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1 subjectivity have remained more in harmony with nature—which she is, furthermore, presumed
2 to represent for the patriarchal tradition?

3 Anyway, it seems that Luce Irigaray—in particular her last two books, *Through Vegetal*
4 *Being* (coauthored with Michael Marder, 2016) and *To Be Born* (2017)—offers elements that
5 correspond to what is at stake in our epoch, both at an empirical and a theoretical level. Hence
6 this conversation about her approach to and treatment of issues crucial today for our life, our
7 world, and all living beings.

8

9 Stephen D. Seely: The philosophical theme of life is central to both *Through Vegetal Being* and
10 *To Be Born*. In *Through Vegetal Being*, however, you begin with what is, to date, your most
11 detailed reflection on your own personal point of entry to your philosophical questioning of life,
12 especially the circumstances surrounding your expulsion from academic society following the
13 publication of *Speculum* in 1974. While you, in part, relate this to Antigone’s expulsion from the
14 polis, you also suggest that in your experience, such expulsion, rather than leading to your death,
15 actually granted you the possibility of life. In the past few years, there has been a great
16 proliferation of work in philosophy on “life itself.” I wonder whether you might begin by
17 speaking to the ways in which your experience of exclusion from the academy opened you to an
18 original path of thinking about this theme? How has this experience helped prevent your thinking
19 of life from falling into the abstract or the overly scientific?

20

21 Luce Irigaray: Thinking of life was not, for me, the result of an academic work—especially one
22 which would be fashionable. As I tell in *Through Vegetal Being*, it happened instead after my

1 expulsion from the university but also my removal from all the things in which I had invested a
2 great part of my life: regarding my work but also the circle of my colleagues and even of my
3 friends, the psychoanalytical institution in which I had made my training and of which I was a
4 member, the meetings, gazettes, and little by little the publishing houses to which I was a
5 collaborator. Thus, I could only die or discover how to live in spite of all that.

6 It was in nature itself that I could recover life, surrounded by trees, flowers, grass, and
7 wild animals with which I shared the same space, the same air, sun, rain, temperature, etc. I
8 could say: with which I shared the same earthly existence and formed a community of the living.
9 Then I rediscovered what life as such was, and perhaps so returned to what early Greek culture
10 called *cosmos*, that is, to an organization of the world which does not result from the imposition
11 of a human *logos* on nature but results from the *logos* that nature is.

12 In a way, I was experiencing the reversal of the story of Antigone. And, fortunately, as
13 my contemporaries no longer appreciated its value, they sent me back to nature instead of
14 imprisoning me in a cell without air, sun, and a living environment, as it happened with
15 Antigone. I then understood that my culture no longer corresponded to a cultivation of life, and
16 that it was the very reason for which I had been rejected as a sort of extraneous element. Nature
17 welcomed me, comforted me, and taught me how to exist and think differently. It has not been,
18 and it is not yet, an easy undertaking. . . . But it disclosed for me the horizon of a new world.

19
20 SDS: Both books contain a strong critique of the subordination of natural rhythms of growth and
21 life to abstract forms of time and space, which you see as violence to both the individuation of
22 each person as well as to nature itself. For you, there is something about vegetal being and about
23 birth that returns us to our belonging to a different conception of being and time. Could you

1 elaborate on how learning to live in accordance with natural rhythms might enable us to dwell
2 differently with/in nature? And, moreover, how might such an overcoming of the imperialism of
3 Western concepts of space and time be helpful to global struggles to save the planet from
4 destruction?

5

6 LI: There is no doubt that reducing space and time to abstract realities is one of the main gestures
7 of the domination of man over nature, a gesture which, furthermore, makes us extraneous to our
8 natural environment. More and more we pretend to scorn natural rhythms, substituting the time
9 of our clocks, the tempo of our work or our travels, of economic growth or of sociopolitical or
10 sociocultural events for living in accordance with the rhythms of nature. And yet, acting so
11 would be beneficial not only to our physical development but also to creating a world
12 community. Indeed, we are beginning to understand, unfortunately for bad reasons, that we all
13 share the same universe and that if some do not respect it here, others will pay for our way of
14 behaving elsewhere.

15 Respecting the rhythms of nature also allows us to celebrate the same real, even if it
16 happens at different moments and in different modes throughout the world, a celebration which
17 bears witness to the fact that living in communion with nature has a psychic, emotional, and even
18 religious dimension that could cement a community in a non-coercive way. It can create a basic
19 universal link between all living beings.

20

21 SDS: Can you speak more about how you envisage the meeting between different traditions of
22 thinking and being here? In the *Der Spiegel* interview, Heidegger famously argued that a path

1 out of the collapse of Western metaphysics can only proceed by way of a “reappropriation” of
2 the Western metaphysical tradition itself, and not by appropriating non-Western thought. Many
3 recent critics, however, have suggested that we must now turn to non-Western, especially
4 indigenous, philosophies for guidance in responding to the challenges of our time. It seems to me
5 that, perhaps now more than ever, it is on the basis of new ontologies of life and nature, perhaps
6 even new cosmologies, that transcultural bridges must be built. What are your own views on the
7 role of sharing between cultures—particularly at a philosophical level—in building this “basic
8 universal link between all living beings” to which you have just alluded? Do the resonances
9 between your own thought and certain indigenous philosophies interest you?

10

11 LI: To really meet another tradition we must first understand in what tradition we have been
12 formed and within which we are, in a way, enclosed—as is the case for a woman or a man to
13 meet a man or a woman. For lack of such a step, how could we meet the other? We inevitably
14 project onto them the part of ourselves of which we are unaware. Thus, we must submit
15 ourselves to a negative, or to an epochè, which allows us to perceive the other as other. It is
16 particularly difficult to succeed in that at the level of culture. Of course, attempting to respect
17 another culture can lead us to wonder about our own. This can represent a first step towards
18 being able to recognize the otherness of the other. We must above all try to return to an original
19 perception of the real that could be shared universally. This stage is the one that allows us to dis-
20 appropriate the construction of our culture as a peculiar one in order to reappropriate a level of
21 perception of ourselves, of the world, and of the other(s), which corresponds to their own truth. It
22 is a really difficult process!

1 I personally learned a lot from my approach to some Eastern cultures, especially from
2 the practice of yoga and the way of thinking in relation to yoga, because they helped me to return
3 to my natural belonging and taught me how to cultivate it regardless of mental constructions—
4 for example, by breathing, understanding the impact of food on my energy, learning gestures
5 which can cure or develop life, etc.

6 Perhaps the most crucial question to be solved is: What does it mean for a living human
7 to be indigenous to earth? We have not yet seriously taken this question into consideration,
8 resorting to various values extraneous to the terrestrial ones. I am afraid that concerning
9 ourselves with new ontologies or cosmologies before lingering on this stage of our becoming
10 may more and more lock us in cultural constructions that cut us off from a return to a universally
11 sharable real and reality.

12

13 SDS: These books, like many of your recent texts, are clearly very concerned with Nietzsche's
14 writings on nihilism, suggesting that a central endeavor of your work is the search for an
15 overcoming of nihilism. Unfortunately, all too many readers have failed to understand
16 Nietzsche's writings on the death of God, ignoring his injunction that we must ourselves become
17 divine in order to be worthy of our responsibility for having killed God. You, with Nietzsche, see
18 such a project as the cultivation of a new becoming of humanity beyond Man (a new humanity to
19 which Nietzsche gave the rather unfortunate name of *Übermensch*). In *Through Vegetal Being*,
20 you explicitly associate this project with vegetal being, which, as you see it, overcomes nihilism
21 by challenging the moralism by which we impose our own artificially constructed values onto
22 life or nature. In *To Be Born*, your commitment to this Nietzschean project becomes even clearer
23 as you frame the overcoming of Man not in the form of an *Übermensch*, but rather the

1 engendering of a new humanity. How do thinking vegetal being and birth help us to overcome
2 the nihilism that threatens our contemporary world?

3

4 LI: One of my main concerns in thinking is how to overcome the nihilism depending on the
5 cultural subjection to suprasensitive values, which Nietzsche criticizes, without falling into
6 another, and sometimes worse, nihilism. The importance of the vegetal world in overcoming
7 nihilism is that it can ensure our survival when passing from the “old man of the West” to a new
8 human being. Indeed, this passage requires us to take charge of our breathing in order not to die.
9 In reality, we have invested our vital energy in values which do not care for our life enough, and
10 we are surviving in a partly artificial way. However, in undoing our investments and the links
11 with the various environments that they have woven does not happen without risk. We must care
12 about our breathing in order to be born in a natural life again. This necessitates an adequate
13 quality of air. And the atmosphere of the glaciers, which has often been favored by Nietzsche, is
14 not the most appropriate for the newborn that we then are. If it can help us freeze our past, and
15 even present, affects, it does not contribute to the development of a new living being. This would
16 happen easier in the woods with a more clement and balanced atmosphere and the contemplation
17 of the manner of living of the trees, surrounded by birds and some wild, but kind, animals.

18

19 SDS: The relation between the cultivation of a vital energy and the overcoming of Man is of
20 great interest to me. To my mind, it is the failure of neoliberal capitalism to cultivate a shared
21 vital, or even spiritual, energy between people that has enabled the rise of new fascist
22 movements that more successfully capitalize on people’s deep, unfulfilled desires for a shared
23 connection with others. By and large, Left politics has also failed to cultivate this energy, which

1 is why Drucilla Cornell and I argued for the cultivation of a “political spirituality” in
2 revolutionary politics (in *The Spirit of Revolution: Beyond the Dead Ends of Man*). You have
3 also written profoundly on the lack of cultivation of energy, or what you in one text call
4 “spiritual vitality,” in Western culture and politics and the urgent need to do so. For your part,
5 this demands a return to nature and cultivation of natural or living energy, which amounts to a
6 sort of rebirth. In being reborn, in returning to nature, how might we cultivate this natural or
7 living energy and share it? What is the relationship between this natural living energy and
8 spirituality? How might this serve, not only to ameliorate the individual and collective maladies
9 that arise from the suppression of our natural energy, but also as the basis for collective
10 movements? Can cultivating and sharing our living, natural energy be the reservoir for a new
11 form of politics?

12

13 LI: I am afraid that a “political spirituality” could amount to a new ideology, perhaps more
14 generous but which does not allow each to develop in accordance with his or her singularity and
15 difference. It is true that it is not easy to pass from the individual level to the collective level, and
16 all the more so since we have been subjected to an artificial individuation which has neutralized
17 our difference(s), beginning with our sexuate difference. Thus, what political spirituality could
18 be valid today? How could we define it? Is it not necessary to first return to our natural
19 belonging and learn how to coexist with respect for our natural difference(s)? A civic way of
20 behaving in such a manner does not yet exist and most of the citizens are lacerated between an
21 uncultured belonging, which expresses itself in the so-called private life, and a codified and
22 presumably neutral civic identity, which cuts them off from their real identity. In both cases a
23 living coexistence, which would allow each to develop in faithfulness to her- or himself, is made

1 impossible and people cannot reach an individuation of their own. How could they live and share
2 life, especially in difference? All are immersed in fabricated identities, moving and acting with
3 an energy which is not their own, torn between impulses and duties, feelings and roles to be
4 taken, etc. How to be capable of a true political responsibility? How not to be dispossessed of
5 one's singular development by investing oneself in a common plan and behavior without being
6 able to care about oneself? On what basis could this "common" be established?

7 I know how difficult this problem is to solve. In this case, given its objective and
8 subjective difficulty I began, a few years ago, to practice a politics of the relation between two—
9 which allows for the respect for life and difference(s)—at each time and on any occasion of the
10 day. At the end of the week, I already met some people. . . . I also understood that my
11 undertaking was above all to work on the elaboration of a new cultural background from which a
12 new way of practicing politics could little by little arise—and to invite young researchers to take
13 part in such a project.

14

15 SDS: For you, it is paramount that this energy is not merely understood as natural and living, but
16 also as sexuante. As you argue, it is above all the sexuante dimension of energy that has been
17 neglected in Western culture, having been reduced to the instinctual level of sexual reproduction,
18 and thought only economically in terms of discharge and release. You have criticized Freud, for
19 instance, for stunting the cultivation of sexuante energy at the level of "genitality." For you, on the
20 contrary, desire is a way that we might cultivate our natural energy and move beyond both
21 abstract forms of materialism and vitalism toward relation and sharing. Desire, especially
22 sexuante—although not necessarily sexual—desire is central to both of these books. Could you
23 speak further about the role of sexuante desire in the cultivation of a new human being? What

1 forms of relations might be made possible thanks to the sharing of sexuate desire if it is freed
2 from its enframing in genitality or “sexuality”? And how might this erotic energy—if I may use
3 that term—also be cultivated as the basis of collectivity, as a new humanity?
4

5 LI: You seem to contrast “natural and living” with “sexuate.” However, natural and living energy
6 is sexuate, whatever the denial of this fact. The numerous investigations that I have conducted on
7 the sexuation of language with children, adolescents, and adults belonging to different
8 backgrounds and milieus bear witness to the persistence of such a reality in spite of its repression
9 in the name of a presupposed neutral and neuter objectivity. And acknowledging desire as a basic
10 element of our subjectivity is a manner of overcoming the traditional split between a body, which
11 would correspond to an inanimate matter, or to a corpse, and a soul or a spirit that would bring
12 life to it.

13 Desire as sexuate gives rise not to an abstract formalism but to concrete, specific, and
14 relational forms that do not concern only sexuality strictly speaking but are sexuate, which can
15 permit another sort of citizenship and cultural becoming. As I explain in *To Be Born*, the erotic
16 energy—represented by the god Eros in the *Symposium* of Plato—is an energy that can act
17 towards uniting us and between us as human beings. As such, erotic energy can be crucial to
18 constituting a community so long as its relational aspect is cultivated and its generative potential
19 is not reduced to merely begetting children.
20

21 SDS: In addition to sexuation, the other fundamental dimension of living that concerns you most
22 is breathing. Over the past years, you have called for a cultivation of breathing in a number of

1 ways: from your critique of the forgetting of air as a constitutive feature of metaphysics (*The*
2 *Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*) to your argument that a culture of breathing could serve
3 as the basis of a global culture (*Beyond East and West*). As you argue, a cultivation of breathing
4 would change our understanding of the relationship between Being and nothingness, would lead
5 to a different understanding of thinking and perception, and would help overcome artificially
6 constructed dualities by returning us again and again to our living, sexuate bodies. As you see it,
7 breathing would also serve as the basis for a new ecology and ethics because it is a form of
8 sharing both with nature and with one another, all while remaining ourselves. In *Through*
9 *Vegetal Being*, you are concerned with the role of the vegetal world in enabling our breathing,
10 while in *To Be Born*, you emphasize the significance of breathing as the first, universal act that
11 begins each person's process of individuation (an individuation that, of course, remains
12 fundamentally relational). Such a cultivation of breathing, for you, is not merely a
13 philosophical—even if ethical—problem: in fact, you have recently called air pollution a crime
14 against humanity in a forceful editorial in the *Guardian* (“Without Clean Air, We Have
15 Nothing”). How might the cultivation of breathing be elaborated as the basis of a new global
16 culture of sharing? And how might threats to this culture of breathing—such as the destruction of
17 the atmosphere and the loss of breathable air—serve as the basis of a new global politics? From
18 your perspective, might the destruction of the climate be the issue around which a new global
19 movement could arise?

20

21 LI: There is no doubt that paying attention to our breathing is a way of transforming past
22 metaphysics as a cultivation of our relation to death into a wisdom in which the negation or the
23 non-being has a completely other meaning. It is then of help in marking the limits of each living

1 being without subjecting all beings to an artificial and fictitious totality in which they alienate
2 their own breath, thus their own life. Breathing by oneself is the condition for taking care of
3 one's own life and for composing an ethical community respectful of the life of everyone.

4 Of course, the first political concern must be to preserve the life of citizens and other
5 living beings, and air ought to be considered our first common good, even before food.
6 Tolerating the pollution of the atmosphere represents, in my opinion, the most fundamental and
7 universal crime against humanity. And the presumed materialists do not realize that their way of
8 conceiving of matter ignores the first material need of our bodies or of our human physical
9 materiality.

10 A new global politics based on the respect for life is necessary, and its aim is easier to
11 formulate and observe in comparison to the aim of a politics based on desire. But I think that the
12 former will be really and effectively taken into account if the latter were finally considered and
13 applied. All the threats concerning living beings and their environment that already exist, are
14 known, and acknowledged do not prevent people and political leaders from continuing to
15 endanger the world and life, including their own.

16

17 SDS: As you frequently indicate, these two texts, like much of your work, is inspired by both
18 Nietzsche's and Heidegger's diagnoses of the end of "traditional" metaphysics. As you have long
19 argued, sexuate difference could serve as the basis for a new ontology that would no longer be
20 meta-physical insofar as it would begin from nature or the real itself, rather than from an
21 artificial construction or *logos*. In a seminar I attended in 2013 at the University of Bristol, you
22 referred to such an approach as a *dia*-physics, rather than a meta-physics, since it would proceed
23 thanks to, by means of, or through nature (or *physis*) rather than beyond (*meta*) it. I was quite

1 struck by this formulation, and although you have not developed it in print, it is clearly on
2 display in the title of *Through Vegetal Being*. Could you then elaborate on how you see sexuate
3 and vegetal being as the bases of your new dia-physical logic? How would such a logic
4 transform the “traditional” relations between Being and thinking? Our understandings of truth
5 and ethics? Do you see this as a move beyond the closure of metaphysics? And, if so, is it the
6 entry into what Heidegger would call another epoch of Being, or is it, in fact, a move beyond
7 epochal principles?

8

9 LI: Considering the way of developing of a vegetal being, we can observe that living matter
10 moves by itself and provides itself with its own forms. Thus, the becoming of the vegetal world
11 does not require the supply of an external dynamism, even if it needs an appropriate environment
12 for the exercise of its own dynamism. Furthermore, a vegetal being blossoms into its own forms
13 without the imposition of external forms on its matter, or on it as material. These two aspects
14 already represent a dia- and not a meta-physical manner of existing that can teach us how to
15 transform our own manner of being and of thinking, as well as the one of conceiving of truth and
16 ethics.

17 As humans, we have to deal with another dia-physical dimension. A tree grows,
18 vertically, from a unique seed planted in the soil. We have been conceived by the conjunction
19 between two different human beings and we must develop between vertical and horizontal
20 dimensions, the latter being above all determined by the relation to the other sexuate part of
21 humanity from which we were born and with which we must coexist in order to fulfill our
22 humanity.

1 Obviously taking into account these two elements of a dia-physical way of existing and
2 becoming we call into question the thought of Heidegger, notably regarding Being, and we do
3 not merely enter into another epoch of Being. I could suggest that the first a priori to be
4 respected is that regarding the determination, especially the sexuate determination, of our living
5 being. This entails a sort of reversal of the way according to which Heidegger thinks about Being
6 and being.

7
8 SDS: I find both of these texts to be very closely related to a speech you gave in 1986 after the
9 Chernobyl disaster, “A Chance for Life” (in *Sexes and Genealogies*), in which you very clearly
10 connect techno-scientific imperialism and the destruction of the earth to Man’s denial of the
11 “debt of life” to the maternal feminine and his preoccupation with death. Obviously with the
12 impending climatological catastrophe, the Being of Man is hurtling toward what Heidegger
13 called its “ownmost possibility”—i.e., death—and one that is now planetary in scale. How might
14 we move from death to birth as the horizon of our Being, from a being-toward-death to a being-
15 from-birth? How would this necessitate and constitute the foundation for a thinking and Being
16 beyond technical-scientific imperialism? How do *To Be Born* and *Through Vegetal Being* offer a
17 chance for life?

18
19 LI: We must reflect on the real nature of our origin and the way in which we can take charge of
20 our natural being in order to lead it to its achievement and flowering. Worrying about this could
21 encourage us to behave differently towards a new living being, as well as to differently envision
22 the manner of bringing it up and educating children. Parents and teachers must acknowledge
23 every new existence as a virtual breach in their horizon, instead of subjecting it to their past

1 culture, ways of behaving, and conceiving of the human becoming and that of the world. Turning
2 towards birth and not towards death is a manner of privileging life and of wondering about its
3 cultivation and sharing instead of developing techniques and knowledge, particularly as a
4 compensation for our lack of life and energy.

5 I think that the importance of death in our past culture testifies to the necessity of
6 providing life with limits. Our sexuate identity corresponds to a structure or a frame which brings
7 limits to an undifferentiated flow of life. Taking on our sexuation with the consideration that it
8 deserves can help us to free ourselves from the need for death as a horizon within which we can
9 only poorly flower as living beings. Beyond the fact that our own sexuation acts as a horizon
10 which determines and delimits our own living development, it also defines our identity and
11 subjectivity as partial with respect to those of living beings who are differently sexuate. This
12 represents another limit that can, with benefit for our life, substitute for that of death.

13

14 SDS: One of the central problematics of Heidegger's thought is the attempt to rethink the
15 relationship between life and Being, beyond Western metaphysics and its technicity. Since at
16 least *The Forgetting of Air*, you have been involved in a deep and extended engagement with this
17 aspect of Heidegger's work, addressing many of his own limitations with respect to a new
18 ontology of life. The ontological dimensions of your work are frequently overlooked, at least in
19 many Anglophone contexts, but they are on clear display in the titles of your two new books,
20 both of which are concerned with the question of Being. In your contribution to the edited
21 volume *Feminist Interpretations of Heidegger* ("From *The Forgetting of Air* to *To Be Two*"), you
22 trace your passage from your critique of Heidegger's own critique of metaphysics in *The*
23 *Forgetting of Air* to your own affirmative ontology of sexuate difference in *To Be Two*. Could

1 you further elaborate on this passage with respect to your two new works, emphasizing the role
2 of ontology in your thinking? What is the passage from *To Be Born* to *To Be Two*? From *The*
3 *Forgetting of Air* to *Through Vegetal Being*?

4

5 LI: First, I would like to confess that I do not really understand what an “ontology of life”
6 signifies, because life is not by itself a being but becomes incarnate differently in many beings. It
7 would be more appropriate to speak about a new ontology of beings as living. I agree with the
8 fact that the ontological dimension of my work is generally overlooked or assessed in a wrong
9 way. Could this be because I am a woman? Or because our sexuate dimension has been reduced
10 to the less valid aspect of our embodiment? On that subject I want to underline that I am rarely,
11 and less and less, speaking of sexuality strictly speaking, but rather of sexuation as a decisive
12 element of our being. And I consider it to be an important mistake of our culture to have
13 confined sexuation to having or not having a sex and have so left unthought all the expressions
14 of our sexuate belonging. These then resurface as inadequate gendered cultural manifestations
15 that some imagine it useful to erase without wondering about what they express of our sexuate
16 belonging that needs to be rethought and modified.

17 The evolution of my thinking—notably from *To Be Two* to *To Be Born* and from *The*
18 *Forgetting of Air* to *Through Vegetal Being*—is determined by a desire, but also a necessity, to
19 free our life, its development, and our sharings from the perspective of our past metaphysics on
20 being. If the early Greek culture still entails a perception of being as living, a constructed being
21 was little by little substituted for the living being. How can we return to a perception of the
22 latter? In *The Forgetting of Air*, I above all endeavor to liberate life from its paralysis within a
23 conceptual representation of the world and all living beings. In *To Be Born* I try to provide living

1 beings, beginning with our own, with an ontological status through thinking about our origin as
2 living. Born of two, and two different beings, we can exist only by providing our being with an
3 ontological status ecstatic with respect to our origin. But ontological here does not mean
4 constructed, but instead the expression of a reality and the possibility of dealing with life as such
5 and its cultivation. The process is more or less the same regarding the passage from *The*
6 *Forgetting of Air* to *Through Vegetal Being* in which I reflect on the manner of behaving towards
7 nature and living beings, including my own, after having liberated them from the ascendancy of
8 past metaphysics over our perception of them. About the passage from *To Be Two* to *To Be Born*,
9 I could say that I try to go from a mere phenomenological approach to a new ontological
10 perspective as far as being is concerned, which requires us to modify the logical background of
11 our traditional way of conceiving of subjectivity and all living beings.

12

13

14 —Luce Irigaray, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, and Stephen D Seely, Institute of
15 Advanced Study, University of Warwick

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