

## LANGUAGES OF THE OTHER: CONTEMPORARY FEMINIST AND THEOLOGICAL DISCOURSES OF OTHERNESS

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Across discussions of a broadly postmodern nature, one commonly finds appeal to a rather uncommon notion: the notion of otherness. The commonness of the appeal tends to belie the fact that the notion being appealed to is so loosely defined that it is often unclear precisely how it is being used. This paper is motivated by the concern that this concept of the Other is so broad, malleable, and ill-defined that the radical potential of its use lies in danger of being dissipated. I wish to defend the analytic potential of this primary term of contemporary debate, concentrating upon two fields wherein the notion of otherness has performed a primary role: those of theology and feminism.

The notion of otherness is unlike other philosophical concepts — or, more precisely, unlike other concepts that are subject of philosophical analysis — in that it denotes that which philosophy does not and in fact cannot interpolate. The history of philosophy may be read — as is common of late — as an attempt at a universal synthesis; it is an attempt to interpret the world as a whole, as a totality. Within the bounds of the reasonable, consciousness grasps and embraces the world, leaving nothing beyond its conceptual hold, beyond the limits of knowledge. The realm of consciousness is, however, ultimately finite. As such, it cannot draw the infinite within its bounds. This notion of otherness, then, is the concept that has been used to refer to that beyond the bounds of conceptual determination — beyond reason, beyond knowledge, beyond language.

Now this aim of philosophy — to grasp the world in its totality — has, of course, been subject to the most rigorous scrutiny throughout its history. And so philosophy has constantly been required to justify itself — specifically, to justify its claim to

totality. In this respect, the suggestion recently popularised by philosophers such as Rorty that philosophy faces a sort of watershed — a crisis arising from its inability to meet this demand for justification — are simply ahistorical. Philosophy stands in no different situation than it has ever stood in regard to its difficulties of self-legitimation.

These philosophers of crisis fail to note that, throughout its history, philosophy has been subject to systematic interrogation and upon grounds akin to those proposed of late. The major thrust of this interrogation has in fact derived from a theological concern. From its very origins, theology has evidenced a commitment to the notion of otherness, in its claims as to the otherness of God. In the writings of the Church Fathers Gregory of Nyssa and Dionysius the Areopagite, God is understood as an entity beyond our ability to conceptualise; His nature is wholly Other to the finite realm that philosophical speculation is capable of grasping (cf, for example: Pseudo-Dionysius, 1980, Ch. 1). Indeed, throughout its history, theology has challenged philosophy for its inability to conceive the Other, to recognise the force of the Other in circumscribing its pretensions to totality. It is this that lies at the root of the antagonism between theology and philosophy, an antagonism that has developed in accordance with the growth in philosophy's pretensions.

Within the 20th century, however, the concern with the status of the Other has evolved in new and equally challenging ways. The most prominent and self-conscious development in the evolution of this concept derives from the field of feminism. Simone de Beauvoir, drawing upon the Hegelian treatment of the master/slave dialectic, pivots her analysis around precisely this concept in asking why it is that woman stands as other to man and other to culture more generally. Woman, she says, 'has been defined as the Other', with 'no past, no history, no religion' of her own, unable to establish the terms of her own existence within culture except by reference to man (de Beauvoir, 1949, pp. 19-29). Throughout history, woman has stood in a relation of immanence to the field of transcendence dominated by man.

This analysis of woman's otherness has served as an extraordinarily rich vein within feminist thought. A great number of feminist philosophers, drawing in particular upon the psychoanalytic insights of Lacan, have contributed to a general account of the otherness of woman in respect of the symbolic

systems of this culture, those systems that govern the construction of meaning and value within society. This account reaches its greatest sophistication in the writings of the French feminists, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixious and Luce Irigaray. It is to the latter of these philosophers that I shall appeal in what follows.

There is one further treatment of otherness that is fundamental to a contemporary understanding of this notion. The most broad and far-ranging discussion of the import of the Other has emerged from within philosophy itself: this is the phenomenological account of Emmanuel Levinas. Levinas is responsible for extending the notion of otherness to incorporate all relations to the I. That is to say, he conceives of all others as filling the role of otherness in relation to the I. For Levinas, the non-I acts as an other insofar as it challenges the integrity of the I, demanding that the I incorporate a concern for the non-I in every human relation: 'responsibility for the Other ... is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what, humanly, I cannot refuse' (Levinas, 1985, p. 101). The notion of otherness is thus accorded a primacy within philosophy; philosophy is incapable of framing its metaphysical and epistemological questions without a prior regard for what is the fundamental ethical question of the status of the Other.

Now there is, I consider, a serious question that arises from the contemporary treatment of otherness, which might be framed as follows: in broadening our notion of the Other to the extent that it pertains to every and any non-I, do we deprive this notion of its specificity, its singularity? The notion of the other, it seems, is simply too broad to sustain its role in challenging the limits of philosophical conceptualisation. If any other now stands as a ground for philosophical questioning, then surely our notion of the other has proliferated to an extent that its meaning has become dissolute.

The question might also be framed in terms of the secularisation that this notion has undergone: has the Other been placed so firmly within the immanent domain that we have lost the original force of the appeal to that beyond conceptualisation, to the transcendental beyond? For the Other in question is no longer the wholly Other of theological speculation; it is an Other that resides firmly within the realm of finite and material human relations. The Other, in other words, is no longer absolute; it is an other that is merely relative to the I, to the One. Surely the

theological challenge to philosophy is thereby reduced, dissipated, banalised?

I suspect that this critique of the contemporary notion of otherness can indeed be sustained in relation to a good deal of postmodern discussions of otherness. There is, as I have mentioned, a tendency to assume that all notions of the Other can be reduced to one another and that the broad, secular notion of otherness suffices to capture the spirit of the challenge to philosophy. I would however want to bracket the writings of Irigaray and Levinas — and certain others, including Derrida — from this charge. For there is a great deal in their writings to suggest that the initial spirit of the challenge that the notion of the Other provides is not lost to them. This is reflected in their recognition of the divine element in the structure of the relations governing otherness. What distinguishes the writings of Irigaray and Levinas in particular is the role that they ascribe to God in the mediation of the relations of otherness within the immanent plane.

Far from being party to the secularisation of otherness, these analyses provide a critique of this tendency, in their critique of the way in which the notion of otherness has been used to reflect and affirm the qualities of the One and the Same. Upon these analyses, the secularisation of otherness can be read as a process whereby the qualities of the wholly Other, the qualities of God, have been coopted by Man. Insofar as Man has been taken to instantiate a higher form of being — a being that is purportedly autonomous, independent and ideally unconditioned, a being to whom a higher form of love is proper — this theological notion of otherness has been adopted as a front for the affirmation of the value of the One, the Same. The secularisation of otherness is thus a process of the divinisation of Man; it is the story of Man become absolute. But, as Nietzsche himself recognised, this self-image of man as the One is implicated in the death of God, to the extent that Man too sits on the brink of the abyss, on the verge of crisis.

It is at the conjunction of the feminist and theological concerns over the secularisation of otherness that I wish to situate the questions that motivate the rest of this paper: what may feminist and theological readings of otherness contribute to one another? How might this conjunction help to alleviate the nihilism that pervades the death of God and Man? The first point that must be made in this context is that these two discourses of otherness hark from fundamentally different arenas and address fundamentally

differing concerns. This gives rise to notions of otherness that are, in substantive terms, not merely different but in some specific respects, at odds, competing. Let me offer two prominent examples of the disparity between them.

The first has to do with the issue of the relation of transcendence and immanence. The otherness of the theologian — if I may call it that — is principally an otherness of the transcendental, of the absolute beyond. What makes God the ultimate site of Otherness for the negative theologian in particular is that He is wholly other; he shares none of the features of finite being. He is infinite, eternal, uncreated, unconditioned and so on.

Upon the common feminist reading, the affirmation of a God who is radically transcendent in this sense will merely serve to reinforce the denigration of those qualities of the immanent that are symbolically associated with femininity. This debate commonly focuses upon the status of corporeality, since this is principle among the qualities of finite being. From a feminist perspective, it is the symbolic association of corporeality with femininity that has underscored the divinisation of Man, who transcends the immanent plane of corporeality. Irigaray's notion of the sensible transcendent, by contrast, is a notion of a God that is immanent to the existence of woman as a corporeal being. She speaks of 'an immanent efflorescence of the divine', that mediates all stages of our becoming within culture and its discourses (Irigaray, 1993, p. 30). This is not a God of absolute transcendence nor yet a God who is secularised; rather, it is a God who is realised, who becomes immanent in the body of woman.

Despite the appeal to immanence, there remains in Irigaray's writings, like those of other feminist theologians, the fundamental feminist concern for the possibilities of transcendence. Irigaray wishes to specify the conditions that must hold if woman is to attain a transcendence beyond the mundane, a transcendence of which she is capable and yet denied for lack of a divine model. And so she posits a God that can act as the grounds of women's possibilities, a mirror for the highest possible forms of her becoming. Her God is transcendent, not in the sense of being far away and beyond, but rather in the sense of being ultimate, the highest and most sacred.

A second point of difference between feminist and theological accounts of otherness thereby emerges, and once again I take Irigaray as exemplary on this point: the God that Irigaray evokes

is not a God of Oneness or singularity; it is a God that grounds plurality and multiplicity. God is in this sense a multifarious God, a God whom women can share even while affirming their differences. It is in fact the oneness of God that makes the masculine singularly privileged when this notion of the other is secularised. In refusing the oneness of God, Irigaray can be read as articulating a more ultimate otherness, an otherness understood as the ultimate expression of difference.

The differences between the feminist and theological accounts of otherness allow the impression that these are truly divergent disciplines. Nevertheless, I want to suggest that, in structural terms, there remain important relations between these two accounts. It is from this convergence that the highly fertile field of feminist theology issues. Let me outline very briefly some of these correlations between the two accounts of the Other.

First, contemporary theological and feminist accounts of otherness commonly converge in the understanding of the relational nature of being, in their denial of the ability of Man to act in the world as a purely autonomous and self-propelled being. Granted these relations are conceived in differing ways: the theological analysis appealing to structures governing human relations to transcendence and the feminist analysis appealing to structures governing intersubjectivity. Nevertheless, in each, it is the relational character of existence that underscores and gives meaning to the subject's experience.

The point can be made even more strongly: upon both these accounts, individual subjectivity would not be possible were it not for the existence of the Other. The subject is, in a structural sense, dependent upon an Other. From a theological perspective, for example, sociality and love are only possible if there is a loving God who mediates the relations of the One and an Other. From a feminist perspective, man cannot ultimately elide the contribution of woman in weaving the fabric of human relations. So, not only is the Other other, but it is the very grounds of the possibility of otherness; it is what allows the relation between the One and the Other.

For both these disciplines, the Other remains in a certain sense beyond comprehensibility, beyond the systematisation of thought. The Other cannot be dominated or mastered; it remains ultimate, in the sense of being always beyond the subject's grasp. It escapes the logic of the One and the Same and cannot be

represented within its discourses. It can only be represented analogically and this of course is the space from within which negative or apophatic theologies issue. It is also, by a different but related logic, the space wherein the possibility of an *écriture féminine* — a writing (of) woman — resides.

Pursuing this theme, not only does God act as the ground of otherness, but by the same token His presence disrupts the 'proper' of language, inserting discourses that cannot be assessed by reference to a standard syntax — those of the mystics, for example. So too with woman. Perhaps the principle theme of French feminism is that woman's experiences cannot be explained within the monological terms of exchange of language. This theme points to a certain absence within language and within the propositional knowledge that it prioritises. The articulation of a notion of otherness suggests that, in the final account, the finite being that we are cannot complete the task of knowledge, without eradicating otherness by reducing it to the Same. In this sense, the notion of the Other thus marks a point of rupture within the discourses of Man.

And yet, by this same logic, the One is drawn to the Other by a desire that cannot ultimately be disavowed. Levinas is right, I think, to affirm that a relation of the I to the non-I that is not characterisable as a knowledge or a contemplation, but rather as the expression of desire (Levinas, 1985, p. 92). God is realised in the desire for that which is excessive, a desire for an ultimate beyond. Feminists too have analysed this economy of desire governing the relations of man to woman and the ambivalences it creates. It is desire that places the relations of Man to God, and of man to woman, on an intimate plane. There is a room for a wealth of psychoanalytical insight here.

The relation to otherness can thus be characterised as the experience of an excessive immediacy of the One to the Other, an immediacy that haunts and disturbs the One, and must be pursued for precisely this reason. It is the experience of a radical alterity, a heterogeneity that is nevertheless present. Ultimately, what this notion of otherness signifies is a certain ambivalence, common to feminist and theological discourses, towards the absolute nature of transcendence. Although the theological notion of otherness has been employed to reinforce God's absolute status, the recent analyses of negative theology of Derrida, among others, show that this God is nevertheless a presence — a hyperessentiality, as Derrida describes it (Derrida, 1992, p. 74 ). What is ultimately

affirmed by these apophatic discourses is the possibility of a union with the Divine that occurs within time, within the here and now of experience.

This leads me to my last point: both theological and feminist discussions of otherness focus upon the ability of experience to relate the one to the other. The infinite nature of the Other may not be assimilated within thought, but it is not for that reason inaccessible to the senses. And so for example the approach to God has a strong existential dimension; it is given expression in a particular form of life. The theme here, in common with feminist approaches, is that this relation to the Other cannot evade the personal, social and ethical dimensions of one's life.

Convergences such as these have lead Levinas to suggest that the notion of otherness itself has a feminine nature: the 'feminine is other for a masculine being not only because of a different nature but also inasmuch as alterity is in some way its nature' (Levinas, 1985, p. 65). Levinas locates in the feminine the locus and origin of the very concept of alterity and this prompts him to consider the relation to woman as a primary model of the relations to otherness. It is a point that was glimpsed by Nietzsche: that one can use the feminine to signify the Other in its most general terms. In Nietzsche, the feminine acts as the very possibility of the appeal to the Other within discourse.

These convergences also suggest that it is too simplistic to assume — as some feminist theologians tend to do — that God acts as a monolithic category designed primarily to reinforce a masculine symbolic (cf, for example: Christ, 1987). Certainly, the attributions of Lord, King and Father to the Godhead have been used to this effect. But the more fertile attributes that accrue to God also allow for the recognition of a feminine face of divinity. In respect of God's status as Other, He shares with woman the qualities of heterogeneity, incommensurability, indefinability and infinitude; these are the features of otherness that are evocative across theological and feminist thought. And so, contrary to some feminist theological discussion, I suggest that there is much that can be exploited by feminism in the analysis of God's otherness and its feminine metaphors.

This theological and feminist understanding of otherness is productive in that it expresses a dynamism, a movement toward that which is other, a movement beyond that which is equal to us. This notion of the Other is bound up with the notion of an other



vision, an alternate understanding of the relation of the immanent to the transcendent that is not bound by anticipatable limits and boundaries. Otherness is here seen as an opening, a point of access to that which exceeds the limits of conceptual determination. It is the irruption of difference within language.

This analysis of the relations of contemporary theology and feminism perhaps gives rise to more questions than it answers. To finish, I will submit two questions of central importance. First, what is the Other for the Other that is woman? Lacan, of course, claims that there is none, there is no other of the Other (Lacan, 1977, p. 311). The question remains, however: if man cannot assimilate the Other within discourse, what of woman, who is already other to this discourse? The second question follows: if femininity is in some way exemplary of the Other, what of woman's relations to this Other? Are they also to be framed by reference to this exemplary model of the relation to woman? In which case, is it the relation of woman to herself that is idealised? Or is it the relation of woman to an other woman that is exemplary, complete with the erotic overtones that Levinas recognises in all relations to the Other? These are questions such as de Beauvoir asked, and they remain central to feminism. One way to pursue them, I suggest, is by way of a return to the originary concept of otherness, that evidenced by the Divine.

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