

## Life, death and (inter)subjectivity: realism and recognition in continental feminism

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Received: 13 December 2005 / Accepted: 23 February 2006  
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**Abstract** I begin with the assumption that a philosophically significant tension exists today in feminist philosophy of religion between those subjects who seek to become divine and those who seek their identity in mutual recognition. My critical engagement with the ambiguous assertions of Luce Irigaray seeks to demonstrate, on the one hand, that a woman needs to recognize her own identity but, on the other hand, that each subject whether male or female must struggle in relation to the other in order to maintain realism about life and death. No one can avoid the recognition that we are each given life but each of us also dies. In addition, I raise a more general, philosophical problem for analytic philosophers who attempt to read continental philosophy of religion: how should philosophers interpret deliberately ambiguous assertions? For example, what does Irigaray mean in asserting, 'Divinity is what we need to become free, autonomous, sovereign'? To find an answer, I turn to the distinctively French readings of the Hegelian struggle for recognition which have preoccupied Continental philosophers especially since the first half of the last century. I explore the struggle for mutual recognition between women and men who must face the reality of life and death in order to avoid the projection of their fear of mortality onto the other sex. This includes a critical look at Irigaray's account of subjectivity and divinity. I turn to the French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff in order to shift the focus from divinity to intersubjectivity. I conclude that taking seriously the struggle for mutual recognition between subjects forces contemporary philosophers of religion to be realist in their living and dying. With this in mind, the lesson from the Continent for philosophy of religion is that we must not stop yearning for recognition. Indeed, we must even risk our autonomy/divinity in seeking to recognize intersubjectivity.

**Keywords** Ambiguity · Autonomy · Beauvoir · Body · Feminist · Fluidity · Hegel · Intersubjectivity · Irigaray · Le Doeuff · Life · Love · Mortality · Natality · Reciprocity · Recognition · Sovereignty · Subjectivity

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## Introduction

“Let me go where I am not yet!” The ambiguity of these words were meant by Hanneke Canters to preserve what she found to be the ‘fluidity’ of the original French: ‘*Laisse-moi aller où je ne suis pas encore*’.<sup>1</sup> Canters’s words have taken on a life of their own for the young feminist philosopher of religion who died tragically in 2002. As a postgraduate student writing a doctoral thesis in Philosophy, Canters was determined to take seriously a woman’s philosophical search for identity as portrayed in *Elemental Passions*. The latter is a difficult, some might say highly obscure, poetic text written by the Continental philosopher and psycholinguist Luce Irigaray. However, with the posthumous publication of *Forever Fluid: A Reading of Luce Irigaray’s Elemental Passions*, we can reflect with Canters on the meaning of life and its passions, even after her death.<sup>2</sup>

It seems right and timely to take the publication of *Forever Fluid* as a starting point for my critical assessment of Irigaray’s admonition that women become divine. One implicit aim of this assessment is to illustrate a more general, philosophical problem with interpretations of Irigaray’s writings. How do we read ambiguity?<sup>3</sup> This question can also be seen as a real obstacle for analytic philosophers who attempt to read Continental philosophy of religion. To structure my assessment, I will focus upon a topic which continues to have a central role in contemporary Continental philosophy: the life and death struggle for mutual recognition between gendered subjects. A distinctively French reading of the Hegelian struggle for recognition has preoccupied Continental philosophers especially since the first half of the last century.<sup>4</sup> Roughly, in Simone de Beauvoir’s French Hegelian terms, to understand male domination of the female other it is necessary to reveal the way in which woman as the Other is forced to represent death (like evil or sin) in life: she takes on man’s fear of mortality (so, too defilement); the struggle for recognition, then, explains how domination avoids a confrontation with the reality of one’s own death. Once a woman recognizes her (gender) identity as free and autonomous, man’s fear re-emerges as the inevitable fate of any being whose consciousness is embodied. The significant critical tension in this topic for feminist philosophy of religion is that a woman not only needs to recognize her own identity, for instance, in Irigarayan terms, in ‘becoming divine,’ but each woman and each man must struggle in relation to another subject in order to maintain realism about life, love and death. A critical look at Irigaray’s account of becoming divine as

<sup>1</sup> Hanneke Canters died on 6 September 2002 – not long after she had received her PhD in Feminist Philosophy from the University of Sunderland, UK. The words quoted here make up Canters’s English translation of the original French statement by Irigaray (1982, p. 30); I also note that Hanneke is thanked for being ‘my ideal reader’ and for her ‘remarkable excitement’ about the first monograph in feminist philosophy of religion, see Anderson, (1998, p. xvi).

<sup>2</sup> Work which went into Canters’s doctorate is published posthumously in a book completed after Hanneke’s death by Grace M. Jantzen; cf. Canters and Jantzen (2005). It is with great sadness that I must add another note: since the time when this article was completed, Grace M. Jantzen herself has died on 2 May 2006. The article should be read with this in mind.

<sup>3</sup> A word about the meaning of ‘ambiguity’ (*ambigüe*) in French philosophy. Ambiguity can mean, as in English, a linguistic expression which has more than one interpretation or is uncertain in interpretation. However, in French *ambigüe* can also mean the way in which two opposing qualities are united or two contradictory things participate in one nature without being synthesized. Love is an example of something, which certain French philosophers take to be ambiguous in the latter sense. See Levinas (1992, section IV, subsection A, pp. 254ff). Also, see footnote 13.

<sup>4</sup> For helpful background on this French reception of Hegel, see Butler (1987) and Roth (1988).

one way to achieve a real sense of gendered identity, will constitute a necessary first step toward self-recognition.

The next step uncovers a common human passion in the philosophical search for self-identity: what I will call 'yearning'.<sup>5</sup> But this step involves risk in struggling to uncover such passion. The French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff uncovers certain dangers for those subjects whose identities and relationships are undermined by philosophical practices of exclusion. With the help of Le Doeuff, our attention is moved from subjectivity and divinity to intersubjectivity in her sense of 'a collective historical experience'.<sup>6</sup> My contention is that the ultimate goal of a woman's philosophical search for identity is mutual recognition, even if unreachable. The struggle of mutual recognition serves as a guiding ideal; it also ensures a realism.

I should qualify my reference to our *yearning* for recognition. I am indebted to the (post)-Hegelian account of *longing* in Judith Butler's 'Longing for Recognition'.<sup>7</sup> Yet I employ the specific term, yearning, to stress the cognitive and political nature of a common passion for equalitarian reciprocity.<sup>8</sup> This cognitive passion unites subjects across gender, sexual, racial and class divides. But *the yearning for recognition* ensures both the realism and the risk of intersubjectivity. This risk – or peril – is captured in the following lines which Canters selects from Irigaray's *Elemental Passions*:

we can never be sure of bridging the gap between us. But that is our adventure. Without this peril there is no us. If you turn it into a guarantee, you separate us (Irigaray, 1982, p. 28).

Keeping these, however, ambiguous words in mind we shall approach intersubjectivity, indirectly, in first considering the relationship between subjectivity and divinity as currently debated in the field of feminist philosophy of religion.

<sup>5</sup> 'Yearning' has been a central concept of my writings in feminist philosophy of religion, Anderson (1998, p. 22). Also see, hooks (1990). Roughly, I appropriate the term itself, 'yearning', from bell hooks to identify a common, rational passion which is a vital reality of religion. My account of yearning builds upon the imperative of feminist standpoint epistemology: to think from the lives of others, especially to think from the lives of outsiders within the dominant cultural framework. A reading of bell hooks in particular enabled me to consider how we/I might learn to think from the lives of African-American women who had been excluded from the practices of Anglo-American philosophy. In bell hooks's words, 'under the heading *Yearning*... I looked for *common* passions, sentiments shared by folks across race, class, gender, and sexual practice, I was struck by the depths of longing in many of us. Those without money long to find a way to get rid of the endless sense of deprivation. Those with money wonder why so much feels so meaningless... there are many individuals with race, gender, and class privilege who are longing to see the kind of revolutionary change that will end domination and oppression even though their lives would be completely and utterly transformed' (hooks, *Yearning*, pp. 12–13).

<sup>6</sup> For Le Doeuff's (1991) more recent account of the means by which institutions perpetuate male-dominated spaces of knowledge and knowing, see Le Doeuff (2003).

<sup>7</sup> See footnotes 13, 23 and 65 (below). It should also be noted that the women philosophers under discussion, including Beauvoir, Irigaray, Le Doeuff, Butler and even my reading of bell hooks are broadly speaking informed by the struggle for mutual recognition of Hegel's lord and servant (this would include master and slave, man and woman, or any pair of terms describing a relationship in which one subject dominates another). A good question is how much of feminist discourse is post-hegelian. My own debt in this essay is largely to Beauvoir's reading of Hegel and its influence upon French feminisms; cf. Bauer (2001).

<sup>8</sup> I owe this conception of equalitarian reciprocity to Le Doeuff (1991, pp. 108 and 278–280).

## On divinity

My general contention is that contemporary philosophers of religion avoid at their own cost the writings of current Continental philosophers who contest the nature and extent of the relationship between subjectivity and divinity. This contestation can expose highly significant ethical matters, including hidden assumptions of philosophers of religion, concerning men, women and divinity. Take, for example, the writings where Irigaray elucidates in a most provocative manner the gendered meanings of subjectivity and divinity, especially in debates concerning women and the divine. In particular, no definite agreement exists on what precisely Irigaray herself means here: 'to become woman . . . [a] woman needs a god who is a figure for the perfection of *her* subjectivity'.<sup>9</sup> Neither is there any more general agreement in contemporary debates about the gendered nature of subjectivity, whether male or female.

Allow me to clarify further my opening critical contention concerning the relationship between subjectivity and divinity. I maintain, firstly, that we can understand a common desire to be divine, especially in conditions of domination; for instance, the conditions of a woman under patriarchy. But, secondly, this should be understood in the larger context of a yearning for mutual recognition. This larger context is necessitated by the fact that neither man nor woman can become divine. However, this 'fact' is at least implicitly contested by the transformative project of becoming divine which has been proposed notably by Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*.<sup>10</sup> As already suggested, from my perspective, the crucial philosophical task in a woman's search for identity is to recognize a common yearning for recognition. This yearning is evident in sexual desire, political rage, unavoidable grief and self-giving/self-creating love.<sup>11</sup> Yet I will maintain that these gendered passions still do not indicate a woman's need for 'divinity', if she is to become 'free, autonomous, sovereign', or for 'the help of the divine'. Instead the urgent, however, difficult task is to recognize oneself and another in the inevitable risk of loss which characterizes intersubjectivity.

More precisely, in response to certain ambiguous assertions from Irigaray's 'Divine Women', I am arguing that recognition, once successful, would enable human subjects in 'human society' (Irigaray, 1993, p. 62)<sup>12</sup> to freely and autonomously embrace each

<sup>9</sup> Irigaray (1993, p. 64). For philosophical and theological readings of Irigaray's 'Divine Women', see Grosz (1993); and see the editors' introductions to excerpts from Irigaray's essays on religion in Joy, O'Grady and Poxon (2002, especially pp. 13–17 and 40–41).

<sup>10</sup> See Jantzen (1998). For more general background, see Nancy Frankenberry, 'Feminist Philosophy of Religion' at <http://plato.Stanford.edu/entries/feminist-religion/>

<sup>11</sup> For background to the role of epistemology and ethics in my own approach to philosophy of religion, see Anderson (2004, pp. 87–102). On the craving for infinitude, see Moore (1997, pp. 275–277) and Anderson (2001).

<sup>12</sup> Concerning this ambiguity in achieving a rightful relationship with the other, see Hegel (1977, paragraph 180). Hegel calls the sense of the subject being split 'ambiguity' (*Doppelsinnes*). This ambiguity is at the heart of the subjectively self-certain being's initial response to the encounter with the other. As will be important to my argument 'the relinquishing of a certain form of narcissism in favour of risking an uncertain, unfixed, ambiguous relationship with the other' is the ethical moment in gaining self-consciousness – on the way to the mutual recognition of subjects (see Bauer, 2001 p. 93 and more generally, pp. 86–103).

In a recent lecture, Pamela Sue Anderson, 'Woman and/as Death: Ambiguity and Ambivalence in the Philosophical Imaginary' (8 January 2006), I sought to focus critically on the role of ambiguity in French feminist philosophy, tracing its significant role back to De Beauvoir (1948); and De Beauvoir (1989). Cf. Langer (2003) and Schott (2003).

other in love and, hopefully, in justice.<sup>13</sup> This hope engenders our guiding ideal: that of mutual recognition. Of course, being able to realize a loving, discerning embrace of (gendered) subjects is far from simple.<sup>14</sup> Debating the issues between Irigaray and Le Doeuff on (inter)subjectivity will help avoid some difficulties. At this stage, I turn to the common ground for this debate. This is the framework which they each inherit from the French feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir.

Let us, then, consider carefully the two assertions from Irigaray's 'Divine Women':

Divinity is what we need to become *free, autonomous, sovereign*.<sup>15</sup> No human subjectivity, no human society has ever been established without *the help of the divine*.<sup>16</sup>

The critical question is, how exactly do we understand Irigaray's references to 'divinity' and to 'the divine'? Knowing that in 'Divine Women' Irigaray is appropriating, or having a fling with, Ludwig Feuerbach does not make understanding her terms any easier.<sup>17</sup> Is divinity meant to be a set of qualities which women need but also need to project before they recognize them as their own? Or, does the divine refer to a personal being who exists and from whom we receive help? In resisting any fixed answer, Irigaray's bold, but (again) ambiguous assertions may offer women a certain poetic license to explore the meaning of divinity – and with this, certain readers may find a freedom to express and interpret their own need to become free, autonomous, sovereign.<sup>18</sup> However, a serious danger accompanies this sort of poetic freedom precisely because it may not generate real (actual) freedom, let alone give good guidance to the reflective male or female reader. The ethical and conceptual problem with Irigaray's conception of becoming sovereign, as I will argue with insight, first, from Beauvoir and, second, from Le Doeuff, is a failure to attempt to establish an egalitarian reciprocity between autonomous subjects. This failure results in an asymmetrical relation between one subject and another. Beauvoir confronts this failure in the philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre where one subject, the man, gains his identity at the cost of the Other who is a woman, or 'the second sex', who must remain an object (in-itself).<sup>19</sup>

To elucidate my ethical concern with the ambiguous meanings of divinity and the divine, I will explore the inconsistencies, which threaten to undermine a woman's well-being. First, does a woman really need a god for 'her subjectivity' in the sense of

<sup>13</sup> For a contemporary account of the extent to which love and justice can be understood as compatible, see Gheaus, (2005, submitted).

<sup>14</sup> See the Kathe Kollwitz sculpture on the cover of Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, p. ii. For a more significant discussion concerning the (potential) significance of the imagery of a loving embrace, see Anderson (2005, pp. 85–99).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Beauvoir (1989, pp. 622–628, especially p. 628); and Irigaray (1993, pp. 55–72).

<sup>16</sup> Irigaray, (1993, p. 62) emphasis added. These assertions were cited in the Call for Papers, 'Women and The Divine' Philosophy conference, University of Liverpool, 18–19 June 2005; and the second sentence (assertion) appeared again in the Call for Papers, 'Gender in Cultural Practice I: Sacred and Profane Identities: Gender and the Expression of Selfhood', Annual Programme Exchange 2005, Universities of Lancaster, UK, and of Groningen, The Netherlands, held in Groningen, 18–19 November 2005.

<sup>17</sup> The subtext is Feuerbach (1957). For background to Irigaray's provocative style of reading philosophy, known in feminist circles as 'her fling with' male philosophers and their texts, see Burke, Schor and Whitford (Eds) (1994).

<sup>18</sup> On the dangers of narcissism for the mystic and the (heterosexual) lover, see Beauvoir (1989, p. 674). Hollywood (2002).

<sup>19</sup> See Beauvoir; Cf. Satre (1966, 1989).

a personal being who supports her specifically as female? Alternatively, is divinity an ideal, representing the distinctive qualities of a female subject, roughly, a model for a woman's subjectivity? Second, whether a personal being, a set of ideal qualities, or a model for subjectivity, what is the precise relation of divinity to the three characteristics listed by Irigaray: 'free, autonomous, sovereign'?<sup>20</sup> Assume that *free* implies being metaphysically undetermined and personally unencumbered; that *autonomous* means thinking for oneself, following an univocal yet universal law of one's own nature as created human, not divine.<sup>21</sup> But then, *sovereign* is a difficult term to define.

### On becoming sovereign

Political philosophers have traditionally applied sovereign to the state or to law. As an attribute of a person rather than an institution, sovereign would minimally mean independent of external domination and internally supreme; it could also mean that the sovereign person exercises ultimate authority over every other person. So what is implied when sovereign is attributed to a free, autonomous female subject? Free and autonomous could be qualities which all human subjects possess at least potentially, but sovereign would seem to introduce a new quality. It would imply that a female subject could reign supreme over other human subjects as (if) divine.<sup>22</sup> It is significant that this third term brings Irigaray's assertions concerning human subjectivity close to what Beauvoir criticizes as a '*sovereign liberty*' in *The Second Sex* – to which I will turn as one possible reading of Irigaray's sovereign female subject (Cf. Beauvoir, 1989, pp. 619, 628, 673–678).

As a feminist philosopher with Kantian leanings,<sup>23</sup> I can understand and embrace the desire for autonomy, which would disallow anyone else to think in one's place. The degree to which we can each be free also remains a significant philosophical question. But, even if we recognize autonomy and freedom as genuine concerns for a woman, why is *divinity* necessary for becoming, in Irigaray's terms, free, autonomous, *sovereign*? Shouldn't it be the reverse? The autonomous subject must give up her heteronomous and narcissistic dependence on the divine; that is, a sense of female divinity at most would give rise to an illusion of a woman's sovereignty!<sup>24</sup> To avoid

<sup>20</sup> For an additional context to understanding the French philosophical debates about becoming sovereign and divinity, see Camus (1971, pp. 91–92); this passage is cited by Moore (2003, p. 147). Compare this account of 'sovereignty' to Murdoch (1970, pp. 77f).

<sup>21</sup> This might imply that 'free' would, then, be 'negative freedom' as described by liberal political theorists; and 'autonomous' would, alongside this, be similar to the liberal idea of 'positive freedom'; cf. Miller (1991).

<sup>22</sup> Irigaray's use of Feuerbach who was himself a young Hegelian gives a post-Hegelian subtext to her terms which would also draw Irigaray close to the philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir. For both Irigaray's dismissal of Beauvoir and Beauvoir's reading of Hegel, see Bauer (2001, pp. 13–14, 88–103). For a defence of G. W. F. Hegel's conception of sovereignty as distinguishable from a despotism eclipsing the autonomy of individual parts, see Williams (1997, pp. 336–342, especially, p. 339); Cf. Hegel (1991, pp. 268–276). The question is whether this Hegelian form of reciprocal recognition can be achieved and preserved (by a Hegelian conception of state), including the self-respect of its individual subjects/members.

<sup>23</sup> My Kantian position goes back to work which I did on Paul Ricoeur who I read in the light of his own self-attribution of a 'post-Hegelian Kantian', see Anderson (1993, pp. 21–32); and Anderson (2002b, pp. 15–31).

<sup>24</sup> For a philosophical critique of Freud's critique of morality and religion, see Lear (2005, pp. 192–208); and for background to narcissism, see *ibid.*, pp. 165–179, 243n2.

such self-deception, I urge each woman to avoid an appropriation of the (Irigarayan) divine which bears any similarity to what Beauvoir reveals as the imprisonment of the female mystic or lover whose freedom, as the second sex, is undermined by her own narcissism. As will be seen further on, Beauvoir's picture of the female mystic, or lover, seems to be modelled on Sartre's paranoid, yet still nascent subject who is haunted by the ambivalence of his (or her) own reflection in the look of the other.<sup>25</sup> In fact, Beauvoir makes reference to the 'masculine firmness' of 'the great female saints' (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 622). On the basis of this reliance on Sartre's account of the female mystic, we can call this particular picture of a female lover (the divine-man relation) 'masculinist'.

The decisive question is whether in becoming divine the nascent female subject can avoid or go beyond any destructive (masculinist) preoccupation with her own self-love, beyond the mirror which in reflecting her own image closes her in, excluding her from intersubjectivity. We may need to recognize in Irigaray's call to become autonomous, *sovereign* as a subject on her own, the stage of primary narcissism when the girl first finds her own image reflected back at herself. But then, what is the next step forward in becoming a free, autonomous, sovereign subject?<sup>26</sup> It is possible that the female subject far too easily becomes preoccupied in identifying her own body with the divinized body of a feminized figure of Christ: like the female mystic who sees her own passive, bleeding body in the suffering of her god (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 619; cf. Hollywood, 2002, pp. 120–145).

Beauvoir captures this situation of a woman whose body imprisons her:

... the way the woman regards her body... is a burden: worn away in service to the species, bleeding each month, proliferating passively, it is not for her a pure instrument for getting a grip on the world but an opaque physical presence, it is no certain source of pleasure and it creates lacerating pains; it contains menaces: woman feels endangered by her "insides". ... And yet it is also her glorious double; she is dazzled in beholding it in the mirror; it is promised happiness, work of art, living statue; she shapes it, adorns it, puts it on show (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 619).

Beauvoir goes on to reveal how the female mystic can be a figure who, with the help of the divine, only appears to become free. The lesson is that a woman's desire for self-love may generate a sovereign liberty, but this freedom is only an illusion, a deified reflection. In Beauvoir's words,

We can understand how intoxicating it is for the narcissist when all heaven becomes her mirror; her deified reflection is infinite like God Himself, and it will never fade. And at the same time, in her burning, palpitating, love-inundated breast she feels her soul created, redeemed, cherished, by the adorable Father; it is her double, it is herself she embraces, infinitely magnified through the mediation of God (p. 674).

<sup>25</sup> For a dramatic representation of this conception of the subject's struggle with the Other, see Sartre, *No Exit*. Nancy Bauer argues that Sartre's subject remains trapped in what Sigmund Freud identifies as 'secondary narcissism', which is a narcissistic personality disorder, but Sartre thinks that this disorder is the 'normal' human condition; and it is this conception of the subject which Beauvoir will expose and reject for a better alternative; see Bauer (2001, pp. 117–135); cf. Beauvoir, 1989, pp. 621–628).

<sup>26</sup> This question has some affinity with the desire for recognition discussed in Butler (2004, chapter 6).

In this light the question to readers of Irigaray is whether in becoming divine, the female subject who seeks to become free and autonomous can move beyond the lacerated desire of the narcissist whose exclusive desire for sovereignty conceals her own heteronomous dependence on the divine in whom she only sees her own gender ambivalent image, whether of masculine-like sovereignty or of female divinity. It is precisely this latter sort of self-division which allows an only apparent autonomy<sup>27</sup> to hide a heteronomous self-love, reinforcing women's material and social oppression by the Christian God, father and son.

### On being beside oneself

In contradistinction to the assertions we have considered so far from Irigaray's 'Divine Women', the problem with human subjectivity and human society for women in our western tradition would seem to have been the so-called 'help of the divine'. This sort of 'help' unwittingly excluded a woman from reciprocal love, leaving her enclosed in her debilitating narcissism: in a state of paranoia.<sup>28</sup> Admittedly Irigaray does recognize the way in which the Christian God has helped man, not woman, to exist in a gender specific relation to the infinite. In Irigaray's own words,

Man is able to exist because God helps him to define his gender (*genre*), helps him orient his finiteness by reference to infinity. ..

To posit a gender, a God is necessary: guaranteeing the infinite.

... And man, clearly, is able to complete his essence only if he claims to be separate as a *gender*. If he has no existence in his gender, he lacks his relation to the infinite and, in fact, to finiteness.

To avoid that finiteness, man has sought out a unique *male* God. God has been created out of man's gender.<sup>29</sup>

Let us suppose for a moment with Irigaray that woman, like man, needs this sort of help. That is, she needs help to create her own god out of (a) woman's gender and so, to become in relation to the infinite. What, then, would prevent this from being, at best, a recipe for conflict between male and female gods, and at worst the reversal of sexism? Perhaps creating god out of a woman's gender would result in a feminized Christ or even a trinity of divine women. But, if the male God has excluded women from human subjectivity, from human society, would a female god do the same for men? Moreover, I still do not see how divinity 'frees' a woman (and/or a man) to be *autonomous*. Instead this creation of a god out of (a) woman's gender would at most make woman sovereign at the expense of man, while encumbering her with man's

<sup>27</sup> For two other contemporary feminist accounts of the limits of our (sexual) autonomy, see Anderson (2003) and Butler (2005). For Butler on the problems with a woman's claim to sovereignty, see her discussion of Hegel's Antigone in Butler (2004, pp. 166–168); cf. Butler, (2000, pp. 8–11, 23, 27–28 and 39–40).

<sup>28</sup> On the role of Christianity in addressing 'feminine paranoia', see Kristeva (1987).

<sup>29</sup> Irigaray (1993, p. 61) Irigaray's translator has inserted a footnote reference to Feuerbach at this point. And Irigaray explains,

... we have to have a will. It is necessary, not for our morality, but for our life. It is the condition of our becoming. In order to will, we have to have a goal. The goal that is most valuable is to go on *becoming* infinitely.

In order to become, it is essential to have a gender or an essence (consequently, a sexuate essence) as *horizon* (p. 61)



dependence.<sup>30</sup> In this light, divinity is not much better for women's relationships than it was for men's. In some sense, Irigaray herself knows this.

Irigaray clearly insists that 'There comes a time for destruction. But, before destruction is possible, God or the gods must *exist*' (Irigaray, 1993, p. 62). This insistence appears consistent with Feuerbach's theory of man's self-projection: the ultimate destruction of man's initial projection of himself in creation of his male God means destruction of the gods he has created. Yet Irigaray claims that a woman still needs to create a god in her own gender: 'God or the gods must exist' (Irigaray, 1993, p. 62). So we need to explore what Irigaray and/or her female readers mean by 'exist'. Does the existence of God or the gods mean: (i) instantiation of god as a being who exists in the empirical world, (ii) idealization of a god as existing in a regulative sense, or, (iii) imagination of God as a wish-fulfilment? We must recognize that within Irigaray's ambiguous terms, God's existence could be real, ideal or illusory.

The decisive problem with Irigaray's route to destruction of the gods via becoming divine is that her conception of divinity does not demonstrate how we can motivate or achieve the equality and reciprocity necessary for the mutual recognition of subjects in justice.<sup>31</sup> Crucially, this would have implications for establishing 'human society' (Irigaray, 1993, p. 62). If these qualities of equal and reciprocal, accompanying the crucial social virtue of justice, are incompatible with divinity then society might be better off not having 'help' from the divine! In fact, Irigaray's assertion that, as cited already, 'no human society has ever been established without the help of the divine' is *not obviously* true. Moreover, the terms of her assertion appear incompatible – in however different ways – with, on the one hand, autonomous subjects and, on the other, sovereign subjects.

To gain further insight into the question raised in the previous section, I spoke with a political theorist about her understanding of autonomy and sovereignty, especially as discussed in liberal political accounts of a state's autonomy and/or sovereignty.<sup>32</sup> An asymmetry was suggested to me. That is, one can be autonomous without being sovereign; but not sovereign without being autonomous. Essentially, autonomy in liberal political debates is understood to mean a positive inward freedom; hence, not controlled inwardly by heteronomous forces. In contrast, sovereignty means not being controlled by outer forces or heteronomous structures – for which the subject must also be autonomous. The question is, what does Irigaray have in mind?

As mentioned from the outset, Canters's novel reading of Irigaray finds possibilities in the fluidity of poetic imagery, especially the poetic imagery of Irigaray's *Elemental Passions*. However, I remain unconvinced philosophically that this fluidity can be straightforwardly a good thing; perhaps this is where the contemporary analytical and Continental philosopher disagree. In fact Canters herself was also often frustrated by the way in which Irigaray's poetic style returned her to herself. No interpretation of the meaning of Irigaray's terms could, or can, be agreed with any degree of certainty.

<sup>30</sup> See Le Doeuff's account of failure of discussion (Le Doeuff, 1991, p. 278).

<sup>31</sup> In part, Irigaray's failure might be explained by her dismissal of Beauvoir's project of social justice, including equality and mutual recognition. Certainly Irigaray does not grant Beauvoir a philosophical position of her own. Yet Beauvoir's philosophy is not only distinct from Sartre's position but offers a significant feminist critique of the disorder of Sartre's narcissistic-paranoid subject. For a reading of Beauvoir which would inform this explanation of Irigaray's failure to understand Beauvoir, see Bauer (2002, pp. 13–14 and especially, 223–237).

<sup>32</sup> I thank Henriette Dahan-Kalev, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, Israel, for this discussion and other constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

I would stress the real danger of misunderstandings and bad advice due to the failure of Irigaray to define her significant terms – dare I say, in less ‘fluid’ ways! In this case, ‘free, autonomous, sovereign’ are not obviously compatible with ‘help of the divine’. Thus, we are left in a quandary.

When reading Irigaray’s assertions from ‘Divine Women’, are we to think that the divine helps to initiate a process – perhaps – whereby the subject recognizes, first, her freedom in becoming; next, her autonomy in contradistinction to divinity; and finally, her sovereignty in achieving the destruction of the gods? If so, we might be closer to Feuerbach; but it still remains unclear what sort of help this divine gives to (a) human society, whether understood as the communal relations of women or the social grouping of women and men. Does the divine pass on sovereign power to the human subject? If so, to which one, or for which gender? To each at different times?<sup>33</sup>

To restate my criticism: at best we have a recipe for interminable conflict between male and female divines; at worst the continuing oppression of the feminized, now divinized body of the imprisoned woman. Readers like Canters may welcome plenty of flexibility for interpreting Irigaray’s words, even for my line of questioning. Notwithstanding Irigaray’s own thoughts on the matter which I simply do not know with any certainty – nor does any one else – it is apparent that for certain female interpreters ambiguity seems all to the good. For these latter women, ambiguity leads to an open-ended understanding of ourselves as female, to finding ourselves through sight, touch, smell, taste, sound, to embodiment, to female morphology – and, ultimately, to that which ‘the female divine’ refers. In Irigaray’s defence, it is claimed that the apparent openness is attractive, even though this attraction is also seductive. The danger remains in this irony: an openness conceals a closure, whereby female subjectivity becomes fixed in relation to divinity.

Admittedly, there is no question that intrigue also surrounds the readings of Irigaray’s ambiguous texts. For example, this is more than demonstrated by Canters’s reading of a woman’s philosophical search of her own identity, or possibly divinity. *Forever Fluid* is a graphic witness to how ambiguity exercises the reader seeking recognition in relation to a poetic text written by Irigaray. In Canters’s case this is the struggle for mutual recognition of ‘I’ – woman and ‘you’ – man in *Elemental Passions*. *Forever Fluid* becomes the means by which Canters, with the additional material and structure from Jantzen in completing this posthumous publication for Canters, can still teach us about the life–death struggle for mutual recognition.<sup>34</sup> Such teaching makes clear the gender of our own subject-identity. The ambivalent nature of this struggle in real life relationships adds to both the ambiguity and the real risk taken by gendered subjects in seeking to realize a significant sort of intersubjectivity.

For me, the crucial obstacle to mutual recognition is the risk that one’s autonomy will either fail to be achieved and/or preserved. Butler demonstrates in a powerful and disturbing account of grief that this need not be the case. Unwittingly, Canters also teaches a similar lesson, which is taking me time to understand; that is, we are beside ourselves in loss, not only in bereavement, but in any loss of relationship. Perhaps

<sup>33</sup> Irigaray seems to assume a highly (culturally) specific sort of agency in ‘Divine Women’. This raises a serious question concerning the subject who is supposed to gain sovereign power: how many (religious) women are in a situation, or engage in ritual practices, which would enable their sovereignty? For an excellent, incisive challenge to the western feminist philosopher’s assumptions concerning the unequivocal value of a liberal political conception of agency and subjectivity, especially of autonomy, sovereignty and self-realization, see Mahmood (2005).

<sup>34</sup> Butler (1987) and Langer (2003, pp. 90–91, 93f).

a woman's search for identity comes full circle in 'being beside herself'. In Butler's moving and deeply insightful words: 'We are undone by each other.'<sup>35</sup> If we are not, we are missing something. If this seems so clearly the case with grief, it is only because it was already the case with desire' (Butler, 2004, chapter 1, p. 19). Here is Butler's account:

...one mourns when one accepts the fact that the loss one undergoes will be one which changes you, changes you possibly forever, and that mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation, the full result of which you cannot know in advance. So there is losing, and there is the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. ... one is hit by waves, ... one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and one finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted, but does not know why. Something is larger than one's own deliberate plan or project, larger than one's own knowing. Something takes hold, but is this something coming from the self, from the outside, or from some region where the difference between the two is indeterminable? What is it that claims us at such moments, such that we are not the masters of ourselves? (Butler, 2004, p. 18).

... grief displays the way in which we are in the thrall of our relations with others that we cannot always recount or explain, that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.

... if I can still speak to a 'we', or include myself within its terms, I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways beside ourselves, whether it is in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage (pp. 19, 20).

We can also learn from the above that autonomy cannot mean strictly speaking separation or independence from others.<sup>36</sup> Instead women only seem to recognize their autonomy insofar as they recognize that each of us is beside herself in relationship to other women, past and present. Or, in Michèle Le Doeuff's words, that 'we need to inherit from [other women] (as they really were)' and so our autonomy must be understood to be a collective historical experience (Le Doeuff, 1991, pp. 128, 243). As will be seen in Beauvoir's words, our political liberation can only be 'collective'.

Returning to Beauvoir's earlier insights into the situation of women, consider a further word of caution about, in particular, the sovereign liberty which appears to be one ideal (interpretation) of Irigaray's claim to become sovereign. This ideal, as Beauvoir's critique of a certain (narcissistic) form of female mysticism suggests, is illusory; that is, it conceals the real situation in which apparent sovereignty confuses the woman's love of the divine with self-love, confuses human subjectivity and human society with a divinized female body propping up a society of male subjects. Admittedly, 'ambiguity' as employed by Beauvoir herself may allow for both the sovereignty and the collectivity of subjects; but then sovereign crucially requires a real, concrete relationship, however ambivalent, to the collective.

The contemporary critical issue of how to conceive women and the divine is not one which can be left to poetic imagery alone or allusive terms on their own. I remain anxious about self-destructive uses of ambiguity; and, in a similar manner, fluidity may

<sup>35</sup> Here I cannot help but think of Rose (1995, especially pp. 98–99, 131–135) – to which I have referred in another context in memory of Hanneke (Anderson (2002a,b)). Also, see Rose (1997).

<sup>36</sup> Again, we could consider this point in the light of Mahmood (2005).

also unwittingly create dangers. As a result I would insist in terms reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur that ‘the symbol’ or, in this case, poetic image gives rise to critical thought.<sup>37</sup> Our thinking needs to be even more careful, critical and precise than found in some Irigaray scholarship on the question of ‘becoming divine’. To give further background to this issue of interpretation let us turn from Irigaray’s text, at least for the moment, to read Beauvoir and Le Doeuff who would unequivocally disagree with those followers of Irigaray advocating a feminism of sexual difference.<sup>38</sup>

### A woman in solitude and in company

Le Doeuff advocates a woman’s productive dialogue with philosophical ideas, whether in solitude or in company with other thinkers (Le Doeuff, 2004; 2005). Such dialogue would allow for the potential disagreement and insight to be found in political readings of the twentieth-century French context (of feminisms) and in dialogical readings of philosophical texts (even in solitude). Now, Le Doeuff must be clearly distinguished from those contemporary ‘French feminists of difference’ who are known to advocate sexual difference, female subjectivity and becoming divine (women).<sup>39</sup> But note that Le Doeuff also has a distinctiveness which resists being lumped together with a feminism of strictly formal equality.<sup>40</sup> That is, it is *not* possible to place Le Doeuff’s feminist politics under a ‘feminism of equality’ insofar as this describes a feminist concern with an abstract notion of being equal. Instead Le Doeuff remains uniquely, passionately and actively engaged with the concrete lives of women and their political struggles in the past and the present. So, Le Doeuff’s originality forces rejection both of these well-known feminist labels for her work. By developing her political sensitivity to the social and material locations of each woman in the history of philosophy, Le Doeuff does not have to choose between a feminist mandate for equality and a feminism of difference. She simply rejects *both* the assumption of a fundamental difference between a man and a woman on the grounds of (the innate seeds for) knowledge *and* the belief that an abstract notion of equality alone has excluded women from politics or public life.

We can recognize the strongly dissenting voices of Beauvoir and of Le Doeuff. Neither would agree with the role given to divinity in Irigaray’s account of female subjectivity; and their voices are heard to offer their own ideas. For this reason, reading these two French women philosophers alongside Irigaray generates a lively and critical debate. I have demonstrated in part already how Beauvoir enables me to recognize the danger of being seduced like the female mystic by one’s own identity. This mystic’s lacerated desire *to be all there is* would appear to end tragically in either

<sup>37</sup> Writing an earlier draft of this lecture at the time of Ricoeur’s death, I could not resist a quotation from Ricoeur (1967, p. 348, also see p. 350). cf. Anderson (1993, pp. 1–3 and 72–73).

<sup>38</sup> Although Irigaray and Le Doeuff are each informed by Beauvoir, they differ radically in their accounts of women in philosophy and ‘feminism’ itself. Irigaray advocates a feminism of difference, insisting upon an ethics of sexual difference, while Le Doeuff strongly objects to this feminist emphasis on the sexual difference between women and men. For Le Doeuff’s own early subversive account of a feminism of difference, as well as her doubts about a feminism of equality, see Le Doeuff (1991, pp. 222–230).

<sup>39</sup> Le Doeuff (1991, pp. 224–230). For additional discussion concerning the controversy surrounding the term ‘French feminism’ and the French contribution to feminist debates on religion in particular. For further critical discussion concerning the idea of ‘becoming divine’, see Pozon (2003).

<sup>40</sup> See Anderson, *Michèle Le Doeuff*.

extreme narcissism or strict nihilism. As for Le Doeuff, although not speaking about divinity, she equally inspires caution on the question of woman's subjectivity, especially objecting to sexual difference as the defining quality of relations between men and women. This contribution of Le Doeuff will become more clear in my penultimate section on 'The Possibilities of Intersubjectivity'.

Basically, in contrast to Irigaray, each of Beauvoir and Le Doeuff speak for equality and reciprocity, ushering in social justice not (the) sovereignty (of sexual difference). Granted this is not a simple contrast, yet Beauvoir and Le Doeuff each recognize serious ethical dangers for the nascent female subject in society due to a lack of equality. Neither advocates becoming divine (sovereign) nor creating the divine out of a woman's gender. Instead they both speak insightfully as follows: on the one hand, we hear Beauvoir's voice speak to the problems of a debilitating narcissism, and on the other hand, Le Doeuff's voice is heard warning of an absolute altruism whereby a woman becomes 'a nothingness in the eyes of the other' (Le Doeuff, 1991, p. 280).

Without a concrete goal of balancing equality and reciprocity. (Le Doeuff, 1991, pp. 278–279) between (male and female) subjects to ensure the justice of intersubjectivity, we can easily face the problems associated with a self-annihilating mysticism within patriarchal societies. Admittedly justice is not the only goal of feminist philosophy: even today some feminist ethicists who would argue that an ethics which sustains loving relationships (that which is often discussed as 'an ethics of care') remains in a serious tension with liberal theories of distributive justice whose goal is equality.<sup>41</sup> Similarly I do not want simply to dismiss Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference as one thing or the other, that is, for loving relationships or for distributive justice. Yet it does seem that Beauvoir anticipates the decisive dangers of Irigaray's assumptions concerning the divinized female body. The latter is not naïve, nor is Irigaray to be dismissed out of hand. In fact, there is a very interesting parallel between Irigaray and Beauvoir. Read in tandem their distinctive attempts to transcend the female body as it has been conceived by the human (male) subject which dominates patriarchal societies can generate new, critical knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

On the one hand, there is little doubt that Beauvoir's own account of religion, mysticism and the female lover remains limited by her preoccupation with a masculinist form of female mysticism, especially insofar as the subtext here is Sartre's (normalized) account of a paranoid subject. I admit that uncovering a debilitating narcissism is highly significant as a philosophical form of suspicion or critique; but this is neither a fair nor a complete picture of female mysticism (or desire). In this context, it is Irigaray who might offer a significant alternative for women and the divine. Beauvoir only sees the choice between an annihilation of the body of the female mystic in her love of self/god or a transcendence of the body by the female mystic – her notable example is Teresa of Avila – who achieves a situated autonomy and reciprocity in her practical projects. The latter sort of mystic represents, in Beauvoir's words, 'women

<sup>41</sup> Gheaus captures this tension well in (2005, pp. 85–138). After carefully 'circumscribing' the concept of care in the literature of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, Gheaus turns to focus upon Rawlsian theories of distributive justice and its tension with 'care'. Her argument that care and justice cannot go together all the way could be usefully applied to a debate between Irigaray's concern with love and personal relationships of sexual difference, and Le Doeuff's critique of any form of intersubjectivity which eclipses the dual norms of equality and reciprocity.

<sup>42</sup> I owe a special debt to Hollywood for her reading of the body of the female mystic in each of Beauvoir and Irigaray, and strongly recommend Hollywood (2002). For other philosophical readings of Beauvoir's feminism, see Bauer (2001) and Doeuff (2004, especially pp. 22–36).

of action. . . who know very well what goals they have in mind and who lucidly devise means for attaining them: their visions simply provide objective images for their certitudes, encouraging these women to persist in the paths they have mapped out in detail for themselves'.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, Irigaray has (elsewhere) developed her own account of the sensible transcendental, that is, the sensible as the condition for redeeming and transforming a woman's body. Transcendence in immanence is her ideal – roughly, it is an embodied place where subjectivity is revalued.<sup>44</sup> In particular, Irigaray tries to give new value to the Christian narrative of salvation, that is, give sexually specific value to the female body in realizing the significance of the (Christian God's) Incarnation. God becomes incarnate in and through a woman's body and this could imply that when God becomes flesh (a) woman's complete desire can be recognized; her joy is complete and her body becomes divinized. However, this ideal remains problematic: neither concretely fixed nor completely thinkable; its full meaning is constantly deferred, never achieved.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the dangers of this ideal may imply the impossibility of ever locating this concept of the incarnation of a divine being who suffers, and yet (ironically?) brings joy, in and through a woman's body. Once, or if, this concept is fixed, without a perpetual deferral of its meaning and use, we will find ourselves back in a position similar to that criticized by Beauvoir as the imprisonment of the female:

There have been ... and ... are many women trying to achieve individual salvation by solitary effort. They are attempting to justify their existence in the midst of their immanence – that is, to realize transcendence in immanence. It is this ultimate effort – sometimes ridiculous often pathetic – of imprisoned woman to transform her prison into a heaven of glory, *her servitude into sovereign liberty*, that we ... observe in the narcissist, in the woman in love, in the mystic (Beauvoir, 1989, pp. 627, 628, emphasis added).

Instead, Beauvoir insists that 'there is no other way out for woman than to work for her *liberation* ... which *must be collective*' (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 628, emphasis added).

In other words, Irigaray's predecessor Beauvoir limits the extent of our liberation as solitary women.<sup>46</sup> The becoming of female subjectivity is limited by what Beauvoir sees as the 'ridiculous' or 'pathetic' effort at an individual transformation. Her account of female mysticism also uncovers the tension between two conceptions of recognizing the self and the other; this tension is *between* recognizing oneself as the Other in

<sup>43</sup> Beauvoir (1989, p. 678); cf. Hollywood (2002 pp. 130–135). Beauvoir's reading should be compared to Irigaray's later reading of Teresa of Avila, representing female mysticism as a transcendence that operates through immanence, in Irigaray (1985).

<sup>44</sup> For a highly insightful postcolonial critique of Irigaray's 'sensible transcendental', see Keller (2003). Keller points out that in the course of her own writings Irigaray presents various other examples of realizing the sensible transcendental: (1) Platonic divinity is realized in beauty as the possible personal attainment of experiencing divinity within one's own corporeality; the sublime, then, is the ideal of attaining one's personal potential; (2) divine women achieve transcendence in immanence with exchanges between women and men, as well as with other women; (3) the sensible transcendental is realized in a practice and ideal of breathing and breath (ibid., p. 72).

<sup>45</sup> For rich background on the Incarnation in the history of Christianity, and specifically on the contentious implications of any recognition (whether by Beauvoir or Irigaray) of 'the salvific power of the body and of femininity insofar as it is identified with human beings bodily nature', see Hollywood, (2002, pp. 198–203).

<sup>46</sup> For a transgressive liberation which undoes gender and (masculine) sovereignty in an original reading of the solitary figure of Antigone, see Butler (2000, pp. 8–11 and 23).

relation to man-God who is the Subject *and* collapsing the rightful boundaries that distinguish self and other. These equally unattractive alternatives for the female subject and her desire in these relations to the male subject and his desire appear to be (i) domination with extreme, or so-called ‘secondary’, narcissism or (ii) annihilation with absolute altruism. The hope is that a third possibility emerges with the ethically significant challenge of mutual recognition between subjects in *love and in justice*.<sup>47</sup>

### The possibilities of intersubjectivity

Let us not remain exclusively with Irigaray or Beauvoir who reflect upon the figure of a female mystic and her male God. Instead consider Le Doeuff’s salutary words concerning the possibility of *dialogue* between subjects – or intersubjectivity – characterized by reciprocity and equality. Arguably, these latter qualities constitute the necessary conditions for the possibility of mutual recognition of oneself and another in justice.<sup>48</sup> And yet there is a critical question as to whether or not our personal (intimate) relationships break with the virtue of justice, and its norms of equality and reciprocity, in order to give and sustain love. In contradistinction to justice, love is arguably constituted by care which responds to the need for intimate relationships and on the basis of this love forgives wrongs; and potentially forgives a serious injustice. But forgiveness is a topic for another essay.<sup>49</sup>

It is significant enough to consider Le Doeuff’s argument that unequal subjects will not be able to recognize one another, since failing to seek the ideal of intersubjectivity in dialogue. I suggest that this failure of mutual recognition would be magnified under similar conditions when seeking the ideal of intersubjectivity – of goodness and justice – between a human and a divine subject. The relevant feminist ethical question in this context is whether Irigaray’s female divine implies the loss of one subject in another, in this instance, of woman in the divine. To move toward an answer let us look closely at a passage where Le Doeuff warns her readers against a certain ‘absolute altruism’.<sup>50</sup>

I turn to the point in *Hipparchia’s Choice* at which Le Doeuff explains how a common desire for honesty involves responsibility for both subjects in dialogue. Notice

<sup>47</sup> This Hegelian alternative is that of mutual recognition, generating a problem with which after Kant and Hegel philosophers struggle. Note that Judith Butler demonstrates how Hegel reads Antigone as a figure without (sexual) desire and so lacking any possibility of recognition, see Butler (2000, p. 11 and 13).

<sup>48</sup> This conception of justice as recognition should be mentioned as different from the liberal theory of distributive justice, the latter being concerned with redistributing goods in order to overcome social and material inequalities, Gheaus (2005, submitted pp. 185–211; notice her footnotes 3, 4, 12 and 16 on different conceptions of justice).

<sup>49</sup> It is interesting to speculate about Le Doeuff’s understanding of forgiveness. Can it be strictly a religious concept, if it is associated with sustaining love and intimate relationships generally? I note that Le Doeuff’s rejection of an ‘absolute altruism’ for an idea of ‘equalitarian reciprocity’ would appear to be in part criticism of the moral philosophy of Vladimir Jankélévitch (see the next footnote for references to this) who published significant writings on forgiveness. For example of his work in English translation, see Jankélévitch (2005).

<sup>50</sup> Note that Le Doeuff’s criticism of what she calls ‘an absolute altruism’ has as its object the work of her own supervisor at the Sorbonne, in particular, Jankélévitch, (1981), especially pp. 161–165; and see Le Doeuff (1991, pp. 278–282) and especially the footnote about her supervisor and friend, ‘Janké’, p. 352n85.

how equality and reciprocity are essential norms for ensuring the justice of one's morality:

When two people who are both driven by a common desire to have an honest discussion meet, they each see this as an opportunity to strip themselves of at least some of the obscure and irrational elements buried within us all; reaching an agreement with somebody always means overcoming idiosyncrasies and fixedness which, far from being personal, have usually been shaped by the diktat of some force. Only another person can mediate these fantasies, in other words establish, through discussion, a minimal distance between oneself and these automatisms. Whenever a man has power over a woman (unilateral power, by definition), it is possible that he will be manipulated by many different things...

... a sex which oppresses another is not free either. When there is absolute command on the one hand and servile obedience.. on the other, the one who commands may of course have the illusion of exercising 'a lawless will'. But since there is then a lack of the discussion with other people which introduces thoughtfulness, that will is very likely to be subject to orders from who knows where.

At this point the moral perspective of intersubjectivity ... is easily twisted and in order for it to be defined as a good thing, something must always be added to it, notably the idea of equality and reciprocity, in other words a reference, however elementary, to the very different perspective of justice. A simplistic apology for dialogue is mystifying to the extent that dialogue often proves eristic, and the same is true of the simply ethics of relations with others. We have seen that if one of the protagonists in a discussion acknowledges the other's point of view and the latter does not reciprocate, the result is the worst possible situation in which one person is ultimately the victim of her or his own morality. Of course we need to keep in reserve the idea that there may be situations in which one gives oneself up to another person's cruelty for moral reasons, but this is valid only when the sacrifice is made in favour of a third party and not of the dreadful tyrant...

What these two considerations have in common is that they require the moral person to take herself into account as well as others (Le Doeuff, 1991, pp. 278, 279).

The above account of intersubjectivity categorized by a reciprocal equality differs markedly from Irigaray's search for divinity. In fact, it would seem closer to certain readings of Kant's autonomous reasoning which unites rational agents equally in a kingdom of ends. But I would also insist that we should avoid the equally damaging alternatives of a woman's choice between extreme narcissism and absolute altruism; the ethical norms of autonomy and altruism can easily be corrupted without the proper balance of self- and other-love.<sup>51</sup> Le Doeuff presents a powerful case *against* the one extreme: an absolute altruism whereby a woman becomes a nothingness in the eyes of the other. Le Doeuff is also equally adamant about the necessity of a certain autonomous thinking (so clearly not passive suffering): hence she defines a feminist as a woman who allows no one else to think in her place (Le Doeuff, 1991, pp. 28, 29).

<sup>51</sup> My current work explores the topic of love, focusing on a problematic notion of 'unselfing' in love; see Anderson (forthcoming).



Le Doeuff's own thinking and her regulative idea(l) of a feminist are intimately linked with practical-political action. Her caution concerning any lack of justice between subjects gives one possible response to Beauvoir's female mystic: that is, a woman insofar as the second sex may have imprisoned herself in relation to a man-God, but there is hope yet for her practical projects and the confidence which she has found in her concrete activities. But these projects are not done in isolation whether for the love of God or love of self. Instead the real task for liberating the spiritual and practical dimensions of a woman's life demands the right balance of equality and reciprocity in dialogue with other women and men. This idea of balancing equality and reciprocity is crucial for Le Doeuff; and with it we can aim to avoid either the totalization or the annihilation of a woman in the divine (other). Thus, woman is not forced to represent the ambivalence of life and death.

## Conclusion

To conclude I return to Canters's philosophical search and its legacy for a woman's identity as mediated by the texts of Continental philosophy. In the face of death and loss, how do we interpret Canters's search for a woman's identity? Does it culminate in divinity? With this question I am thinking, roughly, of Jantzen's appropriation of Irigaray's conception of becoming divine. How do we respond to feminist philosophical interpretations of Irigaray's 'Divine Women'? Do we accept the Continental feminist interpretations of such other texts as *Elemental Passions* which celebrate embodied life and, in particular, natality (instead of mortality)? Yet isn't there something self-contradictory about the feminist claim that a woman's identity is natal in becoming divine, not immortal in life after death, since the latter is a masculinist preoccupation? (Jantzen, 1998, pp. 137–140). On this claim I remained perplexed as a feminist who needs to think of Canters and now Jantzen after their deaths. How does a feminist understand life after death? We might wonder how natality – say, as rebirth in philosophy – can be celebrated to the exclusion of mortality.

I am not sure that feminist readings of Irigaray's texts have or should have any answers to this line of questions concerning the reality of death. Nevertheless, we can learn together from the life and posthumous publication of Canters about a woman's philosophical search for the right words to speak about her life, love, desire, but also death – topics highly relevant to the emerging field of feminist philosophy of religion. In the face of a young philosopher's death, these questions are personally painful and difficult. And yet, whether directly or indirectly, I suggest that Continental philosophy of religion helps us to address them. Personal, social and political questions about our religious and philosophical practices concerning life and death are highly significant for Continental philosophers of religion.

Even from this brief excursion into French feminism, it is fair to conclude with confidence that politics is inseparable from philosophy and from religion on the Continent. From what I can report about Canters's work on French feminist philosophy and about her passion for living life, we can begin to understand how the struggle for mutual recognition forces (Continental) philosophers of religion to be realist in their thinking and acting. With this in mind, the lesson from the Continent for philosophy of religion is that we must *not stop* yearning for mutual recognition. Indeed, we must even risk our autonomy in acknowledging the potential of our intersubjectivity. My last words recall Le Doeuff's succinct conclusion: 'these ... considerations ... require

the moral person to take herself into account as well as others'; and repeat Canters's selection of lines from *Elemental Passions*:

we can never be sure of bridging the gap between us. But that is our adventure.  
Without this peril there is *no us*. If you turn it into a guarantee, *you separate us*  
(Irigaray, 1982, p. 28; emphasis added).

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