



Journal of Arts & Humanities

Volume 13, Issue 03, 2024: 10-15

Article Received: 29-08-2024

Accepted: 11-11-2024

Available Online: 15-11-2024

ISSN: 2167-9045 (Print), 2167-9053 (Online)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.18533/journal.v13i3.2489>

Toward technical being: A perspective on Irigaray's ethic of belonging

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ABSTRACT

Luce Irigaray puts forth an ethic of belonging rooted in a return and reconsideration of the natural world and our place within it. Starting from a Heideggerian conception of world, Irigaray argues that we get caught up in our everydayness which includes our tool-being mode of engagement with the world as a world of objects ready to be used. Instead, Irigaray argues that it is in recognizing the necessity of mere presence at hand in the natural world where our true sense of relationality can be noted and felt. Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology asserts it's a real object as that which is withdrawn from relation, and in this regard all objects have a world which is their own, and to which we can apply Irigaray's conception of belonging. This paper explores some of the key highlights of this ethic of belonging as well as some of the problems that arise from treating it from a Heideggerian perspective. In revising it to fit within Harman's notion of realism, the ethic of belonging takes on a whole new meaning.

Keywords: Heidegger, Irigaray, Object-Oriented Ontology, World.

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1. Introduction

Heidegger once said that we are all beings in the world. This world, he claimed, is not strictly the world around oneself, but is a world of relations, a world of connectedness through which *Dasein* situates itself in a mode of being-in. In her personal philosophy, Luce Irigaray, contemplates an ethics that will enable a betterment of the future, an ethic which will provide for sustainable future. Often, Irigaray speaks of this as an ethic of belonging. It is through this ethic of belonging that Irigaray believes we can create a more efficient and sustainable environment not only for ourselves but for the earth itself.

I will here attempt to give an explication of this ethic of belonging and the way in which Irigaray sees this as a necessity if we are to learn to live not only with each other but with nature. I will then argue that her ethic of belonging, while certainly crucial, rests on a particular interpretation of Heideggerian philosophy, an interpretation rooted in a misreading. Although we all, that is all living

beings, create our own world, a world which belongs solely to us, which serves as the basis of her ethic of belonging, we each develop this world differ extents; one's world can be more or less a world than other beings' worlds, in Heidegger's thought. This results in a separation between human beings, on the one hand, and everything else on the other side of things. This is, in part at least, what might account for the lack of belongingness in contemporary culture with which Irigaray is concerned. There might be a solution to be found in the contemporary ontology of Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology. With Harman's flat ontological model, in which this separation does not exist, the 'worlds' of beings can be developed together and true belonging can be reached.

2. The Ethic of Belonging

First, we must examine this ethic of belonging. According to Irigaray, all beings are situated in a mode of being-in, specifically, being-in-the-world. Irigaray argues that each of us creates our own world, something taken from Heidegger's analysis of the world of *Dasein*. A bird resting on a branch, a bee collecting pollen, each has a world unto itself. This seems directly correspondent to the conception of world in Heidegger's terminology. Heidegger's notion of world, though specifically concerned with the world for *Dasein*, asserts a web of relations. That is, he suggests that the world is a system of entangled relations between entities, such that *Dasein's* world corresponds directly to the way in which *Dasein* relates to what is around him. Heidegger writes that we should use world "as that 'wherein' a factual *Dasein* as such can be said to 'live'. "World" has here a pre-ontological *existentiell* signification" (Heidegger 1996, p. 61). As such, we are here talking about one's environment and one's relation to that environment through *zuhandenheit*, or ready-to-hand.²

When Irigaray mentions and solidifies the creation of one's own world as the source of for ethic of belonging, it is relying on using this Heideggerian conception of world; Irigaray is indicating, that it is through one's relations to that which is ready-to-hand, entities in one's immediate environment, that one creates their own sense of world. It is thus then, being-in one's own world which constitutes the framework for her ethic of belonging. The question still must be posed how one would begin to formulate a sense of belonging if they are sheltered within the confines of their own world?

Let us therefore turn to delimitation of Irigaray's conception of belonging as such, so that we can then identify what this ethic requires of us. In *Through Vegetal Being*, a partly autobiographical work, Irigaray identifies her own past with the character Antigone from the great works of Sophocles. Throughout Irigaray's childhood there was an appreciation for nature, for existence, for life of all kinds. This charming childhood life never lasts however, and Irigaray found herself trapped by a series of hardships, the least of which was being turned against by friends and her fellow psychoanalysts. But it was through these hardships that Irigaray, found something she had lost from her childhood: her sincere connection with the vegetal world.

Antigone, Irigaray thought, "testifies that life is an absolute, the unique absolute that we have to preserve and to incarnate. No other absolute can supplant the absolute that life is without submitting us to mere survival" (Irigaray 2016, p. 19). Thus, life either *is* or *is not*. To Irigaray, she had lost her life; not because she was no longer alive, but because she was no longer living. That is to say, she was no longer encapsulated with and by life. But arising out of these hardships Irigaray found and was reawakened to the vegetal world. This reawakening brought with it not simply new life, but a different kind of life altogether.

Irigaray had rediscovered a way to cultivate, what she calls, "living energy." Here Irigaray, suggests something straight out of Rousseau: that through societal associations, that is through the various roles that we each fill in society, we lose our genuine relationship to the other and assume only a material relationship.³ For Irigaray, this causes a breakdown of our sense of belonging. She writes "the articulation between our natural identity and our cultural productions is lacking, which would

² Heidegger makes it clear that we speak of world as in the world of *Dasein*, we're not talking about entities that are present-at-hand – the totality of things. Instead, we mean the specific way in which *Dasein* relates to those entities, which is present-at-hand.

³ We see this in Rousseau's *Discourse on Inequality* (1997, p. 186-7) when he writes: "Savage man and civilized man differ so much in their inmost heart and inclinations that what constitutes the supreme happiness of the one would reduce the other to despair. The first breathes nothing but repose and freedom, he wants only to live and remain idle, and even the Stoic's ataraxia does not approximate his profound indifference to everything else. By contrast, the Citizen, forever active, sweats, scurries, constantly agonizes in search of ever more strenuous occupations: he works to the death, even rushes toward it in order to be in a position to live, or renounces life in order to acquire immortality."

render the fulfillment of our humanity impossible” (Irigaray 2016, p. 75). Thus, belonging is, according to Irigaray, the original relationship we have to the world; the other, that which is present at hand, nature, and the like. In many ways, this is akin to what Heidegger calls authenticity, though here it is applied to a being-with nature. It is the way to cultivate this living energy, which in turn is, strictly speaking, are drives, our passions, it is that which allows us to grow, to develop, to live.

If this is what it means have a sense of belonging, what then does Irigaray mean by an ethic of belonging? An ethic always has a goal, something at which you are aiming to achieve. For Kant, it was the fulfillment of our duty. For Aristotle, it was *eudaimonia*. Any ethic must have some goal which is to be achieved through its perusal. For the ethic of belonging, what makes it an ethic, is the pursuit, the goal, of becoming human. Yet, becoming human, in this sense, is more along the lines of regaining humanity which has been lost due to societal, cultural, economic aspects of our lives having taken over the natural. There is a “perpetual search for the cause and the origin outside of living beings while forgetting their own” which has taken over our sense of belonging, and so thus, has stripped away at our humanity (Irigaray 2016, p. 91).

3. Irigaray’s Ethic in Heideggerian Worlds

If we are to save ourselves and even more so, the world we live in, we must regain our humanity through reestablishing an ethic of belonging as has been outlined above. The question remains however, is this viable? While Irigaray provides a very compelling account for the necessity of the ethics of belonging, and even though one might agree that we have lost our humanity and must recover it, there are several problems with Irigaray’s suggestion and for which I reject this ethic. First, anyone familiar with the continental tradition will recognize the Heideggerian influence on Irigaray’s thought – of which she makes no attempt to hide. She draws from Heidegger’s definition of world, his conception of the decadence of language, and yet fails to incorporate the development of world into her account. For Heidegger, different beings, depending on their relationship with their own being, have different degrees to which they can develop their world. That is, each being has a different way and different extent to which they can relate to the world around them.

Irigaray does not entirely weed out discussion about this aspect of Heideggerian philosophy. Instead, Irigaray does, in fact, recognize that this is the case for she writes that “in order to differentiate itself from other living beings, humanity had them to consider itself to be one and capable of dominating the living world instead of being a living being among others, more people sharing with all things to its additional awareness and freedom” (Irigaray 2016, p. 91). These additional awarenesses and freedoms come out through having a greater sense of, or in fact more, ‘world’ than the other living beings possess or can develop. Unfortunately, however, this is not enough. For this does not account for the differences between worlds of humans. Indeed, different people will develop different degrees of world as well. For example, and there are plenty of them, a child has less world than an adult given that they have less experiences to draw on and therefore less relationality to the world.

Irigaray does not seem to be able to account for this. In short, not only other different abilities to devote world in different degrees to which world can be developed by different living beings, but it also follows that because of this some may not be able to develop world to the extent Irigaray is seeking, regardless of belonging. It could be, in fact, that due to the necessary preconditions to be able to develop world, the world can no longer be developed in the same way. World changes based on the current *zeitgeist*, and as such, can only be developed in accordance with the current state of being. It is thus worth asking whether or not ‘world’ could even be developed in the way Irigaray is pushing for.

4. The Language of Worlds

It is here then that a discussion of language enters into the theory. One of the preconditions to develop world and to come to terms with one’s own being-in, is to utilize language appropriate to such cause. Language which, indicates to one the conditions of his existence. Heidegger argues, in many places, that we have lost this sense of language. Language is no longer able to point at the being underneath *Dasein*, the being that *Dasein* is and the conditions that underlie. It has changed along with the *zeitgeist*. “Our language is more and more coded, and the technical means we employ to express ourselves in communicate from a distance media gradually weaker and dead,” Irigaray notes, and so

the task is “to rethink our language and order that it expresses life, ours and that of other beings” (Irigaray 2016, p. 90). Although Irigaray accepts and decides to take on Heidegger’s problem of language, she fails to realize that there is no turning back.

There is another concept at play here: spirit. Spirit is, for Heidegger, “the empowering of the powers of beings as such and as a whole. Where spirit rules, beings as such and in each case come more into being” (Heidegger 1959, p. 52). Thus, spirit is more primary to access being than even language – it is through spirit that we come into being. Spirit is a passion, a drive, indeed, an empowering. Spirit may be the more direct mode of coming into being, but it requires a specificity of language which has since been degraded and has become mundane, detached from the world, and so, removed from being.

We can see the relationship that is at work here in Heidegger’s *Introduction to Metaphysics*. He claims the verb ‘to be’ is completely meaningless in modern culture, it is “evanescent” (Heidegger 1959, p. 78). Thus, our language no longer adequately brings forth spirit in us, since to be able “no longer means to spend and to lavish, thanks to lofty overabundance and the mastery of energies” (Heidegger 1959, p. 48). We no longer seek mastery, but adequacy; we longer seek out, or possess, spirit, but rather only muster through our lives in an almost sluggish way.

The problem then, with Irigaray’s suggestion to ‘rethink’ our language is that such thinking requires right language. If we have lost that language, we have also lost the ability to think in such a way so as to ‘rethink’ our language. Furthermore, even if we could rethink our language, we have already lost spirit, which cannot be recovered since it has been too far removed. We are thus stuck without a way to revive an understanding of our being that is not in some way degraded, for Heidegger. If we are to prove Heidegger wrong on this, it will not be through ‘rethinking’ our language.

This leads directly to the final problem with Irigaray’s ethic of belonging: there is nothing that grounds such an ethic. Irigaray insists upon this ethic solely on the grounds of her own experience in the world. However, because it fails to account for the development of world, that it’s a language, the loss of spirit, it also loses a sense of grounding. It is rooted in subjectivity on becoming of an ethic. What is lacking here is an exemplification of why the ethic of belonging is necessary for the goal of becoming human. In other words, Irigaray is making a suggestion about human nature that is incomplete without a philosophical anthropological account of that nature. This would be required first, if there is to be any discussion regarding the ethic through which doing so is possible.

What is promising, however, is Irigaray’s conception of belonging. Very few would argue with the sentiment that we have become too far detached from our ‘state of nature.’ In society today we see a continuous push to return to nature with natural medicines, more time spent outside rather than on technology, and the like. It seems then, that a return to nature, a very reimagining and reawakening of a sense of belonging is necessary. But it cannot be an ethic, at least not in and of itself. Belonging is at best one part of a very complex system which would be required of a new ethic. Thus, while I agree with the concept, Irigaray’s treatment of the concept as an ethic, I believe, actually works against the pursuit of an acceptable ethic. I will now outline the aspect which I believe diminish the concept of belonging and examine ways through which I think we can adapt the concept so as to be able to devise an ethic.

Belonging in and of itself, refers to this ‘vegetal being’ that Irigaray finds at the heart of all us, as part of our being. The main problem with this is that it is not encompassing enough; it too narrowly defines the ethic required if the goal is as broad as “becoming human.” What I wish to focus on here, regarding the conception of belonging, stems out of the arguments above which made clear that our being changes along with the *zeitgeist* – it is not a constant and this is where Irigaray’s use of Heidegger’s conception of world is not quite accurate. In developing world, the rate at which it develops, as well as the extent to which it develops, and everything in-between, is all subjected to the *zeitgeist*. This is, in part, the role of time in Heidegger’s analytic of *Dasein*. As such, contrary to Irigaray’s suggestion, there is no ‘return’ to nature necessary. Let us consider why this is the case and determine how to better utilize Irigaray’s conception of belonging.

Although Irigaray finds this vegetal being as being a primary mode of being-in, it is certainly not the only mode through which one can establish a sense of belonging. Belonging as she has defined it, simply expresses a sort of respect for the other, a peaceful coexistence with other living beings. She writes, “we must also cultivate and mold what we receive with the achievement of our human destiny

in coexistence with other living beings in mind” (Irigaray 2016, p. 94). In other words, we must respect nature rather than trying to overpower nature. However, this cannot be the source of belonging if belonging is indeed the way in which we develop world, or ought to develop world at the very least. Considering that our being-in changes along with the *zeitgeist* so too, then, must our ability to develop world. In fact, not only must our ability to do so change, but also the meaning of that world must change.

Thus, while a coexistence with other living beings is crucial for our becoming human, and more so, vital for the future, it is not the source of, nor is it to be found in, a sense of belonging. Belonging, strictly as a means to develop world requires nothing from the Vegetal. If indeed we have become so far removed from the vegetal that we are a bunch of automatons, then the world which we develop will be that of an automaton, regardless of whether or not this is the world we should be creating as human beings (hence Irigaray’s assertion of belonging as an ethic). All we are to do, indeed, all we can do, is develop that world; that is, the world of our being-in. Simply put, we can only develop ‘world’ out of the world in which we are being-in.

Veathorgetal being then, is not a mode of being-in, but is a stage, a part of the continual development or progression of *Dasein*’s being-in-the-world. Part of what it means to be *Dasein* is to be within time, out of which comes the progression of the world of *Dasein*. We can therefore claim that it is *through vegetal being* that we move, or progress, *toward technical being*. From one stage, vegetal, we develop and change into the future stages, currently the technical. This means that we must find our sense of belonging, not through a return to vegetal being – for doing so would in fact be a rejection of our being-in – but through establishing, creating our world, that is, regaining a sense of belonging, which has been lost due to the alienation that technical being leads to, through our current mode of being-in.

5. Concluding Thoughts: Belonging and the Being-in of Being Human

The question still remains however, about becoming human. Belonging must, then, not be a sentiment, a feeling of coexistence, but recognition, an understanding. If this is true, then what we seek through belonging is not a sense of connection with all living beings, but rather an understanding of the connection between all things. The difference here is subtle, but crucial. A sense of belonging is necessary for the development of world. But this world, and the sense of belonging can arise within any mode of being-in, through any state of world, vegetal, technical, and the like. This is not what Irigaray aimed at when suggesting her ethic of belonging. Instead, what she was positing transcendence beyond the world we create for ourselves through the sense of belonging. “It is through respect for the transcendence of living being that we can open up and build a world that does not lack transcendence of without being subjected to suprasensitive values, which do not favor the blooming of the living as such,” Irigaray writes (2016, p. 101).

It is then only through the understanding of this transcendent nature of living beings, an understanding of the connection between things, that we can then, in this world, develop our own world that accounts for this transcendence. Together, along with the sense of belonging we must rebuild through our being-in-the-world, we may be able to become human. But the focus cannot be on our being-in-the-world, this can only be secondary. Instead, we must find our place among things transcendently. It is this aspect of our being through which we can hope to gain this understanding which is needed if ever we are to develop a world that is not without transcendence.

But how are we to do this? How do we through understanding the transcendental world, recover a world without transcendence, a world of the here and now, of imminence. For this question we must turn to contemporary ontological models. Speculative realist tradition, most notably the object-oriented ontology of Graham Harman, has offered a new form of realism that while confronting objects head-on at face value, nevertheless leaves room for the underlying object of speculative thought.

According to Harman, real objects withdraw from their relations in the world, though they may, and do, possess sensual qualities. Every object can stand apart from the way it relates to the world – not unlike how we sometimes feel like our role, career, etc., is not indicative of who and what we are, but is merely a way that we are in the world. Of this Harman writes “The comet itself, the monkey itself, Coca-Cola itself, resonate in cellars of being where no relation reaches” (2004, p. 9). In this sense, all

objects have a world of their own *contra* Heidegger's assertion otherwise. Harman moves beyond the Heideggerian tool-being notion of world in favor of granting everything a world unto itself, a position I have also maintained, albeit in a different manner (Isrow 2022).

What does this mean for Irigaray's ethic of belonging? If we grant to objects their own world and not only that world which sees them engaged with human activity, be it thought or through use as a tool, then our sense of belonging must be inclusive of all that which has world. This is clear given that the basis of the framework from which Irigaray's ethic of belonging springs is one's own world. It begins with the world that belongs to the object itself, but is then built out to a grander relationship to the world (this being the world of relations in which all objects exist). Thus belonging as beginning with the world off the object itself, as abstracted away from all relations of the world into which it is thrown, and developing into the a sense of relationality that focuses on the present-at-handness of things in the world, is an ethic of belong that aims towards an object's relationality as such as being a primary mode of being-in and which can grant to the object a role in this ethic of belonging.

In short, what Harman's object-oriented ontology provides in the way of Irigaray's ethic of belonging, is an ability to grant non-human objects a world in which they too, are a part of this entirety of belonging. In other words, the ethic of belonging is not solely human alone, but is a fundamental part of the world, it is part of relationality as such, and through this conception of belonging, it is owned by all objects in the world. This also forces us to reconsider how we ought to think about reconnecting with nature for this ethic of belonging. It is no longer enough to reconnect with the natural world, but we must reconnect with our ownmost relationality.

Irigaray's text serves as a call to arms, a militancy, with the aim of opening a discussion of new approaches to develop world beyond the ability that Heidegger gives us to do so, to develop a world that does not exclude transcendence. While her conception of belonging is a step in this direction, it is not an ethic; it is not enough to have a sense of belonging, but instead one must understand where that belonging is rooted, in the connection between all things. Thus, it is not an ethic of belonging, but an ethic of a journey. Irigaray (2016, p. 101-2) states that the goal of elaborating a phenomenology of a global human being, stemmed from her own personal journey. Although she failed to extend this journey to an objective, it is nonetheless a journey which we all must take. The task for the future remains to address this journey and discover it for ourselves. We must re-examine the very meaning of being human. We must develop an ethic based on the journey it takes to uncover the basis of our being-in.

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