical understanding of how and/or what is handed down to us.

Existential phenomenologists describe inter-subjectivity as if it is constituted through our embodied subject's interaction with another embodied subject of the same kind, overlooking the sexually specific differences of the two subjects – both sensory and morphological. This means that existential phenomenologists describe and analyze the experience of an embodied subject not as an experience of a concrete other, but as an abstraction based on the morphology of the male sex. In this regard, Irigaray's conceptualization of the imaginary goes further than that of the existential phenomenologists. Margaret Whitford (1991) observes that Irigaray conceptualizes the imaginary in terms of sex, either male or female. More specifically, she points out that for Irigaray:

[T]he imaginary either bears the morphological marks of the male body, whose cultural products are characterized by unity, teleology, linearity, self-identity, and so on or it bears the morphological marks of the female body, characterized by plurality, non-linearity, fluid identity and so on. (1991, p. 54)

Thus by overlooking the sexual markings on the imaginary and lived experience, existential phenomenology colludes with phallogentrism. For Irigaray, though, sexual difference is fundamental in exploring the cultural imaginary.

In the next chapter, I will elaborate on Irigaray's understanding of the relationship between the imaginary and lived experience, and

how each bears the morphological marks of the male or the female body. I will also examine what such markings mean in relation to subjectivity and sexual difference.

1.5 Luce Irigaray and the question of sexual difference

For Irigaray, the question of sexual difference is a major philosophical issue. In her words, “Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our ‘salvation’ if we thought it through” (1993a, p. 5). According to her, ignoring the question of sexual difference amounts to privileging the masculine. Irigaray’s interest in, and critique of, the problematic of sexual difference demonstrates that the Western cultural imaginary is haunted by the specter of phallogentrism, a specter which threatens to suffocate the space for any inter-subjective communication. To her, it is more important to question the materials out of which the cultural imaginary is constructed than it is to question the cultural construction of subjectivity itself. In other words, for her, only when the cultural imaginary is re-conceptualized vis-à-vis sexual difference, can it positively affect the lives of men and women. In this sense, Irigaray’s style and critique of Western thought situates her within the tradition of post-structuralism (Berg, 1991; Weedon, 1997). Poststructuralist thought holds the view that any study is itself culturally conditioned and therefore not free from preconceptions and prejudices. For instance, to understand the meaning of a text, it is

necessary to not only study the text itself, but also critically examine the contexts and the systems that came together to produce the specific meaning that shows itself. To this end, in the next section I examine the role post-structuralism plays with regard to the study of underlying structures in relation to sexual difference and Irigaray's own unique contribution in this tradition.

1.6 Irigaray and poststructuralist critique

Poststructuralist thinkers like Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Luce Irigaray have critiqued Western metaphysics, finding in particular, its "blind spot" in seeing/thinking the problems of sexual difference. Lacan critiques the Western metaphysical subject as being indifferent to its sexual difference, Derrida (1973) critiques the concept of presence in Husserl's phenomenology rendered through his critique of the "masculine" properties of the voice, and Irigaray (1985a) critiques the gap in the "symmetry" posited between the sexes in Sigmund Freud's account of femininity. In my analysis, however, Luce Irigaray's critique of Western metaphysical texts does more than articulate the sexual de-centering of the subject, the privileging of masculine presence over feminine absence, and of the masculine gender over the feminine. She presents positive articulations of female embodiment that avoid essentializing sexual difference and gender. In addition, she offers a systematic and detailed rethinking of the conditions that would make it possible for women to have "a home in the symbolic order" (Whitford, 1991, p. 156). Finally, she presents

psychosocial and politico-economic structures within which sexually different subjects can engage in communication without neutralizing each other.

In her writings, Irigaray observes that although there are two sexes, only the masculine has a place in Western metaphysical thinking. She points out that within the Western metaphysical economy, the feminine is rendered incapable of representation on its own terms and remains foreclosed. As she states, “The ‘feminine’ is always described in terms of deficiency or atrophy, as the other side of the sex that alone holds a monopoly on value: the male sex” (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 69). When the feminine is invoked, it is usually subjected to a phallogentric economy and thus gets reduced to a poor copy or imitation of the masculine. To illustrate her fundamental critique of Western metaphysics, I will turn to her critique of Sigmund Freud, articulated in her groundbreaking work, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985a). In the first section of this book, Irigaray examines “the blind spot of an old dream of symmetry.” She analyses what constitutes “normal womanhood” in Freud’s theory of sexuality. Her analysis reveals that Freud’s construction materials are based on his assumption that “anatomy is destiny.” That is, for Freud, woman’s lack of a penis evokes in her the desire to want to have something that the man has. This desire/lack will “form the basis for ‘normal womanhood’” (Irigaray, 1985a, p. 49). In the final analysis, according to Irigaray, “sexual pleasure boils down to being plus or minus one sex organ: the penis. And sexual ‘otherness’ comes down to ‘not

having it” (1985a, p. 52). According to Irigaray, this mistake of Freud’s phallic-centered economy of overlooking the sexual specificity of what it means to be woman is the “blind spot of an old dream of symmetry.” The old dream of symmetry stems from the patriarchal fantasy that women (as poor imitations of men) can become women only by striving to become the masculine phantasy of the feminine. For instance, in the beginning of the twentieth century, many women attempted to free themselves and reclaim their full humanity through adopting the masculine ideal of success.

1.7 Rationale for critiquing Ernesto Spinelli

Ernesto Spinelli is one of the most influential existential-phenomenological scholar/practitioners in contemporary therapy. Through his seminars, lectures and writings, Spinelli has earned an international recognition as an innovator in both theory and practice. He has been in private practice in London for more than two decades, and is also a clinical supervisor. He works as a Senior Fellow at the School of Psychotherapy and Counselling, Regents College, and has published several books and articles addressing aspects of existential psychotherapy, including his most recent book, *Practising Existential Psychotherapy: The Relational World* (2007). Through his praxis, publications, and coaching programs, Spinelli contributes in a significant manner towards the ongoing development of existential phenomenological psychotherapy.

In choosing Spinelli's work as an exemplar of existential phenomenology, I am motivated by several factors. First, he goes beyond an articulation of the fundamental theoretical concepts that constitute existential phenomenology, also attempting to clarify "what it might be like to engage in (an existential phenomenological) therapeutic relationship" (1997, p. 4). Hence, he provides case material and first person narratives that illuminate how existential phenomenology informs his own personal practice. My in-depth reading of his work shows that his knowledge and expertise as an existential phenomenologist is thorough and systematic. Furthermore, his "practitioner narratives" provide an important resource in understanding the workings of his imaginary in relation to the real of sexual difference as it emerges in the therapeutic relationship. Also, my choice of Spinelli is influenced by his openness to current developments in the intellectual world. He acknowledges that existential phenomenological therapy's recent developments "have been greatly influenced by hermeneutics, narrative theory, and post-structuralism" (1997, p. 5). In this context, he observes that the developments in existential phenomenological therapy via such influences "should make it plain that its ideas provide a significantly different means of examining and dealing with the wide range of problems that provoke people to seek the services of a therapist to those which infuse most other contemporary therapeutic models" (1997, p. 5). Spinelli's acknowledgment regarding existential phenomenological psychotherapy's current influences frees it from

being elitist and insular. His openness towards other influences prompts me to state that existential phenomenological therapy can also benefit from a critique from the perspective of sexual difference and feminist thought as conceptualized by Luce Irigaray.

Irigaray is also an active practitioner of psychotherapy, and she too writes about her experience as a psychoanalyst as a means of building psychoanalytic theory. In addition, both Spinelli and Irigaray work as phenomenologists – exposing latent (or forgotten) conditions of possibilities for what shows or appears. However, while Spinelli’s articulation of existential phenomenology is clinically useful for understanding the processes involved in a given psychotherapeutic encounter, his work is devoid of any direct reference to sexual difference. Specifically, Spinelli does not explore the lived reality of what it might be for a woman to become other than what she is normatively assumed to be. Based on this omission on his part, we could infer that he has inadvertently colluded with the dominant cultural assumptions about what it means to be woman. If that is the case, perhaps his own critique of today’s psychotherapy as becoming “an ally of dominant cultural assumptions rather than one of culture’s most trenchant critics” (Spinelli, 2001, p. 18) could be aptly applied to his own understanding and application of existential phenomenological psychotherapy.

Spinelli does attempt to articulate what it means to be a human subject in the context of a sexual relationship. Invoking Merleau-Ponty’s arguments regarding embodied consciousness, Spinelli

elaborates by saying, “Sexual encounters provide us with a pivotal means with which to express our presence to ‘the other’ and, in turn, to express the presence of ‘the other’ to ourselves” (2001, p. 82). While he recognizes sexual encounters as “pivotal” in the understanding of the subject’s relationship to the other, he remarks that Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s interest in sexuality is not about “issues of male or female sexuality, sexual orientation or the sociopolitical dimensions of sexuality” (2001, pp. 82-83). Spinelli’s remark that the meaning of sexuality belongs to the “inter-relational dimensions” suggests that the inter-relational and the sociopolitical are ultimately unrelated. Correlatively, Spinelli’s failure to address the specificity of female sexuality anywhere in his texts implies he assumes a normative conceptualization of female sexuality. Such an assumption on Spinelli’s part might lead to a clinical exploration of women’s sufferings only in the context of their personal histories and not in relation to cultural ideologies. If existential phenomenology is about the exploration of inter-subjective possibilities of a given way of being, then drawing from a cultural imaginary grounded on patriarchal fantasies produces only a monologue, one which can only satisfy the exigencies of the male subject.

1.8 Irigaray's sexual difference and Spinelli's existential phenomenological psychology

Hence we arrive at a place from which to understand both the cogency and the urgency of Irigaray's critique of the dominant modes of eliding sexual difference in contemporary Western culture generally, but in therapeutic praxis more specifically, regarding the claims of Spinelli's existential phenomenology to reveal the texture of lived experience as inter-relational. Some of the questions worth exploring from the perspective of Irigaray's post-structuralism are: At what points in Spinelli's work do we find the elision of sexual difference? More specifically, does his work recognize the phallogentric structuring of "woman" within the inter-relational realm? Finally, if the meaning of what it means to be woman does not get represented on its own terms, what consequences does this have for his praxis?

My analysis of his work through Irigaray's notion of sexual difference will make explicit some of Spinelli's implicit assumptions regarding the issues that encompass the inter-subjective realm of existential psychotherapy. A re-examined understanding will call upon his existential phenomenological psychology to be true to its own project of not forgetting to pay attention to fundamental questions; of not forgetting the inter-subjective nature of the *lebenswelt*, and of not forgetting to question its own cultural assumptions regarding inter-subjectivity vis-à-vis sexual difference.

1.9 Possible benefits of incorporating sexual difference in Spinelli's existential psychotherapy

Critiquing Spinelli's existential phenomenological therapy from the perspective of sexual difference will benefit practitioners of existential phenomenological psychotherapy. For instance, paying careful attention to the motif of sexual difference in the lived experiences of human subjects and situating the same within the inter-relational realm will help revitalize and open the space for a genuine dialogue between two subjects instead of a monologue. An example from my professional practice will help illustrate this point. A couple of years ago, I worked with a female patient in her mid-fifties whose presenting concerns involved a desire to reestablish her "voice" in the context of her relationships with her husband and her mother. During the course of therapy, I recognized that having/not having a voice – her concern to "be heard" was inextricably linked to her identity as a woman. Identity is, in turn linked to the cultural imaginary. To her, I was a representative of an "other" who was supposedly different and understanding compared to the others in her life at that time. Looking back, I can state that my intervention/interpretation of what was happening in the moment made a shift in the inter-relational realm. That moment can be marked as crucial in our interaction, as my client was able to enter into a dialogue and also make her voice heard in her terms.

Recognizing and acknowledging sexual difference would mean that the existential phenomenological practitioner needs to utilize skills that would help him/her navigate challenges that a female patient struggles with as she tries to redefine herself. In a general sense, the practitioner would benefit if he/she positions him-herself as a participant and not as an outside observer, use interventions that are about the here and now (between the therapist and the client), is willing to take risks on behalf of sexual difference, and invent spaces that would allow women to assume and own their sexed 'I' position. By being alert to the struggles emerging from the awareness of sexual difference, existential psychotherapy will continue to deal with "the world" in all its dimensions without evicting it out of the consulting room. Above all, an engagement with "sexual difference" will force Spinelli's existential phenomenological psychology to challenge its own assumptions regarding the normative assumptions of female sexuality.

In this dissertation, I will articulate the place of sexual difference in Spinelli's existential phenomenological psychology. In so doing, I will apply the deconstructive psychoanalytic techniques utilized by Irigaray in her analyses of the "blind spots" of various psychoanalytic and philosophical positions toward understanding how Spinelli's approach to the inter-subjective landscape of psychotherapy is influenced by certain implicit and explicit assumptions concerning sexual difference. Specifically, I will examine how he takes up the body as it manifests in therapy, and how this either allows for or

disavows the presence of the both the client and therapist as sexually-specific “others.” This will require a close attention to the constructs he deploys in his theoretical accounts of, and justifications for, elements of his practice that address embodiment and sexual difference. Through this analysis, I hope to show that by paying attention to sexual difference, existential psychotherapy can benefit from being attuned to creative possibilities that emerge as the therapist listens to the body speaking (both one's own and the client's) with a different ear. I also want to show that when the therapist can move beyond the constrictions of a phallogocentric discourse, sexual difference as a non-phallic relation to language and body will structure inter-subjectivity.

In the next chapter, I will first explicate the notion of the imaginary within the psychoanalytic tradition to contextualize Irigaray's own understanding of the imaginary. My outline will provide us an understanding of Irigaray's own notion of the imaginary and how it impacts her work in creating the conditions of possibility for women to take up the position of an “I” within the socio-cultural order.

Chapter 2

The imaginary and sexual difference

The coherence of a conceptual system does not imply its *truth*, but may be the coherence of its phantasy.

- Margaret Whitford,
Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine, p. 69

The theory of the human body is always a part of a world-picture....The theory of the human body is always a part of a *fantasy*.

- James Hillman, *The Myth of Analysis*, p. 220

2.1 The imaginary within the psychoanalytic tradition

Irigaray's (1985a; 1985b) critique of the Western cultural imaginary is primarily based on her deconstruction of the notion of the imaginary as developed within the psychoanalytic tradition of Jacques Lacan (1977). Within these traditions, the imaginary is primarily (though not exclusively) associated with the formation of the ego. Freud's understanding of the ego's formation evolved from his attempts to reconcile a biological and a psychological approach to understanding psychic life. Grosz (1994, pp. 27-39) identifies two understandings of the ego that Freud proposes in his study of perception, one from *The Ego and the Id* (1923/1961) and the other from *On Narcissism* (1914/1957). Briefly stated, the "realist model" of

ego formation consists of seeing the ego as a pre-determined entity, a mediating principle between pleasure and the demands of reality.

Freud (1923/1961) compares the ego to that of a man on horse back:

In its relation to the id, the ego is like a man on horse back, who has to hold in check the superior strength of the horse; with this difference, that the rider tries to do so with his own strength while the ego uses borrowed forces. (p. 25)

The main function, then, of the “realist ego” is to mediate, to keep in check the forces of pleasure versus the demands of a repressive reality. Alternatively, the “narcissistic model” sees the ego as self-image constructed through a dynamic process of internalization of images, both of one’s own body and that of others’. In this view, the ego is inter-subjective, in as much as it relies on the subject’s relations with others.

Jacques Lacan founds his understanding of the imaginary on Freud’s narcissistic model of the ego. According to Grosz, Lacan understands the ego to be “an imaginary outline or projection of the body, the body insofar as it is imagined and represented for the subject by the image of others (including its own reflection in the mirror)” (Grosz, 1994, p. 39). Lacan identifies the mirror stage as the moment when ego formation takes place, although he clarifies that this moment is not the decisive and final one. In a paper delivered at the International Congress of Psychoanalysis in 1949, Lacan elaborates on the role of the mirror stage in the formation of the subject. He describes the phenomenon of the reflected image in the mirror and the significance of the same in the formation of its ego:

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. (Lacan, 1977, p. 2)

According to Lacan, the child experiences jubilation, a feeling of elation at the moment it recognizes its image in the mirror. This pleasure stems from the fact that it discovers an “I”, a sense of coherence of itself that is separate from others. In other words, the child sees itself as a unity, a whole, in contrast to its experience of its body as fragmentary and uncoordinated.

At the same time, the child also experiences a feeling of ambivalence towards the image it sees in the mirror. The child experiences frustration because the image it sees is beyond it, an ideal to be attained. It is an ideal because it is always also the other, out of reach, unknown; yet to be attained. In other words, the reflected image in the mirror produces a sense of an “I” and “not-I” at the same time. In dealing with the ambivalence, the child will begin to internalize the mirror image instead of rejecting it. Internalization takes place because the image promises mastery, control over the body, and it holds the lure of the desire of the other; however, this internalization comes with a price – dissonance. The image identified with is different from its actual lived experience. Grosz (1990) explains how this dissonance organizes the infant’s psyche:

The image is always the image of another. Yet the otherness of the other is not entirely alien. The subject, to be a subject at all, internalizes otherness as its condition of possibility. It is thus radically *split*, unconscious of the processes of its own production, divided by lack and rupture. The ego illusorily sees itself as autonomous and self-determined, independent of otherness. (p. 43)

In other words, as Lacan observes, the dissonance produced in this dynamic between the child and his image will coagulate into a desire for being or having what the other desires. In his own words, “This form will crystallize in the subject’s internal conflictual tension, which determines the awakening of his desire for the object of the other’s desire” (1977, p. 19). Hence, the pursuit of the object of the other’s desire will continue to structure and constitute the subject’s identity, and bring with it fantasies of aggression and control.

The jubilant recognition of seeing the unified body in the mirror indicates that ego formation cannot be thought of without the body. Thus, Grosz (1990) observes that for Lacan, the ego is not only “a product of the internalization of otherness,” but also “a psychological projection of the body, a kind of map of the body’s psycho-social meaning” (p. 43). Here, the word “body” refers to the lived understanding of one’s anatomy (which can operate at an unconscious, preconscious, or a conscious level), and is itself psychically mapped or structured along the lines of one’s parental or familial significations and cultural fantasies of the body’s organization. Thus the ego can be understood as an internalized map

constructed with the materials derived from one's relations to others and to culture as well as the lived understanding of one's body.

In summary, the psychoanalytic tradition posits that the ego is formed on the basis of the child's recognition of its own specular image reflected in the mirror and by others. Consequently, the mirror stage initiates a dyadic structure of imaginary identifications that is dependent on images and representations. For example, when the child sees itself in a mirror, the parent might say, "You look just like your father," or "You have grandpa's eyes," statements that provide images for the child to identify with. The ego can be seen as the sedimentation of images of others. This means that a subject's claim to knowledge is infiltrated by a function of the ego's investment in sustaining (through identification) certain images that please it and rejecting those that are unacceptable. For instance, we see evidence of this in the use of the terms that evoke images like swallowing and/or incorporating that something is thought to be true or acceptable and spitting and/or expelling as something that is thought to be false or deemed unacceptable. For example, in the case of a person who either feels like throwing up or literally throws up when he/she perceives something traumatic (like a terrible car accident), we can say that this person is experiencing a kind of inability to incorporate something traumatic and so is expelling that which is unacceptable.

Grosz (1990) characterizes the ego as a dynamic relation between the subject and others. She maintains, "The ego can thus be seen as an intrasubjective relation founded on inter-subjectivity. It is

the coagulation and residue of internalized images of others” (1990, p. 46). The imaginary is the domain whereby relations between self and others as unconscious fantasy exist in an unmediated fashion. What is initiated in the imaginary becomes solidified as the child enters the symbolic order. Entry into language is evidenced in the ability to say “I”, to take up a proper name, which in turn, binds together the imaginary identifications and helps towards forming a cohesive social identity. Within the Lacanian tradition, the coveted object in the symbolic order is the Phallus, the master signifier. To have a social existence, one must have a relationship to the Phallus. In the next section I will discuss Irigaray’s critique of the assumptions that construct the psychoanalytic imaginary. My interpretations in the following section are influenced by Elizabeth Grosz and Margaret Whitford’s readings of Irigaray.

2.2 Irigaray’s critique of the psychoanalytic imaginary

Luce Irigaray shows much interest in the notion of the imaginary and its relevance for understanding subjectivity and sexual difference. My interpretation of Irigaray’s critique of the imaginary within the psychoanalytic tradition is influenced by the interpretations of Margaret Whitford and Elizabeth Grosz. In *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* Margaret Whitford (1991) traces the development of the imaginary in Irigaray’s work. She claims that while Irigaray draws on various sources in developing her own understanding of the imaginary, the psychoanalytic tradition in which she was schooled

remains the central source. Far from being uncritical of that tradition, however, Irigaray's account deconstructs the Freudian and Lacanian notion of the imaginary vis-à-vis her articulation of the role of sexual difference in the ego's domination.

Whitford (1991) observes that although Irigaray does not discuss Lacan's re-conceptualization of the Freudian understanding of the ego as self-image directly, she does acknowledge Lacan's blind spot in his discussion of ego formation and the imaginary. To begin with, Irigaray questions the assumptions about the physical properties of the mirror that are implicit in Freud's and Lacan's account. More specifically, Whitford echoes Irigaray when she states that the flat mirror that reflects the specular image "does not reflect the sexual organs and the sexual specificity of the woman" (Whitford, 1991, p. 65). Irigaray suggests instead a different sort of mirror (the speculum) that allows for "representation" of a woman's morphology. When Irigaray refers to a woman's morphology, she is not referring to a genetically coded female body or even the female anatomy, but to the body as a product of "social inscriptions, always inherently social" (Grosz, 1989, p. 112). Whitford explains Irigaray's thinking when she states, "The body which is reflected in this flat mirror, and thus the imaginary body subtending subjectivity, is either a male body (with male sexual organs) or else a defective male body (a male body without sexual organs, hence castrated)" (1991, p. 65). Irigaray also suggests that women as "components of the mirror" (1985b, p. 151) support the male edifice in an invisible manner by being situated as the "silvering

at the back of the mirror” (1985a, p.197) and thus always been taken for granted.

Within the psychoanalytic tradition, then, a woman is predestined to be without an imaginary specific to her sex. Hence the psychoanalytic imaginary is revealed as “masculine,” as specific to the morphology of the male. To put this differently, the imaginary that subtends subjectivity is built on the idea that the grid through which the girl comes to make sense of the whole world is modeled on the boy’s experience of seeing the world. In this model, her difference and sexual specificity is overlooked and subsumed under the male grid. For example, in cultures where men have the tendency to sexually objectify women, heterosexual women invariably internalize this masculine perception of physical appearance and work towards “shaping” their physical appearance to fit the masculine perceptual grid of what is desirable and acceptable.

The implication of a mono-sexual model for the little girl is, in Irigaray’s words, “[T]he little man that the little girl is, must become a man minus certain attributes whose paradigm is morphological – attributes capable of determining, of assuring, the reproduction-specularization of the same” (1985a, p. 27). Thus women in this mono-sexual discourse are perceived as defective males and their role is to safeguard sameness. For example, as Irigaray observes that in case of marriage, a woman is “forced to renounce the marks of her ancestry and inscribe herself on man’s pedigree. She leaves her family, her ‘house,’ her name – though admittedly it too is only a

patronymic – her family tree, in favor of her husband’s” (1985a, p. 33). She is an object that is exchanged between men (father to husband) in order to safeguard sameness.

Whitford (1991, p.65) characterizes Irigaray’s critique of both Freud and Lacan as “psychoanalyzing the psychoanalysts.” Irigaray does this when she analyzes the analyst’s imaginary, the unconscious fantasies that subtend the logic of psychoanalytic rationality. Yet, Freud and Lacan are not the only ones whose imaginary is male; rather, their conceptualizations reflect their participation in the phallogentric cultural symbolic while also reinforcing it.

By critiquing the imaginary, Whitford cautions that Irigaray is not trying to prescribe what the female should be. Instead, she challenges the presumption that the Western imaginary is a given, and therefore something that is immutable and true. Instead, Whitford shows that for Irigaray “what is taken to be the unalterable order of reality (discursive or otherwise) is in fact *imaginary* and therefore susceptible to change” (1991, p. 67). For instance, Irigaray wonders what it would be like if a woman’s desires were not governed by the male imaginary:

If woman had desires other than ‘penis-envy,’ this would call into question the unity, the uniqueness, the simplicity of the mirror charged with sending man’s image back to him – albeit inverted. Call into question its flatness. The specularization, and speculation, of the purpose of (*his*) desire could no longer be two-dimensional. (1985a, p. 51)

Irigaray (1985b) also cautions that we cannot leap out of the economy of the male imaginary or the cultural symbolic to elucidate a “new theory of women.” Instead she proposes a different strategy:

[T]he issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself, of suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal. Which presupposes that women do not aspire simply to be men’s equals in knowledge. That they do not claim to be rivaling men in constructing a logic of the feminine that would still take onto-theo-logic as its model They should not put it, then, in the form ‘What is woman?’ but rather, repeating/interpreting the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the subject, they should signify that with respect to this logic a *disruptive excess* is possible on the feminine side. (1985b, p. 78)

So, she cautions against answering questions concerning “womanhood” as a static and essential category or an unchanging material referent, as she understands such questions to emerge from the very discourse that ignores the difference of “her” sex. Any transformation of theory, practice, on the material reality of men’s and women’s lives requires a fundamental shift at the level of the imaginary.

Irigaray suggests that “re-imagining” the imaginary will require a new strategy for listening to the unconscious in/of philosophy:

We need to listen (psycho)analytically to its procedures of repression, to the structuration of language that shores up its representations, separating the true from the false, the meaningful from the meaningless, and so forth.... What is called for instead is an examination of the *operation of the ‘grammar’* of each figure of discourse, its syntactic

laws or requirements, its imaginary configurations, its metaphoric networks, and also of course, what it does not articulate at the level of utterance: *its silences*. (1985b, p. 75)

Thus for Irigaray, it is not about prescribing what the female should be, but describing how it functions within the western imaginary and symbolic operations, in order to show how what is taken to be the unalterable order of reality (discursive or otherwise) is in fact *imaginary* and therefore susceptible to change.

2.3 Phenomenologists' and Irigaray's understanding of the imaginary

Margaret Whitford (1991) observes that both Irigaray and the phenomenologists (like Merleau-Ponty and Sartre) share an understanding of the imaginary as structuring experiences. Irigaray states in her *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993a), that like Merleau-Ponty (1968), she is also interested in the “pre-discursive experience.” For Merleau-Ponty, the pre-discursive experience is that which informs our rationality and judgments. By returning to this moment, Merleau-Ponty hoped to create a different language, a language of alterity. For Merleau-Ponty, however, this pre-discursive experience is always already historical. In other words, it precedes our very existence. This claim on the part of Merleau-Ponty raises suspicions in Irigaray. According to her, he fails to see how a different language can be created if the pre-discursive is always already implicated in the symbolic.

As stated earlier, Irigaray's notion of the imaginary goes beyond that of the phenomenologists, when she conceptualizes the imaginary in terms of the morphological marks of bodies. For instance, the body gets mapped into zones (erogenous and otherwise) as in the case of an infant that is fed, thus mapping his/her mouth (instead of the ear or the nose, for instance) as a zone of pleasure and satiation; or when the child "learns" that he/she uses hands to touch things (and not the mouth for instance), thus mapping the hand as a zone for experiencing tactile sensations, etc. To Irigaray, the phenomenologists fail to take into account the sexual other, "an other whose body's ontological status would differ from my own" (Irigaray, 1993a, p.157).

Irigaray's critical reading of the psychoanalytic tradition extends to the Western metaphysical tradition. Her critique reveals that the imaginary that underlies the Western metaphysical tradition is based on an exclusionary model – the male gets represented on his own terms in the cultural imaginary and the female gets subsumed and functions according to male parameters. However, Irigaray also recognizes the importance of being phenomenological in her methodology. To this effect, Irigaray asserts, "A certain recourse, or return to the phenomenological method seems necessary in order to make enter into the universe of the rational some natural, corporeal, sensible realities which until now had been removed from it" (Irigaray, 2000, p. 156). A phenomenological method/description would reveal that the natural, corporeal and sensible permeate and suffuse all knowledge. The Cartesian subject, on the contrary, would try to purify

all knowledge of the products of imagination to arrive at clear and distinct knowledge. In this context, as Whitford points out, Irigaray believes the “disjunction from the imaginary cannot finally be made, that knowledge always bears the mark of the imaginary, and that what we take to be universal and objective is in fact male” (Whitford, 1991, p. 56). The next section will show how Irigaray’s strategy of using the elemental provides her a language by which she destabilizes the conceptual edifice of Western thought by inviting us to pay attention to what is covered over in our everyday life.

Irigaray (1993c) identifies four basic elements as primitive categories used by the imagining mind: earth, fire, water and air:

These elements, which, since the beginning of philosophy, have been a focus of meditation of every creation of a world, have often been misunderstood in our culture, which has tended to refuse to think about the material conditions of existence....Our so-called human sciences and our day-to-day speech steer clear of the elements, moving through and with a language that forgets the matter it names and by means of which it speaks. (pp. 57-58)

Irigaray posits these four elements in turn as being subtended by a more basic schema, viz., the male/female division. Her choice of the four elements provides her a vocabulary (construction materials) to counter the conceptual edifice of Western metaphysics of being.

Whitford writes:

In the first place, it provides a vocabulary for talking in the most basic terms about the material of passional life, about opposition and conflict, or love and exchange, about fertility and creativity, of sterility and death, a vocabulary which is more immediate and direct in its language than the abstractions of conceptualization, yet without the

immobilizing tendencies of the concept. It is a discursive strategy which allows for fluidity. (1991, p. 61)

Whitford suggests other related reasons for Irigaray to utilize the elemental vocabulary when speaking about the female body and its morphology, and when speaking of the erotic. Elemental, materially-focused language allows for a displacement of the visual and/or the gaze, for example, and allows for a speech “in terms of space and thresholds and fluids, fire and water, air and earth, without objectifying, hypostatizing, or essentializing” (Whitford, 1991, p. 62). The elemental, hence can “represent” “an unstructured and fluid psychic space, less constrained by the dominant imaginary, more open to other possibilities” (Whitford, 1991, p. 62). The next section examines the possibility opened up by the elemental vocabulary in symbolizing feminine subjectivity.

2.4 The condition of possibility for a female imaginary and symbolic

If the Western metaphysical tradition is subtended by a male imaginary, then it is crucial to ask: how to bring about a change in the imaginary? Whitford problematizes this issue when she points out that a change in the imaginary is nearly impossible if the social institutions “continue to support the phantasies of the male imaginary” (1991, p. 91). In an incisive and challenging essay, *Women*

on the Market, Irigaray (1985b) utilizes a Marxian analysis of commodities to analyze the role of women as objects. She explains:

Mother, virgin, prostitute: these are the social roles imposed on women. The characteristics of (so-called) feminine sexuality derive from them: the valorization of reproduction and nursing; faithfulness; modesty, ignorance of and even lack of interest in sexual pleasure; a passive acceptance of men's 'activity'; seductiveness, in order to arouse the consumers' desire while offering herself as its material support without getting pleasure herself ... Neither as mother nor as virgin nor as prostitute has woman any right to her own pleasure. (p. 186)

Her analysis of the social roles imposed upon women characterizes feminine sexuality as objects/material support for enactment of male fantasies. Ignoring such a characterization of feminine sexuality is tantamount to perpetuating the status quo.

Whitford also points out that the imaginary cannot be changed without the symbolic changing also. She clarifies, "The imaginary is an *effect* of the symbolic; it is the symbolic which structures the imaginary, so that there is a sense in which the imaginary does not exist until it is symbolized" (1991, p. 91). Also, the symbolic, understood as structure (or a position of enunciation) would be empty without the contents of the imaginary. Irigaray proposes that symbolizing the mother-daughter relationship as an archetype for women's relations among each other and establishing this externally in the social register would create a pause in the male imaginary. Whitford argues that such attempts at symbolic representation "would constitute an external reality which might block the more damaging effects of the male imaginary and ideally have a creative outcome"

(1991, p. 92). This symbolization is not to replace the paternal with the maternal but would allow the woman as subject to enter into the symbolic for the first time.

In the next chapter I examine some of the obstacles that stand in the way of symbolizing woman as subject. I also show how Irigaray attempts at a positive articulation of female subjectivity vis-à-vis the conceptual edifice of Western metaphysics.

Chapter 3

Sexual difference and woman as subject

There is no simple manageable way to leap to the outside of phallogocentrism, *nor any possible way to situate oneself there, that would result from the simple fact of being a woman.*

- Luce Irigaray, *This sex which is not one*, p.162

Can we think women as other without systematizing otherness, without construing it in terms of the totalizing discourse that defines woman as other?

- Tina Chanter, *Ethics of Eros*, p. 176-7

3.1 Introduction

Among the many postmodern thinkers who have influenced Luce Irigaray's articulation of a female symbolic and sexual difference, Jacques Derrida's work is perhaps one of the most important. In particular, Irigaray is indebted to his deconstructive style of reading Western metaphysical thought as structured around hierarchal binaries. A deconstructive reading calls into question the foundations of Western metaphysics and its economy of "phallogocentrism," that is, the operative principle of culture as grounded in values associated with Western traditional masculinity (a masculinity associated with among other things, class privilege, "whiteness", and Judeo-Christian religious values). For instance, in his work, *Speech and Phenomena*

(1973), Derrida critiques the concept of presence in Edmund Husserl's privileging of the "masculine" properties of speech over writing (the unprivileged term). Writing is unprivileged because in relation to speech, as Derrida notes, the speaker is absent in writing and thus by implication removed from the immediacy of and control over meaning. Thus we could say writing as *absence/lack* can be associated with "feminine" properties. Derrida remarks that when speech/voice is suspended, its status also changes to being unstable and ambiguous. In his own words, "*A voice without différance, a voice without writing, is at once absolutely alive and absolutely dead*" (Derrida, 1973, p. 102, emphasis in original). By destabilizing this bias towards speech as meaning/presence in Western metaphysics, Derrida deconstructs the notion of identity as the locus from which meaning as presence emerges. Derrida renders self-presence as "de-centered", unstable, in flux. Derrida and Irigaray however, have different intentions in questioning and deconstructing the pervasive hierarchical assumptions of Western metaphysics. While Derrida aims towards deconstructing phallogocentrism and problematizing any clear-cut dividing line between two positions, Irigaray is concerned with the complexity of how to represent the feminine subject in a context where representation itself is fraught with problems. In this sense, any insistence on the part of feminists for representation can learn much from deconstruction (Grosz, 1995, p. 116).

In this chapter then, I will show how unlike Derrida, Luce Irigaray offers a positive articulation of feminine subjectivity that

avoids essentializing sexual difference and gender. Derrida claims that his primary concern is with the deconstruction of conceptual frameworks and not with the construction of new concepts. In this context, Derrida's neologisms like *différance*, *supplement*, *pharmakon*, and so on, are not concepts per se, but provisional terms coined by him to offset and put into play rigid, hierarchical binary structures. In the process of rendering her articulation of feminine subjectivity, I will also show how Irigaray presents a systematic and detailed rethinking of the conditions that would make it possible for women to coexist and dialogue with men on their own terms. Lastly, I will also illustrate the conditions (as articulated by Irigaray) with which sexually different subjects can engage in communication without subsuming or incorporating each other. As two subjects they remain irreducible to each other and return to themselves without losing their subjectivities.

3.2 Sexual difference and deconstruction

In this section, I explore how Irigaray utilizes deconstruction in relation to the task of dealing with the problematic of sexual difference. Irigaray's method consists of psychoanalyzing Western metaphysical discourse and practices in order to bring to the fore the unconscious, what is repressed. To this end, she adopts Derrida's style, namely, deconstruction. More specifically, she adopts deconstruction's tactic of de-centering/subverting the central or privileged term within a binary structure by undercutting its illusory

independence from the marginalized term. Like Derrida, she does not attempt to efface Western metaphysical discourse, or to wipe it off the map, so to speak. As Barbara Johnson, a translator of Derrida's *La Dissémination*, explains, "*Deconstruction* is not synonymous with *destruction*, however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word *analysis*, which etymologically means "to undo" – a virtual synonym for "to deconstruct" (1980, p. 5). For instance, with the binary pair man-woman, deconstruction subverts and de-centers the privileged term, "man" by showing that the term "man" is dependent on the term "woman" for meaning; adopting the language of biology (and science fiction), we could describe these terms as "symbionts." The marginalized term "woman" would now take on the central position for a temporary period and thus disrupt the ossified dynamic of the binary. The intention is to set up a *free play* that would loosen the tendency within the binary structure to fix, centralize and totalize. In this sense, deconstruction is not an attack from the outside, but like a parasite works from the inside. In Derrida's words:

The movements of deconstruction do not destroy structures from the outside. They are not possible and effective, nor can they take accurate aim, except by inhabiting those structures. Inhabiting them *in a certain way*, because one always inhabits, and all the more when one does not suspect it. Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work. (1998, p. 24)

With the use of the phrase, “*in a certain way*” Derrida reminds us of the impossibility of stepping out of the metaphysical economy. Irigaray however, can be understood as inhabiting the structure *in a certain* (“other”) *way* because she speaks *as a woman*. Speaking *as a woman* means to speak “from a non-existent place, which has to be created or invented as she goes along, and at the same time to show that philosophers have a locatable, sexual place of enunciation” (Whitford, 1991, p. 124).

Irigaray adopts a deconstructive style specifically when dealing with the problematic of sexual difference. She believes that to effect a change in the symbolic order we cannot simply swap terms around or make a simple reversal of claims regarding woman. Instead, Irigaray purposefully adopts the strategy of *mimesis* in order to deconstruct the phallogentric representations of women; however, she claims that mimicry is only a preliminary phase at thinking through sexual difference. Her mimetic strategy parallels Derrida’s deconstructive strategy of “inhabiting (the structures) *in a certain (other) way.*”

Regarding her strategy of *mimesis*, she writes:

There is, in an initial phase, perhaps only one ‘path,’ the one historically assigned to the feminine: that of *mimicry*. One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it To play with *mimesis* is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it ... so as to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. (1985b, p. 76)

Additionally, she claims that her strategy of mimicry is of the sort “historically assigned to the feminine.” Here, she cites Plato, who distinguishes two kinds of mimesis: “*mimesis* as production, which would lie more in the realm of music, and ... *mimesis* that would be already caught up in a process of *imitation*, *specularization*, *adequation*, and *reproduction*” (Irigaray, 1985b, p. 131). Irigaray identifies her strategy of mimesis as the latter. Through this strategy she seeks to deconstruct the feminine requirements of patriarchy. Margaret Whitford (1991) clarifies the possible reasons for Irigaray’s use of this strategy. For Irigaray, she observes, any attempt at representation of women or even their non-representation falls within the domain of the phallogentric system. Mimesis, as an “initial phase,” is tactical in as much as through “playful repetition” Irigaray would make visible what was supposed to be invisible regarding women. Irigaray’s mimetic strategy is similar to what the noted psychoanalyst Joan Riviere refers to in her essay, “Womanliness as masquerade,” written in 1929. She writes, “Womanliness, therefore, [can] be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if [a woman] was found to possess it – much as a thief will turn out his pockets and ask to be searched to prove that he has not stolen the goods” (as cited in Burgin, Donald, & Kaplan, 1986, p. 37-8). This feminine masquerade allows a woman who violates social codes of her time by participating in a “highly” intellectual profession, for example, to project an outward

expression of extreme femininity in her appearance and behavior in order to diffuse and allay male fears of the woman “doing a man’s job” in a man’s world. From the place of cultural support for their role in mimetic praxis, women as artful mimes can use this strategy toward protecting themselves from being re-introjected into the masculine fabric of thought.

Although Derrida recognizes the work of phallogocentric logic in metaphysical structures, he seems to shy away from pursuing deconstruction beyond this point. He considers the work of deconstruction irrelevant after the opposition has been deconstructed. In fact, after this point, Derrida also appears to be skeptical and wary of any attempt (of philosophers like Irigaray) at thinking through the possibility of the radical alterity of the unprivileged term, which is the “female.” For him, rethinking the other (the repressed term) would amount to phallocratism (that is, it would reestablish the rule of repressed term). This would lead to a replay of oppression by the repressed term. In his words, “[T]he hierarchy of dual oppositions [in this case male and female] always reestablishes itself” (Derrida, 1981, p. 42). Derrida is understandably cautious about operating from outside of metaphysics; in other words, as Chanter observes, “[T]o deconstruct metaphysics by using any language other than that which metaphysics itself provides” (1995, p. 247) is unimaginable for Derrida. Irigaray, too, is well aware of the challenge posed by the trap of metaphysics. She is aware that it is tricky and slippery to step out and re-conceptualize the structure after establishing the free play

between the terms. Thus we can assume her agreement with Derrida on this point, as expressed in the following caveat:

We do not escape, in particular, by thinking we can dispense with a rigorous interpretation of phallogocentrism. There is no simple manageable way to leap to the outside of phallogocentrism, *nor any possible way to situate oneself there, that would result from the simple fact of being a woman.* (1985b, p. 162)

In her essay, "Ontology and Equivocation," Elizabeth Grosz (1995) is sympathetic to Derrida's problems with feminist discourse vis-à-vis deconstruction. However, she also observes a "certain strategic ambiguity in Derrida's use of the notion of ... a sexuality, a sexuality before the imposition of dual sex roles, a sexuality that is somehow ontological but entirely without qualities and attributes" (1995, p. 121). Grosz clarifies her observations regarding Derrida by distinguishing between two meanings of the word "sexuality". She states:

It is clear that sexuality, in the sense of 'pleasurable drive,' could quite valuably be understood as a mode of prior indeterminacy that gains its specific form and qualities a posteriori, and largely as an effect of binary polarization. It is not so easy to see how sexuality, in the sense of sexed subjectivity, male and female, can be understood as indeterminate. (1995, p. 121-2)

Here Grosz cautions that if we fail to acknowledge sexual difference, there is a danger of sexual difference collapsing to sexual neutrality. Thus in her critique of Derrida, Grosz affirms unequivocally that for her, affirming the "irreducible specificity of each sex relative to the

other” (1995, 121-2.) is a *sine qua non* and an a priori to any discussion of specific forms and qualities of sexuality.

Deconstruction does seem well within its bounds as its concern is not about valorizing and/or rethinking woman (the unprivileged term), but to challenge the authority of man (the privileged term) and to create flexibility within the structure. Unless the conditions of possibility for articulating her subjectivity is not taken up, she will remain as the “other of the same” (that is, a poor imitation of man, or as a negative term, as ‘- A’, where man is represented as ‘A’ (Grosz, 1990, p. 172). As an “other of the same,” woman continues to remain homeless within the symbolic order. And, I would add, the possibility of sexual difference – of woman as “other of the other,” as sexually specific subjects – will continue to have no real place in the psycho-social imagination.

3.3 Sexual division as sexual indifference

One of the major challenges facing a feminist thinker like Irigaray is to articulate the conditions of existence for woman such that she may operate as a sexually specific subject in relation to her environment. To recall, according to her analysis of the psychoanalytic tradition, the phallus governs the symbolic order. Subjectivity is structured hence according to the fantasy of either “being” or “having” a phallus. Since women (as castrated) do not “have” a phallus, they are alienated in the symbolic order. Language is not able to mediate the loss that women suffer. This is what allows Irigaray to claim that

women are homeless within the symbolic order (Grosz, 1990; Whitford 1991).

In her thought-provoking essay, “Divine Women,” Irigaray (1993c) asserts that positing a divine ideal for women as a model of subjectivity would serve as a guarantee of a horizon. She asserts that the divine as horizon is “not a luxury but a *necessity*” (1993c, p. 67). It is a necessity because without a guideline, a horizon, women lack a reference for their own becoming, and can become vulnerable to the dictates of others. In discussing the leitmotif of “divine,” she reframes the function of the mirror to suit the needs of woman’s becoming. In Irigaray’s hands, the mirror stands not as a metaphor for alienation in and through the gaze of the other, but is used as a metonymic device. In the phallic economy of subjectivity, the mirror, which serves to alienate women from their own becoming, is now made by Irigaray to serve a positive purpose of self-contemplation. Irigaray contends:

We look at ourselves in the mirror to *please someone*, rarely to interrogate the state of our body or our spirit, rarely for ourselves and in search of our own becoming. The mirror almost always serves to reduce us to a pure exteriority – of a very particular kind.... The mirror signifies the constitution of a fabricated (female) other that I shall put forward as an instrument of seduction in my place. I seek to be seductive and to be content with images of which I theoretically remain the artisan, the artist. I have yet to unveil, unmask, or veil myself *for me* – to veil myself so as to achieve self-contemplation, for example, to let my gaze travel over myself so as to limit my exposure to the other and repossess my own gestures and garments, thus nestling back into my vision and contemplation of myself. (1993c, p. 65)

In other words, the mirror is not a weapon or a tool to alienate a woman from her own becoming but serves not only as a guide to gather her fragmented and alienated self but also to validate her in her autonomous subjectivity. This “self,” however, is not another “identity,” or a hypostatized entity but a loose assemblage, a series of provisional, fluid-like contact points.

Irigaray’s analysis (1985a) of the Western metaphysical tradition also shows that an economy of the death drive constitutes the *human* (man and woman). This economy of the death drive is represented in the concept of castration anxiety, that is, the refusal of the subject to face loss, historically linked at least (in the history of philosophy) to notions of mortality and death. Death, in this context, is represented as a ‘hole’ or ‘nothingness’ within the phallic order. Within the male imaginary, women stand in close proximity to this lack/hole in existence. Each gender negotiates this threat of dissolution and nothingness in his/her own way. Man negotiates his threat by projecting his anxiety onto woman as she “*represents* death or the unthinkable for/by men” (Whitford, 1991, p. 115).

To understand what facilitates this projection of his anxiety onto woman, I will elaborate on what Irigaray (1993c) describes as the “flawed distribution” of tasks and functions within the symbolic order. She observes, “*The human race has been divided into two functions, two tasks, not two genders.* Under pain of death, woman has renounced her gender. Man has done the same, though differently” (1993c, p. 120). Based on this symbolic distribution, woman bears

functions and tasks that invalidate her genealogy and transcendence. For example, the function and task of childrearing that has been largely borne by women is so well entrenched into the cultural imaginary-symbolic, thanks to the “flawed distribution” whereby she was the bearer of the corporeal. In this symbolic division, woman is the possessor of the unwanted, the unknown, and nothingness. Whitford echoes Irigaray when she states, “An ethics of sexual difference, that is, an ethics which recognizes the subjectivity of each sex, would have to address the symbolic division which allocates the material, corporeal, sensible, ‘natural’ to the feminine, and the spiritual, ideal, intelligible, transcendental to the masculine” (1991, p. 149). Whitford (1991) agrees with Irigaray in saying that we cannot have an ethics of sexual difference without addressing the symbolic division that remains unexamined within the symbolic and social realms.

As a consequence of having to bear the “negative” aspects involved in reproducing the symbolic order, women achieve “transcendence” differently from men. By bearing the ‘negative’ aspect of the division, the price paid by woman is losing her place within the symbolic order. Thus she is “located” only in the margins, relegated to “lower” functions – functions associated with the body.

Transcendence, a higher function and a prerogative of the male is achieved by overcoming the sensible, the lower function that is allocated to the female. In her essay, “Any theory of the ‘Subject’ has always been appropriated by the ‘Masculine’,” Irigaray (1985a)

captures the inevitable flight of the male who is severed/severs himself from the corporeal. The female on the other hand – always already embodied – seems to transcend by a sort of “re-tour.” She states:

Rising to a perspective that would dominate the totality, to the vantage point of greatest power, he thus cuts himself off from the bedrock, from his empirical relationship with the matrix that he claims to survey. To specularize and to speculate. Exiling himself ever further (toward) where the greatest power lies, he thus becomes the ‘sun’...a pole of attraction stronger than the ‘earth.’ Meanwhile, the excess in this universal fascination is that ‘she’ also turns upon herself, that she knows how to re-turn (upon herself) but not how to seek outside for identity within the other: nature, sun, God...(woman). As things now go, man moves away in order to preserve his stake in the value of his representation, while woman counterbalances with the permanence of a (self)recollection which is unaware of itself as such. (1985a, 133-4)

Thus, according to Irigaray, men and women achieve transcendence very differently. Within the operations of a phallic economy, Irigaray points out that the woman acts as a mirror and a base/earth. Man presses down/re-presses the woman to enable him to launch off, to take flight, to achieve transcendence. Irigaray describes woman’s effort at transcendence as a “re-turn upon herself.” I will revisit this image of woman re-turning to herself in this chapter, in the context of discussing Irigaray’s notion of the two lips. For now, it suffices to say that for women, the price paid by them for being used as the launch pad from which man projects himself into an “identity” is that access to transcendence is denied to her and (as Whitford observes), “she must always be for-men, available for their transcendence” (1991, p.

153). Ironically, this configuration of sexual difference can be as harmful for men as it is for women. Whitford suggests, “Man may think he is active, dynamic, propelling himself upwards from earth to sky, but he is in a sepulchre, while woman, like Antigone, is imprisoned and buried alive” (1991, p. 157).

Within this phallic economy, death, experienced as annihilation, dissolution, and nothingness is also relegated to the woman. Simply put, man negotiates his own otherness (negative) by projecting it onto his “other half” (woman) to hold or contain his otherness for him. In this way, the phallic economy of sexual relations perpetuates the forgetting of the problematic of sexual difference. In this context, Irigaray proposes a redistribution of functions and tasks that acknowledges sexual difference. In other words, Irigaray believes that a symbolic redistribution would necessitate that man appropriate his otherness, and that woman have access to transcendence in her own terms. This also means that man seeking transcendence will have to seek a different “g[r]o[un]d” that takes into account his own body. In other words, his *divine* needs to change; this would allow him to appropriate his own body, his otherness. If woman ceases to be the ground from which he would ascend, then he would have to renegotiate the terms and conditions of his own transcendence. Just as man needs to renegotiate his ‘movements’ within the symbolic order, woman as subject will have to find navigational strategies that are in consonance with her female subjectivity. In the next section, I

will explain how woman as ‘other of the other’ can/could renegotiate her path to transcendence.

3.4 The sensible transcendental as horizon

If woman is to be realized as an ‘other of the other’ then she should also have an ideal that is specific to her own ontological status. In this context, Irigaray’s proposition that women have their own “god” makes more sense. Irigaray’s purpose in introducing the divine in relation to sexual difference purports a dual function: 1) “of providing a non-restrictive horizon for identity,” (Whitford, 1991, p. 141) and 2) “binding the violence of the social body” (Whitford, 1991, p. 141). In what follows, I will explain how the two functions are in consonance with sexual difference.

Following the nineteenth-century German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach’s arguments for mankind’s need for a God, Irigaray proposes a need for women to be linked to a divine horizon or a transcendent dimension. As stated earlier, she argues that women are excluded from the transcendental realm because of how they are positioned within the symbolic. Man, by appropriating transcendental functions and relegating sensible and corporeal functions to woman perpetuate this symbolic distribution of functions and tasks. To deal with the correlative disjunction or internal split that women experience within themselves, Irigaray introduces a third term – the *sensible transcendental*.

The *sensible transcendental* as a divine dimension recognizes the need for “[a] body ... symbolized in such a way that women are no longer sole guardians of the corporeal, so that men can incorporate their own corporeality into their sublimations, so that women can sublimate as women” (Whitford, 1991, p. 142). The *sensible transcendental*, would force us, for instance, to reconsider the traditional division of labor in reproduction and childrearing normally validated by the construction of sexual opposition. The corporeal comes into play here as women take on chores like cooking, cleaning, doing dishes, etc.; tasks that get reinforced by statements made by men like, “They (mothers) are better at those things than we are.” A more egalitarian and/or reciprocal sharing of this labor would be one possible avenue for man and woman to come to terms with their corporeal otherness based on the acknowledgement of sexual difference. The *sensible transcendental* as a third term that would help bring these oppositions into play, both at the imaginary and the symbolic realms, such that “each sex will be able to assume its own divisions, its own negativity, and its own death” (Whitford, 1991, p. 122). This divine ideal (the *sensible transcendental*) is also relevant as it would help women assert their female specificity without fear of being incorporated by the male version of the divine. Irigaray asserts:

Woman has no mirror wherewith to become woman. Having a God and becoming one’s gender go hand in hand. God is the other that we absolutely cannot be without. In order to *become*, we need some shadowy perception of achievement; not a fixed objective, not a One postulated to be immutable but rather a cohesion and a horizon that assures us the

passage between past and future, the bridge of a present *that remembers*, that is not sheer oblivion and loss, not a crumbling away of existence, a failure, simply, to take note. (1993c, p. 67)

Having a God is akin to having a mirror, suggesting an alternative imaginary for women. This notion of “God” as mirror however, is different in the traditional Eurocentric/Judeo-Christian notion of God. The traditional notion of God is male (Father/Son/Holy Spirit) and stands for the possession of/and representative of an inaccessible transcendence. Irigaray proposes an alternative notion of “god” for women as the (patriarchal) theological notion of God is impoverished in relation to the feminine gender. She remarks:

Our theological tradition presents some difficulty as far as God in the feminine gender is concerned. There is no *woman* God, no female trinity: mother, daughter, spirit. This paralyzes the infinite of becoming a woman since she is fixed in the role of mother through whom the *son* of God is made flesh. (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 62)

Instead, she suggests:

If she is to become woman, if she is to accomplish her female subjectivity, woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of *her* subjectivity...a female god who can open the perspective in which [*her*] flesh can be transfigured. (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 64)

Whitford (1991) summarizes concisely the characteristics of this divine dimension/horizon as postulated by Irigaray: “(1) corporeal; (2) sexuate, either male or female; (3) subject to becoming; (4) multiple; (5) incarnated in us here and now” (p. 144). Whitford predicts that when this corporeal image of the divine (which is non-prescriptive) is integrated into the current economy, there will be space created for

women and men to experience autonomy and responsibility.

Undoubtedly, women will have a home in the symbolic. Along with the above benefits, there is a realistic possibility of an (ethical) relation between man and woman. In this context, Whitford observes, “It allows for the possibility of seeing her (Irigaray) as *another woman*, instead of as an ideal or bad mother, and therefore of relating *to her* work rather than simply swallowing it whole or rejecting it altogether” (1991, pp. 144-145).

Irigaray posits that the divine dimension not only offers up an alternate language for subjectivity, but also serves as a paradigm for the regulation of violence and creating of cohesion in society (Whitford, 1991, pp. 144-145). To explicate this, I will follow closely how Irigaray utilizes the analysis and observations of the contemporary philosopher-anthropologist René Girard. Girard (1977) describes the historical role of religion in regulating violence in society through the ritual act of sacrifice and its underlying mechanism of “scapegoating.” For instance, he points out how the sacrificial ceremonies of the Dinkas as recorded by the ethnologist Godfrey Lienhardt takes place to help with regulating aggression:

From time to time somebody detaches himself from the group to beat the cow or calf that has been tied to a nearby stake, or to hurl insults at it. There is nothing static or stilted about the performance; it succeeds in giving shape to a collective impulse that gradually triumphs over the forces of dispersion and discord by bringing corporate violence to bear on a ritual victim.... The ritualistic mentality imagines that this death will result in benefits too great to be ascribed to a simple punitive measure. (pp. 97-98)

Irigaray notes a parallel between Girard's understanding of the mechanism of scapegoating and the Freudian phallic model of sexuality. She remarks that the functioning of sacrifice in the regulation of aggression corresponds to the "masculine model of sexuality described by Freud: tension, discharge, return to homeostasis, etc" (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 76). In this context, it is also worth noting Whitford's observations regarding how Irigaray deconstructs Girard's failure to mention one historical sacrifice, common to most cultures, namely, the sacrifice associated with motherhood. Whitford remarks, "Relations between men and women are paralyzed because society does not recognize this initial sacrifice, does not acknowledge the debt which it owes to mothers" (1991, p. 145). The initial and almost invisible sacrifice made by women allows for social productivity. This sacrifice is usually underpaid or unpaid female labor. Irigaray (1993c) remarks:

No social body can be constituted, developed, or renewed without female labor; without the cathartic function of the beloved mistress or wife, the reproductive function of the mother, the life-giving and caretaking function of the housewife and nurse. This failure to recognize or remember establishes the sacrificial rite or rhythm. (p. 86)

Irigaray (1993c) proposes a different model of regulating aggression and building cohesion at the interpersonal level. Her model is informed by her practice of psychoanalysis as well as by observing Eastern cultures. Instead of sacrifice, she suggests using *words* to

symbolize affect, being *attentive to the present* and being *respectful of the rhythms of nature*. In her own words:

Thus one achieves ethical, social, and religious being by attending to the season, the time of day, the passing moment, and honoring the living order, rather than destroying it, although destruction itself is part of the great natural cycles and tends to signal growth and a new beginning. (1993c, p. 77)

Irigaray (1993c) also observes that the “sacrificial order overlays the natural rhythms with a different and *cumulative* temporality that dispenses and prevents us from attending to the moment. Once this occurs imprecisions multiply and grow. A *catharsis* becomes necessary” (p. 77). The current war in Iraq maintained by the sacrifice of many young lives prevents the US from attending to the socio-political scene with its various crises – environmental, economic, health care, etc. Sacrifices, rituals and catharsis become necessary when we fail to be respectful of nature and its cycles. But, Irigaray is careful not to reify these either, they are also changing, in flux.

Being attentive to the present means being attentive to the body. Being attentive to the body means to be attuned to the information from one’s senses. Being attentive to the senses requires a focus on the present and not in the past or the future; however, even here Irigaray warns us that we need to be cautious about privileging the visual over the other senses. Irigaray clarifies, “Vision is effectively a sense that can totalize, enclose, in its own way. More than the other senses, it is likely to construct a landscape, a horizon” (1993a, p. 175). In contrast to a visual experience of space that tends to

construct an enclosure and master, the tactile has a different experience of spatiality. In touch, the person experiences the world in the moment and decision-making with regard to movement is not an automatic and habitual process but requires mindfulness and creativity. In paying attention to the moment we are called upon to be more attentive to the present than to the future or the past. Whitford (1991) also observes that attending to the present can be conceptually linked to both linguistic theory and theology. In relation to linguistic theory, attending to the present suggests being present to the subject of enunciation and the sexuate identity of the person. In relation to theology, the link is to the *parousia* or the Second coming. Irigaray states:

Does parousia correspond to the expectation of a future not only as a *utopia* or a *destiny* but also as a *here and now*, the willed construction of bridge in the present between the past and the future? ... Why do we assume that God must always remain an inaccessible transcendence rather than a realization – here and now – in and through the body? (1993a, p. 147-8)

Irigaray's rethinking of sacrifice in religion reaffirms the image of the divine as embodied and immanent and simultaneously transcendent, thus offering a different ideal for woman in her becoming a subject. The correlation of the divine and attentiveness to the present is offered then as an alternate path to regulating violence and building social cohesion and order.

3.5 Construction materials for a feminine imaginary

A feminine imaginary would take into account “the morphology of the female body and *her* relationship to the ground, to the mirror, to space and time, and to dwelling” (Whitford, 1991, p. 159). The categories that Irigaray proposes constitute the “construction materials” for the invention of a language that would house woman in consonance with her morphology. Irigaray’s invented categories do not substitute for the categories that house the male. Rather, her categories resonate with the task of woman-becoming-subject. We can say that these categories stand on their own because they do not represent the “other of the same,” rather they represent “the other of the other.”

The categories or terms Irigaray proposes not only take into account women’s morphology; they also act as mediators between the binary oppositions. Irigaray introduces many categories. I would like to name a prominent few: *the threshold* (a space for woman to move freely within and without), *the mucous* (neither liquid nor solid, something yet to be theorized, like sexual difference), *the angel* (a mediator that carries the message that the human can become divine). I have already addressed one very important term, the *sensible transcendental* in the previous section.

An important implication of using new construction materials is that there will be positive changes in many areas of a woman’s life, but particularly in the area of communication between the sexes. “Dialogue” requires two sexually different subjects to engage in a

conversation. Also, decisions cannot be made *about* the other and *for* the other. The playing field and the rules will have changed. Whitford remarks, “What it does mean is that the other sex – the other woman – has an imaginary and symbolic existence, so that she cannot be incorporated any longer without awareness or acknowledgment” (1991, p. 166). Women will have to be included in decision making for them or about them and they will not be ignored or subsumed in dialogue.

In this concluding section I will elaborate the term “two lips” that Irigaray offers as another construction material for building a new symbolic. An understanding of this category/term would enhance the creation of a sexually different subject. In her essay, “When Our Lips Speak Together,” Irigaray (1985b) asserts, “We are not lacks, voids awaiting sustenance, plenitude, fulfillment from the other. By our lips we are women: this does not mean that we are focused on consuming, consummation, fulfillment” (pp. 209-210). Irigaray uses the image of the lips as a metonymic strategy. That is, to evoke associations of meaning of what is signified. Here, lips as a metonymic device evoke associations that would resonate with woman as a sexuate being.

To unpack the complexity of the image of the two lips, I am utilizing Maggie Berg’s “alternative reading of Irigaray’s lips” (1991, p. 51). Berg begins her reading by stating that she wants to read “Irigaray’s lips as a counterpart to Lacan’s phallus” (p. 51) and to resolve the apparent contradictions that the image of the two lips

evokes in critics. Critics have read it literally and also as a discursive strategy. The literal reading reads the two lips as creating an essence or definition of women's identity. I would agree with Berg that such a reading is faulty for many reasons. First, as Irigaray herself points out the lips do not suggest a regression to anatomy. She chooses the two lips for its ambiguity. Besides, biology and/or nature are also mediated categories. So the lips are always already situated within a cultural understanding. Berg also states that for Irigaray, the words, "lips" and "speak" evoke images that refer simultaneously to both sexuality and discourse respectively, meaning "the two cannot and should not be separated, because one always implies the other" (Berg, 1991, p. 56). Berg also points out that Irigaray avoids the trap of phallogentrism by not presenting the lips to displace the phallus; instead she offers them up as in a play of *différance*, whereby the lips "oscillate between signifier and signified" (Berg, 1991, p. 57), not contained by any one term. In other words, Berg concludes that in contrast to Lacan's phallus, Irigaray's lips cannot be pinned down to either anatomy or language. In this context, she argues that in the case of Lacan, it is almost impossible for the phallus not to be linked to anatomy. Grosz raises similar suspicions regarding Lacan's phallus. She observes, "In spite of Lacan's claims, the phallus is not a 'neutral' term functioning equally for both sexes, positioning them both in the symbolic order. As the word suggests, it is a term privileging masculinity, or rather, the penis" (1990, p. 122). In her conclusion, Berg states that "Irigaray's text makes the signified (what goes on in

our heads when we read the lips) so rich in connotation that it actually transforms the anatomical referent” (1991, p. 70).

Like Berg, Whitford’s (1991) reading of the “two lips” is based on seeing the lips as denoting a relationship of metonymy or contiguity rather than a metaphorical (and hierarchical) relationship between binary oppositions. Contiguity refers to an association of meaning within a context whereas metaphor refers to a substitution of meaning based on a socio-linguistic code. Whitford (1991) remarks that Irigaray does not use metaphors to address the motif of woman. Rather, she uses metonymy to talk about the two lips as well as other categories. She writes, “Whereas the paternal genealogy is based on metaphoric identification, the maternal genealogy is, or could be based on metonymic identification” (Whitford, 1991, p. 180). A maternal genealogy that is based on metonymical identifications would allow for mother and daughter to coexist and relate as subjects rather than subjects and objects. Within the paternal genealogy, the woman would relate to the mother as an object. Also, for Irigaray, the lips, unlike the phallus, act as threshold. As threshold, the lips cannot be substituted or exchanged. Woman’s place cannot be taken by others. In her essay, “Gesture in Psychoanalysis,” (1993c) Irigaray refers to the lips in contrast to the “*fort-da*” as a substitutional mechanism used by the male to control and master their relations with others. She writes, “The *fort-da* is already a substitutional mechanism, whereas the lips are the woman herself, the threshold to a woman that has not been distanced by any object” (1993c, p. 102). The lips as threshold do not

control, master or manipulate. As a rich and associative signified, the lips respect the mystery of the radical other.

In the next chapter, I address the existential phenomenological psychology of Ernesto Spinelli. I outline the salient points that constitute his theory and praxis. I will show how his therapeutic praxis is oblivious to the question of sexual difference.

Chapter 4

The existential phenomenological psychology of Ernesto Spinelli

A theory may require that we revise even the descriptions of the world on which the theory itself is based.

- Alison Jaggar,
Feminist Politics and Human Nature, p. 381

The phenomenological account of the lived body and the lived world needs to be complemented by the awareness that there is an interaction between the lived experience, the imaginary, and the discursive and social construction of both.

- Margaret Whitford,
Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine, p. 152.

4.1 Introduction

Ernesto Spinelli is both a practicing existential psychotherapist and an academic. He is known for his development of the “self-construct,” his emphasis on the inter-relational dimension of the psychotherapeutic relationship, and the clarification of the inter-subjective factors that underlie an existential theory of human sexuality.

Spinelli’s existential psychotherapy is a product of the tradition of European existentialism and phenomenology. Spinelli’s articulation of existential psychotherapy is indebted to the existential

phenomenological tradition of Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice-Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre (Spinelli, 2001; Spinelli, 2004). For example, Spinelli suggests ways to resolve human conflict based on Sartre's phenomenological exploration of the "gaze of the other" (Spinelli, 2004, p. 58). Using Heidegger's understanding of language as transformative versus representational, Spinelli (2001) articulates the link between language and art. He remarks, "We suffer our artistic endeavours, just as we suffer language, in order that both we and the world may be revealed and transformed" (2001, p. 137). Last but not least, Spinelli's attempts to "reconfigure human sexuality" are directly influenced by Merleau-Ponty's articulation of the body as the "*vehicle of being-in-the-world and a basic form of the appearance (manifestation) of the world itself*" (2001, p. 82).

In this chapter, I will review Spinelli's theory of existential psychotherapy, especially the features that are relevant to sexual difference. I will detail his "inter-relational" approach which, while clinically nuanced enough to represent an advance, fails to examine the theoretical and practical consequences of sexual difference.

4.2 The existential psychotherapy of Ernesto Spinelli

Although Spinelli calls himself an "existential psychotherapist," he does not distinguish his practice and thinking from what he identifies as "the enterprise of phenomenological enquiry" (2006, p. 2). He observes that its primary task is to "illuminate and disclose the make-up, or way of being, of any given structure in its form of

meaning” (2006, p. 2). He writes, “Indeed it is my contention that we can consider existential psychotherapy as an *expression* of phenomenological research in terms of its shared aims, methods of enquiry and, perhaps most significantly, its values in general and specifically its values regarding inter-relatedness” (2006, p. 2). Consequently, as an existential psychotherapist, Spinelli believes client issues (dilemmas, disorders, disturbances, and so on) “originate from, and are embodied expressions of, the client’s ongoing overall interpersonal relations” (2006, p. 2). In his discussion of the inter-subjective realm, he also uses other terms (like, “interpersonal,” and/or “inter-relational”) to mean the same. Psychoanalysis had its own “inter-relational” and/or “inter-subjective” turn, initiated around the latter half of the 20th century (Stolorow, Atwood, & Orange, 2002; Sullivan, 1953). Briefly, psychoanalysis shifted its focus from paying attention to the intra-psychic reality of the analysand to his/her inter-subjective reality. These psychoanalysts did not forget the intra-psychic dimension, however, but saw it as part of the inter-subjective.

Practitioners of existential psychotherapy do not attempt the removal or “symptom reduction” of clients’ “problematic” thoughts, behaviors, and affects. Instead, Spinelli asserts:

[T]ogether with the client, they attempt to expose and consider these symptoms as interrelated expressions of the client’s wider ‘way of being’ so that the implications of their maintenance, reduction or removal for that ‘way of being’ can be considered and evaluated. (2006, p. 3)

4.3 Salient features of Spinelli's existential psychotherapy

4.3.1 The self-construct as an alternative to the concept of self

Like many theorists in his tradition, Spinelli begins with a critique of the Western notion of the self. He delineates several assumptions about self that “permeate as a whole or in part our psychological theories, our sociopolitical laws and precepts, our moral and ethical codes” (2001, p. 39). Subsequent attempts at defining the self have been nothing but the “permutation” of these assumptions (2001, p. 40) and remain problematic and not attuned to lived experience. In this context, Spinelli states that contemporary social scientists' observations show that when we attempt to define something elusive, we use metaphorical language “to provide a (supposed) clarity to that which remains mysterious” (2001, p. 40). As he points out, metaphors are often culturally over-determined and limited in scope, so their use comes with a price. Spinelli claims that “If metaphors allow us to ‘see’, they do so by framing the boundaries both of what is seen and how it is seen” (2001, p. 41). Spinelli himself uses a metaphor of a mirror to suggest how metaphors constrain meaning. He explains, “If every metaphor provides a mirror, it also provides a hammer with which to demolish all other potential mirrors that, placed at different angles, would provoke competing or contradictory transformative metaphors” (2001, p. 41).

Instead of the ambiguous and problematic term “self” to describe what it means to be human, Spinelli proposes “self-construct” or “self-structure” as alternatives. He observes that

although the term “self-construct” operates metaphorically, it retains the “fluid, process-like experience of being human” (2001, p. 47) rather than the static “thing-like” entity implied by “self.” This shift in terminology allows for holding contradictory beliefs simultaneously.

Spinelli explains, “Indeed, this very incapacity to define the constituents of the self-structure in any final or fixed sense seems to me to be the crux of any movement towards what may be labelled authenticity” (2001, p. 53). His characterization of the term “self-construct” suggests a parallel in meaning to Irigaray’s fluid-like structure of femininity. The difference however, is that Spinelli’s “self-construct” is founded on the assumptions of a mono-sexual economy.

4. 3. 2 The existential psychotherapist’s role as “attendant” and “other”

Spinelli notes that psychotherapy “has increasingly tended to become an ally of dominant cultural assumptions rather than one of culture’s most trenchant critics” (2001, p. 18). The therapist’s allying him- or herself with normative assumptions regarding what it is to be human means that aspects of the therapist’s or client’s world that are inconsistent with these assumptions are either excluded or by default pathologized. By colluding with the status quo, Spinelli observes, “psychotherapy, however inadvertently, has blunted its socially critical edge” (2001, p.19). By evicting the world from the consulting room, psychotherapy has “encased itself within a set of restrictive interventions” (2001, p. 19) and will continue to stagnate in its mediocrity.

To break out of this dismal situation, Spinelli proposes a model of existential psychotherapy wherein the therapist's role "shifts from that of helper, healer and instructor back to its original meaning of 'attendant' – one who walks beside you and, through being with you, illuminates not just your world, but all worlds as well" (2001, p. 20). As an attendant, the therapist invites the world into the consulting room and thus "shake(s) psychotherapy out of the hermetically sealed and arcane confines of the 'special and exclusive' relationship between client and psychotherapist" (2001, p. 19).

Spinelli points out that as an attendant, the existential therapist also assumes the role of an "other" to the client. As such, the therapist "acts as a representative of all others in the client's wider world relations" (Spinelli, 2007, p. 59). The therapist's mode of engagement as "other" is unique. As such, the therapist "may both clarify and challenge any number of the client's dispositional stances about how others are, and how others expect the client to be, and how the client expects others to be with him or her" (2007, p. 60). Spinelli proposes that the therapist as an "other" must initially accept the presenting self-construct of the client; that is, how the client constructs him- or herself in relation to others.

To clarify this stance of the therapist as "other," Spinelli utilizes the insights of Martin Buber, a twentieth-century educator and philosopher. According to Spinelli, Buber posits two types of intersubjective relations, the *I-Thou* and the *I-It*. Spinelli likens his understanding of the therapist as "other" to Buber's *I-Thou* relation

which promotes an “inclusive” otherness rather than the “objectifying” *I-It* relations. Spinelli characterizes the *I-Thou* relation as based on reciprocity rather than empathy. Spinelli explains:

As Buber viewed it, empathy requires the therapist to treat the client as merely another version of ‘I’ and, thus, stays attuned only to a projected image of him or her self, thereby remaining unwilling to include the otherness of the client within the therapeutic stance. As a consequence, the client’s response to the therapist’s empathy is to continue to experience the therapist as an unrelated ‘other’. If the *I-It* attitude is grounded in an insistence upon the separateness of ‘the other’, the *I-Thou* attitude promotes a reciprocity or meeting between each ‘other’. The former equally objectifies both the ‘I’ and the ‘It’. The latter reveals that both ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ co-exist as inseparable poles of interrelation. (2007, p. 112)

Some of the qualities that shape an existential therapist based on reciprocity are reflection, challenge, and making explicit what is implicit.

The following therapeutic interaction, between Spinelli and Elizabeth, a thirty-two-year-old terminally ill with lung cancer, illustrates how he applied his theory:

‘Am I in denial?’ Elizabeth asks. ‘Am I acting as though it will just go away? That I’ll wake up and find that this has been just another nightmare?’

‘Are you?’ I ask back.

Elizabeth gazes at me, intrigued and exasperated by my prodding. She ... agrees to humour me. ‘When I die,’ she states, ‘I want others to say that I took care of myself. Isn’t that absurd?’

‘And if you didn’t?’ I say. ‘If you stopped taking care of your body and the others recognized this. Then what?’

‘I couldn’t stand it. I’d be betraying my own principles.’

‘And to live up to your principles, even at the point of your dying, is of vital importance to you.’

‘Yes. Yes, I suppose it is.’
 ‘Even if, as you said earlier, it’s all
 meaningless.’
 My comment shakes her. (Spinelli, 1997, p. 192)

While Spinelli is undoubtedly compassionate in his approach to Elizabeth, he also maintains a relationship of *I-Thou* with her as evidenced in his strategies of dialogical interaction. By differentiating between the *I-Thou* and *I-It* relations, Spinelli outlines qualities that a therapist as “other” should possess. The therapist should be willing:

[To] *be with* the client (i.e. to respect the client’s way of being as valid and meaningful) and to *be for* the client (i.e. to attempt entry into the client’s way of being in order to clarify its underlying values, beliefs, and so forth). (1997, p. 89)

For instance, in the vignette presented above, Spinelli demonstrates respect when he chooses not to provide Elizabeth with answers to her queries regarding whether she was in denial; instead, he turns the question back to her in an effort to be with her as she struggles to clarify it for herself. In sum, the existential psychotherapist as “other” acts as a presence and an impact that challenges the current self-construct of the client with respect and openness.

4. 3. 3 The dialogical realms of encounter

In his practice, Spinelli attempts to address three dialogical realms of therapeutic encounter: “the *I-focused*, *you-focused* and *we-focused*” (2006, p. 3). These dialogical realms are understood as possible ways of being within a therapeutic encounter. Briefly stated, the *I-focused* realm is one in which the therapist works to clarify the experience of being him- or herself in the therapeutic relationship; the

you-focused realm is one in which the therapist works to clarify the therapist's experience of the client's experience of the therapist; and the *we-focused* realm is one in which the therapist works to clarify both participants' experience of each other. Spinelli states that since the "*we-focused* realm of encounter is characterized by its *immediacy*" (2006, p. 3), the therapist places a premium on this realm so that the therapist "can attempt to 'enter', with increasing adequacy, the currently lived-world of the client" (2006, p. 3). The third dialogical realm can be justified as more immediate than the others, based on the fact that "*immediacy re-connects that which is being stated with the being who is making the statement*" (Spinelli, 2007, p.132). Focusing on the third realm's experiential component, the existential psychotherapist aims for a "real and valid" interaction between himself and his client because of its potential to be unmediated and present.

He explains:

The existential psychotherapist's willingness to examine and consider what emerges experientially through this realm as being real and valid (rather than substitutive, symbolic, or 'transferential') serves to implicate his or her current manner of existence as expressed through the interactive relationship with the client. This focus further serves to expose and clarify *in the immediacy of the current encounter* the self-same inter-relational issues that clients express as being deeply problematic within their wider world relations. (2007, p. 132)

The underlying belief is that the "*immediacy of the current encounter*" is crucial as it provides a microcosmic view of the client's wider way of being in the world.

Spinelli also discusses a fourth inter-relational realm, viz., the *they-focused* realm. This encompasses the others of the client's world and their views of his or her way of being. Spinelli notes that this realm is highly significant when the client begins to consider "alternative 'ways to be'" (2007, p. 4). For instance, a client (an inmate in jail) in the course of therapy stated the following: "Last Saturday, when I saw my daughter during visitation, I believe that she feels that she must blame herself in some way." The statement is an indication that the client is beginning to consider other ways to be as he begins to view his situation from others' perspective.

4. 3. 4 Body and sexuality as inter-relational

Spinelli acknowledges his indebtedness to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the body and sexuality. Based on his close reading of Merleau-Ponty, Spinelli considers the body to be not a thing among other things but that which "expresses a unique dialogue with the world" (2001, p. 82). The body also "reflect(s) our way of projecting towards the world and our responses to the world's projecting of itself towards us" (1997, p. 187). In this sense, the body is inter-relational. Spinelli's own understanding of sexuality is consonant with Merleau-Ponty's in which sexual encounters are seen as "a pivotal means with which to express our presence to 'the other' and, in turn, to express the presence of 'the other' to ourselves" (2001, p. 82). He claims that Merleau-Ponty is not interested "in the issues of male or female sexuality, sexual orientation or the sociopolitical dimensions of sexuality" (2001, p. 82), but rather in sexuality "*as it is revealed in its*

inter-relational dimensions” (2001, p. 83). Spinelli’s gloss (which I will address in the next section) of Merleau-Ponty’s account of sexuality is significant, both in relation to his account of the therapeutic process and the role of sexual difference therein.

To sum up, Spinelli’s existential therapy respects the inter-subjective dimension and is in line with the sound principles of existential phenomenological psychology. For instance, his strategy of exploring and clarifying the client’s world with respect and openness is evidence of his in-depth understanding of existential phenomenology. His non-recognition of the question of sexual difference however, is shown in his unexamined assumptions regarding the foundation of inter-subjectivity. I will examine his key concepts as seen in his theory and practice and show how the exclusion of the question of sexual difference mars his own attempt at not becoming an ally of the “dominant cultural assumptions” (2001, p. 18).

4.4 Spinelli’s existential psychotherapy vis-à-vis sexual difference

Spinelli describes existential-phenomenological theory as underscoring “that our experience of living is never certain, never fully predictable, never secure” (1997, p. 6), but that we can choose to respond to this uncertainty in a myriad of ways. Even choosing not to choose is a choice. He adds that, whatever the response, it itself

“expresses the stance we take toward our relations with the world” (1997, p. 6). For instance, when a client reports that he declined an offer to smoke marijuana, his choice expresses his stance towards his relations with himself and others: his stance towards his own health (perhaps to breathe clean air and to prolong his existence), his psychological well-being (not to be conditioned by a habit and/or not to lose motivation), and towards others (being secure enough to stand on his own).

From the perspective of existential phenomenology, if our responses reveal the stance we take towards our relations with the world, how do they reveal our sexually differentiated position? As regards others, how do they reveal our acknowledgment of a sexually different other? Would not our responses reveal a different stance at a fundamental level based on our specific sexuality? In other words, if our response (as being-in-the-world) is always already subtended by sexual difference, then our response to the uncertain and the unknown is going to be different, given that we are man and woman, two sexually different subjects.

Sexual difference, however, is not salient in Spinelli’s understanding of the workings of inter-subjectivity. Perhaps this is not surprising, given that sexual difference is rarely addressed within the existential-phenomenological tradition. This fact is acknowledged by Spinelli’s peers, Emmy van Deurzen and Raymond Kenward (2005) who state:

There is much in the area of sexuality that existential theorists have yet to consider. For instance, to be sexual is to be differentiated from the other sex, and to be sexual is to be incomplete (men and women are each half of the reproductive process). There is an opportunity to analyse what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, to examine maternity and paternity, childbearing and the experience of childbirth, and men's presence and absence in procreation, of relationships with the same-sex and opposite-sex parents, of homosexuality, bi-sexuality, masturbation, of rape (violence is always a possibility in human relationships), and of the relationship between sex and love. (Van Deurzen & Kenward, 2005, p. 185)

Although the authors contend that there is a lack of discussion of sexual difference within existential phenomenology, their own remarks are problematic. For instance, their idea that "to be sexual is to be incomplete" carries a normative assumption that men and women are complementary. Also, the statement "men and women are each half of the reproductive process" assumes that gay parents could not be part of the reproductive and familial process.

Spinelli claims that the existential therapist takes the position of "the other" in psychotherapy. Briefly, as an "other," the therapist will stand in as the representative of all the others in the client's world. By claiming to be able to stand on two sides of a divide, Spinelli assumes a reciprocal relation by which the therapist can stand in for the other. But as long as a "culture of the relationship between genders" (Irigaray, 2000, p. 91) is not spelled out in qualitative terms, Spinelli's existential psychotherapy runs the risk of reducing the other to the status of the same. Irigaray (2000) herself characterizes inter-

subjectivity as the positive outcome of the acknowledgment of sexual difference:

The difference between woman and man allows for an inter-subjectivity that wouldn't subject the one and the other to nature, to the same, to the equal, to imperatives, to laws, to their external realities. This requires that the one and the other recognize their own limits in that they belong to only one gender. To be a woman means not to be a man and to be a man means not to be a woman. This *not* becomes an instrument and a place for each person's identity and a creative, and not only procreative, intentional relationship between the two to be established. Being able to identify with the other seems to me an ambiguous cultural improvement. (2000, p. 91)

From the perspective of sexual difference, Spinelli's therapeutic implementation of what he calls "reciprocity" is naive. In Irigaray's book *I love to you*, she explains the insertion of the linking proposition "to" into the verb in the following manner: "*I love to you* means I maintain a relation of indirection to you. I do not subjugate you or consume you. I respect you (as irreducible)" (1996, p. 109). But the *I-Thou* relation that Spinelli advocates is characterized by a relation of reciprocity that does not take into account sexual difference. In this sense, his *I-Thou* relation characterizes the other as an "other of the same" and not as an "other of the other." So for instance, "woman" within the *I-Thou* economy of relations is simply an "other" (an "other of the same") and not radically different.

Based on Irigaray's deconstruction of Western religion, the *I-Thou* relation can be situated as mirroring man-God relations. Within this model, the *Thou* implies the monotheistic male God. Irigaray

makes explicit what is implicit in the evocation of the *other* or the *Thou* in inter-subjective relations:

In the history of our culture, there's much talk of *I*. *Thou* (*Tu*) and *the other* are also evoked – whether with reference to my neighbor or to a totally other God, the *Thou* of certain philosophers or a theology that forgets that this you (*tu*) is generally a *he*. But these *I*'s and *you*'s, which seem self-evident within the bounds of a delimited field, remain vague and abstract. We only have to talk about the concrete existence of living men and women for us to falter over the question of who is this *I* and who is *you*. *Do you love me?* the woman says to the man. *I wonder if I am loved*, he replies. How can *we* be formed, then? (1996, p. 48)

Whitford concurs, offering a corrective to a mono-sexual economy via Irigaray's notion of the *sensible transcendental*:

The Other has always been seen by men as God, but never as the other sex. The 'You' is always addressed to the transcendental, never to women. With a sensible transcendental, the exchange between the 'you' and the 'I' could take place in the here and now, with each sex assuming its own 'I' and addressing its 'you' to a transcendent other. (1991, 147)

By not addressing the phallogentric economy of relations, Spinelli, a strong proponent of inter-subjectivity, inadvertently colludes with its assumptions. His other, is a substitutable other. That is, woman as other is a reflection, a complement, an opposite to man. By assuming sameness within an inter-relational realm, communication between two subjects cannot be considered dialogical. As Irigaray observes:

This dialogical relation between man and woman ... remains to be invented, almost entirely from scratch. It represents an important stage in human civilization that has yet to be accomplished. It

requires man and woman to be faithful to their gender and to start communicating from their differences, and not get rid of them. (2000, p. 85)

Spinelli's assumption of a sexually neutral other also affects his understanding of the body as expressing a "unique dialogue with the world" (1997, p. 187). In one of his eight stories of existential therapy (*Tales of Un-knowing*), Spinelli (1997) describes his work with a teenage girl named Amanda and her relationship to her body. Her presenting issue can be summed up as not liking herself, in particular her body. During the course of therapy, Spinelli and Amanda come to recognize how she had come to disown her body, and to understand how this manifested itself in her relationships with others and herself. According to Spinelli, her recognition of disowning her body opened up for her the gradual possibility of re-owning her body and accepting its power to control others, as well as the possibility of accepting the need to let go of her attempts to control her body.

Spinelli's analysis of Amanda's self-construct as a struggle in terms of her body vis-à-vis her lived experience is pertinent. He states:

Her lived experience provided her with contradictory messages: on the one hand, it told her that it was not enough to be judged and appreciated simply as a body. On the other, it demonstrated to her over and over again that that was precisely the one way that others *did* judge and appreciate her. (Spinelli, 1997, p. 50)

His analysis of Amanda's conflict reveals a problem that reflects the neglect of sexual difference. In the use of the phrase, "to be judged and appreciated simply as a body," Spinelli slips into the traditional image of the body as a cohesive and coherent phenomenon, a neutral

entity. But the body is never a neutral or even a cohesive and coherent phenomenon. It is always already formed through a process of “internalization of images, representations and signifying practices” (Grosz, 1989, p. 112). Culturally, women experience being “controlled” by their bodies according to a sexually specific meaning: for example, through sexual objectification, subjugation, and rape, but also pregnancy, menstruation, and the emphasis placed on women’s appearance. By ignoring the fundamental sexual contouring of the body, Spinelli falls into the mistake of neutralizing the body and ignoring the sexual inscriptions on the body.

Amanda’s interpersonal experience in therapy, according to Spinelli helped her “to begin to re-own that self-same body and change her relationship to it” (1997, p. 50) which in turn freed her to explore “novel possibilities, new perspectives” (1997, p. 51). Spinelli tells us that Amanda “embark(s) upon a series of casual sexual relationships” (1997, p. 51) and “literally experiment(s) with her body-shape, adding and losing weight, immersing herself in a life of strenuous exercise or utmost indolence” (1997, p. 52), eventually reaching a balanced body-image. Amanda’s choices towards her body are subtended by what Irigaray would characterize as a “masculine model of sexuality described by Freud: tension, discharge, return to homeostasis, etc.” (1993c, p. 76). Amanda’s stances towards her body seem to progress according to the law of thermodynamics whereby equilibrium is reached after an expenditure of energy.

If for Spinelli the body is neutral and mono-sexual in the sense delineated above, then how does that affect his understanding of subjectivity? Spinelli makes certain assumptions regarding subjectivity through his notions of freedom and transcendence. His understanding of freedom is inherited from his predecessors – existential philosophers like Gabriel Marcel, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre (Spinelli, 1997; 2001). In a pedagogical description of his praxis entitled “Her Last Breath,” Spinelli walks us through his encounter with his client Elizabeth (referred to earlier in this chapter) who is dying from lung cancer. They arrive at an important juncture in therapy when they clarify her relationship to her body. Elizabeth states that despite her body betraying her “in such a total fashion,” she will not betray it. She asserts that when she dies, she “want(s) others to say that (she) took care of (herself)” (Spinelli, 1977, p. 193). For Elizabeth, being faithful to her body (even though, at this time in her life, whatever her body means to her is slipping away) though apparently meaningless “remains important to (her), determines what remains of (her) life’s possibilities” (Spinelli, 1997, 193). Spinelli mulls over her statement:

Listening carefully to her words, I wonder whether this could be a statement of strength. Certainly, it might be interpreted as such; many would judge it in this fashion. But I remain cautious in jumping to this conclusion. I don’t know whether Elizabeth experiences this principle as something which she has chosen or which has imposed itself upon her. The difference between ‘I can’ and ‘I must’ seems crucial here since while the former permits openness towards one’s experience and forgiveness for the imperfect consequences that

emerge, the latter imposes a stance that rejects all options save the one deemed 'correct' or 'permissible' and punishes anything less than perfection. (1997, p. 193)

Spinelli cautiously considers Elizabeth's statement regarding her body and does not want to accept it as a "statement of strength." He is unsure whether Elizabeth's principle about her treatment of her body is based on a free and conscious choice, meaning "I can," or whether it is motivated by her restrictive self-construct "I must," meaning "I must be good to my body so that others will ...". Spinelli's task of clarifying and challenging the client's self-construct (irrespective of his/her gender) rests on the idea that a free, transcendent body is that of a white, male, adult body.

For Spinelli, an "I can" stance of openness towards experience discounts women's sexuation. This oversight reflects his own theory of subjectivity, which only acknowledges one subject, the male. Spinelli maintains that the "self-construct" is continually challenged in its inter-relations with others; however, he does not consider the impact of the socio-cultural inscriptions on the body. In this sense, Spinelli's intervention succeeds in keeping the socio-cultural perception of the body out of the consulting room.

If Spinelli assumes that the subject is sexually neutral, how does that affect his notion of death anxiety? Spinelli notes that contemporary Western society tends to expel death and anything associated with it. He explains, "This expulsion of death as an inherent feature of life appears to have as its impetus the attempt to

avoid all confrontation with mystery; it is our effort to eradicate the fear of the unknown” (Spinelli, 2001, p. 155). For instance, he points out how in the West the “*the cult of youth*” (2001, p. 155) has been elevated to such an extent that cosmetics and plastic surgery are routinely used to make people look young. In this context, Spinelli argues that the term “death anxiety” may be misleading. In line with Heidegger’s thinking, he observes, “It is not death, *per se*, that provokes our fears and concerns; rather, it is the recognition of the fragility of our existence” (1997, p. 9). Spinelli also maintains that how each one of us deals with death anxiety “is likely to be as varied and unique as our experience of being alive” (1997, p. 10). His attitude assumes that both men’s and women’s ways of negotiating death anxiety are not based on being sexually different but simply on being human.

According to Spinelli, when dealing with death anxiety or recognizing our vulnerability as human beings, our response falls between the two extremes of either sheltering ourselves in a lifestyle that is “bounded by regime and habit” (1997, p. 10) or abandoning ourselves into a life of “defiance of security and predictability” (1997, p. 10). Spinelli’s characterization of the two stances in dealing with death anxiety evokes metaphors that are reminiscent of the Freudian model of sexuality: “holding back” (requiring discipline) or “discharge” (abandonment) – operating according to the two principles of thermodynamics (tension & discharge) which helps towards returning of a mechanism to homeostasis (Irigaray, 1993b, p. 115; Irigaray,

1993c, p. 76). Irigaray contends that the model of thermodynamics to deal with life's realities is ill-suited to female sexuality. Instead she suggests an economy that is "more related to becoming, more attuned to the time of the universe" (1993b, p. 115). She contends that the female economy of sexuality will have to take into account "irreversible events that define the stages of her life" (1993b, p. 115) based on a different sense of temporality, a temporality related to a different rhythm, a rhythm that is in consonance with the cosmos.

In the final chapter of *The Mirror and the Hammer*, Spinelli (2001) suggests possibilities for existential psychotherapy in a chapter titled "Towards a more humane psychotherapy." To make sense of the complex workings of existential psychotherapy, Spinelli utilizes the metaphor of *chaos theory* from contemporary physics. Chaos theory arose as an alternative model to linear-based models of physics that used cause and effect to explain outcomes in complex systems. Spinelli understands chaos theory to hold the view that "the behavior of complex systems, while clearly *not* random and unpredictable ... can only begin to be discerned when investigators cease seeking to place them within the confines of linearly causal analyses" (2001, p. 173). According to Spinelli, the implication of chaos theory for existential psychotherapy is that "sudden radical linearly irrational change" (2001, p. 174) is a fundamental given within a complex system like human behaviors. Like chaos theory, he suggests that psychotherapy needs to move away from the urge to control and predict, and "approach matters from the standpoint of a new

proposition ... based, centrally, upon the acceptance of that mutual revelatory disclosure that is the expression of inter-relational encounter” (Spinelli, 2001, p. 175). By invoking the metaphor of chaos theory to understand the complexity of existential psychotherapy, Spinelli affirms that the inter-relational encounter offers the possibility for non-linear change.

Irigaray also looks to science for a model, but for one that would suit female subjectivity. In contrast to the thermodynamic model of psychoanalysis, Irigaray (2002) subscribes to the contemporary Belgian physicist Ilya Prigogine’s model of “dissipative structures.” She explains:

Female sexuality may harmonize better, if we must evoke a scientific model, with what Prigogine calls ‘dissipative’ structures, which function through exchange with the outside world, which proceed in energy states, and whose ordering is based not on seeking equilibrium, but on crossing thresholds corresponding to leaving disorder or entropy behind, without discharge. (Irigaray, 2002, p. 253)

While Spinelli’s reliance on “chaos theory” reaffirms his understanding of existential psychotherapy as a model that does not seek linear causal explanations for human behaviors, his understanding of this model fails to take into account sexual difference. That is, although the sexuation of human beings do not “cause” behaviors, they can “in-form” human choices. Ignoring this can impact what happens within the inter-subjective realm. While the clients will feel liberated and be open to exploring various novel

possibilities in their relation to their bodies or others, their underlying assumptions regarding their subjectivity will remain unchallenged.

Metaphors come in handy again for Spinelli in another characterization of the inter-relational encounter between the therapist and the client. Here he utilizes the metaphor of the mirror and the hammer to frame “the meeting of *self with other*” (2001, p.175). Spinelli explains what transpires in the inter-relational encounter. He states, “Such meetings, like that between mirror and a hammer, may well be shattering. Yet, through their collision, the human truths that truly matter to us all, and that *are* our humanity, may stand revealed” (2001, p. 175). Two words stand out in this metaphor: “collision” and “shattering.” Both words describe actions pertaining to the metaphysics of solids, which collide and shatter. In the collision of the mirror and the hammer, Spinelli characterizes the outcome to be “shattering.” From the fragments, our humanity will stand revealed. This meeting between the self and the other (or “intimacy” as Spinelli calls it) is marked by violence. These metaphors also evoke “masculine” images of stability, rigidity, solidity, inertness, stasis, and “aggressive” images of noise, and fragmentation. Psychotherapeutic interventions that are framed in phallic terms will have to either exclude women or subsume them.

Why not a mutual exchange that reveals the truth about sexual difference? That would require an imaginary that is subtended by the economy of the fluids, an economy that is in consonance with the feminine experience of encounters. Another question worth asking in

this context is: what kind of sex does the mirror reflect? Or better still, does the mirror reflect any sex at all? The fragments of the mirror shattered by the hammer will not necessarily take into account a (sexually) different other; rather, it only reflects the image presented to it, namely, the “other of the same.”

Irigaray (1991) describes the encounter between two sexually different persons in amorous terms. She writes:

This autistic, egological, solitary love does not correspond to the shared outpouring, to the loss of boundaries which takes place for both lovers when they cross the boundary of the skin into the mucous membranes of the body, leaving the circle which encloses my solitude to meet in a shared space, a shared breath, abandoning the relatively dry and precise outlines of each body’s solid exterior to enter a fluid universe where the perception of being two persons [*de la dualité*] becomes indistinct, and above all, acceding to another energy, neither that of the one nor that of the other, but an energy produced together and as a result of the irreducible difference of sex. (1991, p. 180)

For Irigaray, the meeting of two sexually different persons is subtended by the metaphysics of the fluids. The loss of boundaries does not lead to a fusion of the two or to a shattering of one or the other.

In my concluding chapter, I will take up in detail Irigaray’s response to the metaphysics of the solids that permeate Western thought. I will also show why sexual difference is privileged in my reading of Spinelli’s work. I will also discuss the problems that Spinelli faces in his theory and practice based on his restrictive understanding of embodiment and his use of masculine metaphors in understanding

the construction of existential psychotherapy. I also hope to show that by paying attention to sexual difference, Spinelli's existential psychotherapy can benefit from being attuned to creative possibilities that emerge as the therapist listens to the body speaking with a different ear. I also want to show that when the therapist can move beyond the constrictions of a phallogentric discourse, sexual difference as a non-phallic relation to language and body will structure inter-subjectivity.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

I am, therefore, a political militant for the impossible, which is not to say utopian. Rather, I want what is yet to be as the only possibility of a future.

- Luce Irigaray, *I Love to You*, p. 10.

5.1 Sexual difference as foundational

My analysis of Spinelli's theory and practice of existential psychotherapy shows that he has neglected the question of sexual difference. In this chapter I will discuss this neglect and its implications. Subsequently, I will also use Irigaray's insights to respond to the issues raised in my analysis of Spinelli's praxis. I will discuss the possible direction that this Irigarayan critique can offer to Spinelli's existential therapy. Before I proceed, however, I want to address an inevitable question: "Why privilege sexual difference when analyzing Spinelli's praxis? What about other differences that also mediate man-woman relations and which he also neglects, like race, culture, and class? What makes sexual difference different?"

Many of Irigaray's critiques have raised questions regarding her emphasis on sexual difference. Some of her critics point out that her undue emphasis on sexual difference has precluded her from paying

attention to other differences. Patricia J. Huntington (1998), for instance, criticizes Irigaray for elevating sexual difference in her exploration of identity. For Huntington, race, class, and other matrices are “coextensive features of [a] symbolic reality that refer to the tension between being and nonbeing, having and not having” (1998, p. 255). Essentially, critics argue that Irigaray privileges sexual difference and makes other differences secondary.

Irigaray responds simply that other differences cannot be adequately considered without confronting the questions raised by sexual difference (and vice versa). For Irigaray, sexual difference is not mediated by biology or some ontological difference between what culture identifies as “man” and “woman,” but a particular relationship to the body and language that structures inter-subjectivity. Her understanding of sexual difference clearly does not exclude the significance of other differences in the understanding of inter-subjectivity. While she is wary of any attempts at submerging difference to sameness, she nevertheless recognizes a lack in the area of difference. She states, “We are still lacking a culture of between-sexes, of between-races, of between-traditions, etc” (Irigaray, 2002, p. 139). She also recognizes that sexual, class, race, or sexual identity differences are fairly fundamental to how we are constituted as men and women. Each one of the above issues is structured in relation to the other. They have in their evolution been dependent on each other, as for instance, when the issues of race intersect with the issues of gender or class. Irigaray, however, privileges sexual difference because

it is not displaced yet across cultures. Historically, sexual difference is seen as more fundamental than other differences. She adds, "(B)eing interested in it cannot, in any case, result in any privilege, but forgetting its importance can. Because the way in which sexual relations are organized in a society, in a culture, can create privileges" (2000, pp. 166-167). Furthermore, Irigaray maintains that questioning the assumptions that sustain sexual differentiation can affect all other relations. Based on her observations of other cultures, Irigaray argues that differences between them, for instance, "come from more or less hierarchical treatments of the relations between genders" (2000, pp. 166-167). For example, hierarchical class relations and gender based relations are collated in the phrases, "head of the table," "head of the class," or "head of the state." The implications of such a positioning indicate gender-based hierarchal relations.

Irigaray further states, "The duality of the sexes cuts across all races, all cultures, all traditions. It is therefore possible to organize a society starting from this difference" (2002a, p. 136). She also notes that privileging sexual difference is crucial to human relations because "the instinct to possess the other's body like a property" (2000, p. 98) is universal.

If a study of sexual difference as an absence (as established in my preceding chapters) reveals the importance of respecting others, then this respect can be extended to other differences as well. As Irigaray proposes, "Respect of the other gender, the most difficult kind of respect since it leads from the most instinctive to the most spiritual,

can bring us to respect other differences: race, generation, tradition, language, and culture” (2000, p. 99). Irigaray observes that preserving this respect for the sexual other is difficult because “the instinct to possess the other’s body like a property” (2000, p. 98) continues to subsist as a natural given in the relations between men and women. For Irigaray, the complexity involved in the relations between man and woman, can be a powerful guide in our efforts at learning to respect other differences. In fact, Irigaray persistently emphasizes the importance of sexual difference as foundational to any inquiry into subjectivity.

My critique of Spinelli’s existential psychotherapy is limited to showing the consequences of his occlusion of sexual difference. My emphasis on sexual difference (as I have argued in this thesis) is based on Irigaray’s compelling arguments. Spinelli’s existential phenomenological psychotherapy’s occlusion of sexual difference leads to several problems that I will now discuss.

5.2 Embodiment without sexual difference

Embodiment is a crucial concept in the existential phenomenological psychology of Spinelli. It fuels his emphasis on inter-subjective relations. Echoing Merleau-Ponty, Spinelli states that the body is not a thing among other things, but exists as relatedness to the world or as “embodied consciousness” (2001, p. 82) and expresses “our unique dialogue with the world,” (2001, p. 82). Spinelli’s specific understanding of embodiment can also be gleaned

from his reliance on the existential philosopher Gabriel Marcel's views on how we take up our relationship to our body. According to Spinelli (1997), Marcel posits that our bodies exist "in a 'borderline zone' between 'being' and 'having'" (p. 187). In other words, "I cannot say that my body is me, nor can I say that it is not me – I both am and have a body" (Spinelli, 1997, p. 187). Marcel's assumption is that in relation to our bodies, we exist in a 'borderline zone' between "being" and "having," irrespective of our specific morphologies. In other words, woman is/has a body just as man is/has a body. Both Merleau-Ponty's and Marcel's conceptualizations of embodiments are what guide Spinelli in his articulation of his clients' "self-constructs." My analysis shows that Spinelli's theory and practice ignores the sexual specificity of the body. Nowhere in his writings does Spinelli consider sexual difference and its implications.

From an Irigarayan perspective, ignoring sexual difference vis-à-vis embodiment is problematic, "as the female and male morphologies are the not same and it therefore follows that their way of experiencing the sensible and of constructing the spiritual is not the same" (Irigaray, 1996, p. 38). It is true that Spinelli does not explicitly espouse the idea that male and female morphologies are the same. By the same token, however, while he acknowledges that embodiment expresses our unique dialogue with the world, he fails to hear the sexuate nature of this dialogue. By suspending the question of sexual difference, Spinelli implies, for example, that a woman's relatedness to her body is an "individual" problem unmediated by her sex. In other

words, embodiment is simply a perceptual problem mediated at most by one's "self-construct." If embodiment is merely an "individual" problem, then its implication for therapeutic praxis is limited to a clarification of self-constructs. What this means is that Spinelli's notion of embodiment can motivate the practitioner to focus only on the role played by the "existence tensions" (Spinelli, 2001, p. 11) that constrict embodiment, rather than on socio-cultural significations. Spinelli's assumption that one's restrictive "self-construct" (sedimentation and habituation of one's beliefs) is responsible for the body's resistance to change is a simplistic understanding of embodiment.

The following example from Spinelli's practice regarding his client Elizabeth's struggle with her own relationship to her body as she faces terminal illness (lung cancer) will illustrate his restrictive understanding of embodiment. A few weeks into therapy, Spinelli articulates Elizabeth's assumptions towards her body and how they restrict her relationships. Spinelli wonders whether she can accept an "unconditional[ly] loving and respectful relationship" (1997, p. 291) towards her body "*regardless* of whether it (her body) is deemed 'good' or 'bad'" (1997, p. 291). Spinelli is alluding to the possibility of an unconditional relationship based on her disclosure about her experience of tending to her plants. From Elizabeth's response to his queries regarding her conflicted relation to her body, Spinelli surmises that although she wishes to accept her body unconditionally and does not see doing so as an impossibility, she feels "that there exists for her

an obstacle within her relations with her body, with others, and with her sense of her own being (i.e. her self-construct), that is not present in her relationship with plants” (1997, p. 201). The “obstacle” that Spinelli refers to with regard to her body is overlooked in his attempts to explore Elizabeth’s “*lived experience via her self-construct*” (1997, p. 201). While Spinelli successfully challenges her *self-construct* and how it restricts her interpersonal life, he does not explore the “lived experience” of Elizabeth in therapy via her sexuate nature. My point is that a change in Elizabeth’s perception of her *self-construct* alone cannot account for how she takes up her own unique way “of experiencing the sensible and constructing the spiritual” (Irigaray, 1996, p. 38). Rather, by listening with an ear for the perceptual and sensory language of the client’s body, Spinelli and his client can allow for creative possibilities to emerge in their encounter. Instead, Spinelli tends to reduce the body “merely to a sociological phenomenon, the consequences of socialization and learning” (Grosz, 1989, p. 111), which could be explored and challenged within a respectful reciprocal relation.

Spinelli also characterizes Elizabeth’s relation to the plants that she tends to as “loving’ and ‘near-maternal’” (1997, p. 188). In characterizing her relations as maternal, Spinelli appears to be colluding with the phallogocentric understanding of the mother as one who is maternal and nurturing (also known as unconditional love). By positioning her in this manner, I wonder whether Spinelli is inadvertently creating a space for Elizabeth that allows her to give up

being woman so that she could be maternal (and unconditional) in her relation to her body and to others.

According to Spinelli, however, a change in *self-construct* is effected when the client chooses between two attitudes, viz., “I can” and “I must.” Briefly, the difference between the two stances are that the former “permits openness towards one’s experience... and the latter imposes a stance that rejects all options” (1997, p. 193). Spinelli assumes that women and men have equal access to such stances. But “I can” is not given the same way to men and women within the patriarchal tradition. Openness could be understood as openness to difference. That is, as Irigaray proposes, “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” (1993a, p. 74). To be surprised, and to appear and be seen as new and different, Irigaray maintains that women should be able to have access to a position of enunciation. Access to this position of enunciation will help with one’s experience of the sensible and the construction of the spiritual. Spinelli’s exclusive focus on the exploration of the client’s self-construct prevents him from paying attention to the sexuation of embodiment. His exclusive focus on the self-construct restricts his own approach and precludes him from helping the client explore her self-construct as a sexuate being. His “interventions” fall short of giving the client access to a position of enunciation that is in line with her sexed subjectivity.

5.3 The use of “masculine” metaphors

In his recent work, Spinelli (2007) characterizes the inherent tension that emerges in therapy as *daimonic*. He borrows this term from the American existential psychotherapist Rollo May and tailors it to his own purposes. Spinelli explains, “(T)he ensuing struggle between the attempt to maintain the existing worldview and the ‘push’ to reconstitute it parallels the depersonalised (or dissociated) possessive force of the daimonic” (2007, p. 170). Spinelli also describes the manifestations of the *daimonic* in therapy as “intense feelings that ‘spring up’ for the client in ways that may surprise, shock, disturb, excite, repel or dismay him or her” (2007, p. 170). In the face of such experiences, the therapist’s role, he contends is not “to dissolve, reduce, intensify or explain these daimonic explosions” (2007, p. 171) but “to attempt to ‘stand beside’ the client throughout their appearance and to pursue their investigation through descriptive clarification and challenge” (2007, p. 171).

Spinelli’s utilization of such metaphors to characterize the process of existential therapy is problematic. Intense feelings are not the same for men and women. In other words, the experience of the “intense feelings that ‘spring up’” in therapy are themselves socially constructed and so it is incorrect to assume that they are the same for both men and women. Once again, a phenomenology of lived experience that is not subtended by sexual difference will foreclose important nuances and not allow the therapist to be sensitive to such differences.

Although this daimonic force is perceived as neutral in its origin, its outcome (contingent upon the channeling process) can be creative or destructive. In this sense, one of the associations evoked through this metaphor is madness. In therapy, the task of the existential therapist would be to “stand beside” and through clarification and challenges sublimate this force to have creative and healthy outcomes. Irigaray (1993c) however, cautions us about the difference in how men and women take up their relations to madness. She asserts:

This is in fact how the question needs to be posed. Each sex has a relation to madness. Every desire has a relation to madness. But it would seem that one desire has been taken as wisdom, moderation, truth, leaving the other sex the weight of a madness that cannot be acknowledged or accommodated. (1993c, p. 10)

Irigaray also uses the image of the *daimonic* in her articulation of sexual difference. She characterizes the fecundity of the man-woman couple as “*mediumlike*, daimonic, the guarantee for all, male and female, of the immortal becoming of the living” (1993a, p. 26). Unlike Spinelli’s, Irigaray’s use of this term does not have explosive and masculine qualities. In general, she characterizes the feminine imaginary in fluid terms, as I discuss next through her image of the “mechanics of fluids.”

5.4 Irigaray’s response

How does Irigaray respond to the problems in the theory and practice of Spinelli’s existential phenomenological psychotherapy? As

to the question of sexual difference, Irigaray maintains, “The natural is at least two: male and female” (1996, p. 35), and so any attempt to collapse this fundamental difference is to ignore reality. She insists on maintaining this difference: not doing so would be unethical. Because natural sexual difference is forgotten in our culture, it excludes women at two levels: that of sex (for instance, there are few women philosophers) and gender (for instance, when men’s ideal of success is endorsed for women, too). Both these exclusions are facilitated by the use of language. Given this status quo, Irigaray cautions, however, that a simple reversal (for example, by making men marginal) is not the solution, because “to reverse the order of things, even supposing this to be possible, history would repeat itself in the long run” (1985b, p. 33). She also resists the temptation to promote hierarchical relations between men and women. She insists on the possibility of difference without hierarchy. She is careful about repeating any phallographic gestures of mastery and control.

Sexual difference is the anchor point in resolving any such problems. Sexual difference is about recognizing and maintaining the space between the two subjects. How does Irigaray do so? She explains:

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. (1993a, p. 13)

Irigaray marks this space of sexual difference for “wonder,” because in wonder (as in the case of appreciating a work of art) there is no crossing over, no consummation, or possession. This does not mean that the relation between the two is sterile. Irigaray posits a fecund relationship, but one characterized by creativity rather than procreativity. From this perspective, the space between man and woman is not crossed over even in the sexual act. Understood in this manner, sexual difference serves as the foundation of all relations, in which the other is an irreducible sexual other.

This space of sexual difference is also marked by a *here and now* concept of time, for which Irigaray uses a theological term: *parousia*. It is an “expectation of a future not only as a *utopia* or a *destiny* but also as a *here and now*, the willed construction of a bridge in the present between the past and the future” (Irigaray, 1993a, p. p. 147). Sexual difference marked by *parousia* is a future anterior and at the same time a *not yet*. It this paradoxical or elusive quality of sexual difference that prompts Irigaray to say, “I am therefore a political militant for the impossible, which is not to say utopian. Rather, I want what is yet to be as the only possibility of a future” (1996, p. 10). The *parousiac* concept of temporality is not very different from the term *sensible transcendental*. There is an urgency that marks the *here and*

now, which does not exclude the respect and wonder for the *here and now*.

Irigaray examines the assumptions underlying attempts to create an autonomous position for women within the cultural. She looks for construction materials that do not evoke masculine images of rigidity, solidity, constancy and homeostasis. For instance, in one essay, Irigaray describes feminine sexuality as subtended by an imaginary consonant with “The ‘Mechanics’ of Fluids”:

Yet one must know how to listen otherwise than in good form(s) to hear what it says. That it is continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductible, diffusible, ... That it is unending, potent and impotent owing to its resistance to the countable; ... that it mixes with bodies of a like state, sometimes dilutes itself in them in an almost homogenous manner, which makes the distinction between the one and other problematical; and furthermore that it is already diffuse ‘in itself,’ which disconcerts any attempt at static identification. (1985b, p. 111)

Thus Irigaray shows that the “mechanics of the solids” cannot capture the “mechanics of the fluids.” The former lacks the language to capture the fluid-like feminine experience. Irigaray establishes the link between the mechanics of “solids” and metaphors employed by a dry male logic, and juxtaposes them against the “fluidity” of feminine speech.

The formlessness of the fluid however, does not mean that it has no form. Grosz observes, “The fluid has no given form on its own but it can, of course, be given a form: when placed within a constricted space, it takes on the shape of that space” (1989, p. 118). Irigaray’s

choice of fluids over solids is underscored by her choice of metonymy over metaphor. In a footnote in this essay, she observes that metaphors with their reliance on “likeness” cannot do justice to the properties of fluid, which is “neither vague nor rigorous in a geometric way, it entails an adjustment of meaning which is far from being accomplished” (1989, p. 110). Irigaray also cautions that the “teleology” of the feminine experience is at stake when “every psychic economy is organized around the phallus” (1989, p. 110), thereby constraining the articulation of the inter-subjective experience of women in normative heterosexual terms.

In the essay “Body Against Body: In Relation to the Mother,” Irigaray (1993c) notes that women’s autonomous position has been sacrificed to serve a patriarchal economy of relations. For instance, a phenomenological analysis of women in their maternal function would reveal that the maternal function subtends “the social order as well as the order of desire, but it is always restricted to the dimension of need” (1993c, p. 10-1). Irigaray asks, “What is woman, apart from her social and material function in reproducing children, nursing, renewing the work force?” (1993c, p. 10). Grosz’s comment on this situation is apt:

This is not an effect of nature nor is it a social necessity but is the result of women’s submersion in maternity and thus her eclipse as woman. It is an effect of a social organization which induces guilt in those women-mothers who assert themselves as women, as autonomous, sexual beings, independent of the child or its father. (1989, p. 122)

Irigaray posits that for women to be included in the cultural without being reabsorbed by phallogentric and patriarchal categories, she has to assert her specificity. Her ability as nurturer should transcend the material realm. Irigaray asserts:

Our urgent task it to refuse to submit to a desubjectivized social role, the role of mother, which is dictated by an order subject to the division of labor – he produces, she reproduces – that walls us up in the ghetto of a single function. When did society ever ask fathers to choose between being men or citizens? We don't have to give up being women to be mothers. (1993c, p. 18)

As mothers within the phallogentric and patriarchal order, women are exiled from themselves, as they unable to take up an autonomous position.

What does Irigaray advocate in this situation? The answer is particularly relevant to existential psychotherapy in its effort to articulate a psychic economy in relation to one's inter-subjective experience.

Inter-subjective relation involves, among other things, dialogic communication between two subjects. To have a genuine dialogue, Irigaray suggests, we must pay attention to the subject taking up a position of enunciation or an autonomous position in relation to others (men and women). To accomplish this project, she calls upon women to "invent a language," that is in harmony with their bodies. She avers, "If we don't invent a language, if we don't find our body's language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story. We

shall tire of the same ones, and leave our desires unexpressed, unrealized" (1985b, p. 214).

The position of enunciation that Irigaray describes also needs to encompass another important aspect of the speaking subject, namely, the "autobiographical *I*." She draws attention to this "I" in her essay "The Three Genders" (Irigaray, 1993c). Taking her cue from contemporary autobiographical narratives, she states, "This transformation of the autobiographical *I* into a different cultural *I* seems essential if we are to set up a new ethics of sexual difference" (1993c, p. 177). A different cultural *I* would correspond according to Irigaray to a subject who is not one but two, that is, a subject who is both an "I" and a "You," expressed in Irigaray's writings as an "I-she" or a "You-he" dialoguing with each other. Dialogue in the intersubjective realm that does not respect the cultural other will reduce woman to an object status and repeat the phallogocentric economy of sameness.

By paying attention to sexual difference, can existential psychotherapy benefit from being attuned to creative possibilities that emerge as the therapist listens to the body speaking (both one's own and the client's)? What can Irigaray offer to enhance and revitalize the existential psychotherapy of Spinelli? I have already demonstrated that by not paying attention to a sexually specific other and by not paying attention to the language of the sexuate body, his therapeutic praxis has occluded sexual difference. To liberate his praxis from inadvertently falling prey to language that uproots the client from

his/her own body and history, I venture to offer an alternative mode of attending to the client as outlined by Irigaray (1993c).

In her essay, "Flesh Colors" (1993c) Irigaray attempts at thinking through "an elaboration of *sexualized subjective identity*" (1993c, p. 153) in therapy. In another essay, "Gesture in Psychoanalysis" (1993c) Irigaray points out that the client is stuck (in the past) when he/she is focused on "producing *rational speech*" (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 93), thus remaining a prisoner of the gestures of such a speech. I understand this production to be the restructuring of meanings in the context of therapy, which is reminiscent of Spinelli's version of therapy (de-sedimenting self-constructs). Irigaray suggests however, that we pay attention to the gestures of the body as for instance, evidenced in "voice, with its different qualities (timbre, intensity, pitch) and colors" (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 157). She explains that both voice and color as "two components of human identity differ according to sex" (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 157). In suggesting that the therapist pays attention to these two components, Irigaray is offering the therapist alternative ways to attend to sexuate embodiment that is not in line with a phallic understanding of sexual difference. They (voice and color) relate "to the materiality of the human body" (Miller, 2007, p. 112) and thus resist the phallic logic of sexual difference. In the case of colors, for instance, they "do not simply obey binary opposition or one of the principles of noncontradiction that control every truth according to our logical systems" (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 157). As regards voice, Irigaray says that the "transitions occur almost

imperceptibly” (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 158) and that each sex, “retains a whole range of sounds whose chords, mediant, and harmonics must constantly be discovered or recovered as a personal balance or as a relation to the other” (1993c, p. 158). I propose that Spinelli’s practice of existential therapy can benefit from paying attention to the gestures of the body (both of the client and the therapist) as indicated above, and thus remain attuned to a non-phallic understanding of sexual difference. If Spinelli were to incorporate this “gesture” of Irigaray into his therapeutic praxis, his praxis can be liberated from the hold of a phallogocentric economy of inter-subjectivity.

Irigaray also observes that along with paying attention to voice and color, therapy could be understood as painting (1993c, p. 155). Quoting the 20th century Swiss painter Paul Klee, she states, “The point about painting is to *spatialize perception* and *make time simultaneous*” (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 155). In its non-representational sense, painting (described in terms of time) attempts at making past, present, and future simultaneous. This kind of painting attempts at an alternative understanding of time in therapy. In this sense, Irigaray states that interpretations (in therapy) can be seen “as the ability to compose along with the patient and to help the patient to paint: to represent his or her perceptions and form them into a perspective in space-time” (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 155). By utilizing an understanding of painting that is not merely representational, Irigaray challenges “the emphasis in our culture on writing as a medium for meaning” (Miller,

2007, p. 112) and by extension, I would add, therapy as an endeavor in the restructuring of meanings.

I end this section with Irigaray's thoughts on successful analysis which could also serve as a bridge to Spinelli's project of existential phenomenological therapy:

A successful analysis would be the one that successfully restores the balance and the harmony of the perceptual economy. Pathology can often be explained by the fact that certain past events and affects are crystallized in the present of the subject, and their energy is no longer available. These residues must be brought to the patient's perception, they must be made fluid again, put in perspective so that creativity can again work freely. (Irigaray, 1993c, p. 156)

5.5 Final thoughts

My research on existential psychotherapy's forgetting of sexual difference has raised complex questions. Racial and cultural differences also need to be explored in this context, as does the implication of sexual difference for same gender (woman-woman and man-man) psychotherapy: for instance, what is being overlooked in the inter-subjective realm of psychotherapy between man and man and woman and woman? What are implications for psychotherapy when this happens?

Reading Irigaray is never easy. Her writing is complex, her style is unique, and her ideas are provocative. I continue to find the profundity of the simple truth of sexual difference to be challenging. As a male researcher, I have learned from Irigaray the meaning of

respect for women from an “inside out” perspective. I am grateful for this opportunity. Woman as radical other is not the same kind of human being as I am. I believe this reevaluation will serve me well, both at a private and a professional level. Questions about women’s subjectivity that I have explored with the help of Irigaray will remain open-ended, keeping me poised in wonder.

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