What Does It Mean to be Living?

A Conversation between Luce Irigaray and Stephen D. Seely

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Our Western culture more and more moves away from life. It is so much so that speaking about nature is generally understood as alluding to some or other concept that would be more or less adequate, but not as referring to or questioning about life. This situation is all the stranger since we are facing a real danger regarding the survival of the earth and of all the living beings that populate it. It is as if all the discourses we hear about this problem could remain abstract considerations and academic or scientific evaluations and discussions without practical concern about our own life and our living environment. This probably results from the status of our discourse in general and its current relation to the real.

There is no doubt that questions are little by little arising about the present situation of the world, and also that some of the recent philosophers have begun to inquire about the truth and their way of approaching it (as is the case, for example, with Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty). But it seems that, although they speak about the necessity of overcoming our past metaphysics, they succeed in doing that with difficulty.

Could it be possible that the undertaking would be easier for a woman, because she did not actively contribute to the construction of our past metaphysics, and her identity and
subjectivity have remained more in harmony with nature—which she is, furthermore, presumed
to represent for the patriarchal tradition?

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

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

Luce Irigaray: Thinking of life was not, for me, the result of an academic work—especially one
which would be fashionable. As I tell in *Through Vegetal Being*, it happened instead after my
expulsion from the university but also my removal from all the things in which I had invested a
great part of my life: regarding my work but also the circle of my colleagues and even of my
friends, the psychoanalytical institution in which I had made my training and of which I was a
member, the meetings, gazettes, and little by little the publishing houses to which I was a
collaborator. Thus, I could only die or discover how to live in spite of all that.

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

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

SDS: Both books contain a strong critique of the subordination of natural rhythms of growth and
life to abstract forms of time and space, which you see as violence to both the individuation of
each person as well as to nature itself. For you, there is something about vegetal being and about
birth that returns us to our belonging to a different conception of being and time. Could you
elaborate on how learning to live in accordance with natural rhythms might enable us to dwell differently with/in nature? And, moreover, how might such an overcoming of the imperialism of Western concepts of space and time be helpful to global struggles to save the planet from destruction?

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

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

SDS: Can you speak more about how you envisage the meeting between different traditions of thinking and being here? In the Der Spiegel interview, Heidegger famously argued that a path
out of the collapse of Western metaphysics can only proceed by way of a “reappropriation” of the Western metaphysical tradition itself, and not by appropriating non-Western thought. Many recent critics, however, have suggested that we must now turn to non-Western, especially indigenous, philosophies for guidance in responding to the challenges of our time. It seems to me that, perhaps now more than ever, it is on the basis of new ontologies of life and nature, perhaps even new cosmologies, that transcultural bridges must be built. What are your own views on the role of sharing between cultures—particularly at a philosophical level—in building this “basic universal link between all living beings” to which you have just alluded? Do the resonances between your own thought and certain indigenous philosophies interest you?

LI: To really meet another tradition we must first understand in what tradition we have been formed and within which we are, in a way, enclosed—as is the case for a woman or a man to meet a man or a woman. For lack of such a step, how could we meet the other? We inevitably project onto them the part of ourselves of which we are unaware. Thus, we must submit ourselves to a negative, or to an epochè, which allows us to perceive the other as other. It is particularly difficult to succeed in that at the level of culture. Of course, attempting to respect another culture can lead us to wonder about our own. This can represent a first step towards being able to recognize the otherness of the other. We must above all try to return to an original perception of the real that could be shared universally. This stage is the one that allows us to dis-appropriate the construction of our culture as a peculiar one in order to reappropriate a level of perception of ourselves, of the world, and of the other(s), which corresponds to their own truth. It is a really difficult process!
I personally learned a lot from my approach to some Eastern cultures, especially from the practice of yoga and the way of thinking in relation to yoga, because they helped me to return to my natural belonging and taught me how to cultivate it regardless of mental constructions—for example, by breathing, understanding the impact of food on my energy, learning gestures which can cure or develop life, etc.

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

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

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

SDS: The relation between the cultivation of a vital energy and the overcoming of Man is of great interest to me. To my mind, it is the failure of neoliberal capitalism to cultivate a shared vital, or even spiritual, energy between people that has enabled the rise of new fascist movements that more successfully capitalize on people’s deep, unfulfilled desires for a shared connection with others. By and large, Left politics has also failed to cultivate this energy, which
is why Drucilla Cornell and I argued for the cultivation of a “political spirituality” in revolutionary politics (in *The Spirit of Revolution: Beyond the Dead Ends of Man*). You have also written profoundly on the lack of cultivation of energy, or what you in one text call “spiritual vitality,” in Western culture and politics and the urgent need to do so. For your part, this demands a return to nature and cultivation of natural or living energy, which amounts to a sort of rebirth. In being reborn, in returning to nature, how might we cultivate this natural or living energy and share it? What is the relationship between this natural living energy and spirituality? How might this serve, not only to ameliorate the individual and collective maladies that arise from the suppression of our natural energy, but also as the basis for collective movements? Can cultivating and sharing our living, natural energy be the reservoir for a new form of politics?

LI: I am afraid that a “political spirituality” could amount to a new ideology, perhaps more generous but which does not allow each to develop in accordance with his or her singularity and difference. It is true that it is not easy to pass from the individual level to the collective level, and all the more so since we have been subjected to an artificial individuation which has neutralized our difference(s), beginning with our sexuate difference. Thus, what political spirituality could be valid today? How could we define it? Is it not necessary to first return to our natural belonging and learn how to coexist with respect for our natural difference(s)? A civic way of behaving in such a manner does not yet exist and most of the citizens are lacerated between an uncultured belonging, which expresses itself in the so-called private life, and a codified and presumably neutral civic identity, which cuts them off from their real identity. In both cases a living coexistence, which would allow each to develop in faithfulness to her- or himself, is made
impossible and people cannot reach an individuation of their own. How could they live and share
life, especially in difference? All are immersed in fabricated identities, moving and acting with
an energy which is not their own, torn between impulses and duties, feelings and roles to be
taken, etc. How to be capable of a true political responsibility? How not to be dispossessed of
one’s singular development by investing oneself in a common plan and behavior without being
able to care about oneself? On what basis could this “common” be established?

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

SDS: For you, it is paramount that this energy is not merely understood as natural and living, but
also as sexuate. As you argue, it is above all the sexuate dimension of energy that has been
neglected in Western culture, having been reduced to the instinctual level of sexual reproduction,
and thought only economically in terms of discharge and release. You have criticized Freud, for
instance, for stunting the cultivation of sexuate energy at the level of “genitality.” For you, on the
contrary, desire is a way that we might cultivate our natural energy and move beyond both
abstract forms of materialism and vitalism toward relation and sharing. Desire, especially
sexuate—although not necessarily sexual—desire is central to both of these books. Could you
speak further about the role of sexuate desire in the cultivation of a new human being? What
forms of relations might be made possible thanks to the sharing of sexuate desire if it is freed from its enframing in genitality or “sexuality”? And how might this erotic energy—if I may use that term—also be cultivated as the basis of collectivity, as a new humanity?

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

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

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

LI: There is no doubt that paying attention to our breathing is a way of transforming past metaphysics as a cultivation of our relation to death into a wisdom in which the negation or the non-being has a completely other meaning. It is then of help in marking the limits of each living
being without subjecting all beings to an artificial and fictitious totality in which they alienate
their own breath, thus their own life. Breathing by oneself is the condition for taking care of
one’s own life and for composing an ethical community respectful of the life of everyone.

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

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

SDS: As you frequently indicate, these two texts, like much of your work, is inspired by both
Nietzsche’s and Heidegger’s diagnoses of the end of “traditional” metaphysics. As you have long
argued, sexuate difference could serve as the basis for a new ontology that would no longer be
meta-physical insofar as it would begin from nature or the real itself, rather than from an
artificial construction or logos. In a seminar I attended in 2013 at the University of Bristol, you
referred to such an approach as a dia-physics, rather than a meta-physics, since it would proceed
thanks to, by means of, or through nature (or physis) rather than beyond (meta) it. I was quite
struck by this formulation, and although you have not developed it in print, it is clearly on
display in the title of Through Vegetal Being. Could you then elaborate on how you see sexuate
and vegetal being as the bases of your new dia-physical logic? How would such a logic
transform the “traditional” relations between Being and thinking? Our understandings of truth
and ethics? Do you see this as a move beyond the closure of metaphysics? And, if so, is it the
entry into what Heidegger would call another epoch of Being, or is it, in fact, a move beyond
epochal principles?

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

As humans, we have to deal with another dia-physical dimension. A tree grows,
vertically, from a unique seed planted in the soil. We have been conceived by the conjunction
between two different human beings and we must develop between vertical and horizontal
dimensions, the latter being above all determined by the relation to the other sexuate part of
humanity from which we were born and with which we must coexist in order to fulfill our
humanity.
Obviously taking into account these two elements of a dia-physical way of existing and becoming we call into question the thought of Heidegger, notably regarding Being, and we do not merely enter into another epoch of Being. I could suggest that the first a priori to be respected is that regarding the determination, especially the sexuate determination, of our living being. This entails a sort of reversal of the way according to which Heidegger thinks about Being and being.

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

LI: We must reflect on the real nature of our origin and the way in which we can take charge of our natural being in order to lead it to its achievement and flowering. Worrying about this could encourage us to behave differently towards a new living being, as well as to differently envision the manner of bringing it up and educating children. Parents and teachers must acknowledge every new existence as a virtual breach in their horizon, instead of subjecting it to their past
culture, ways of behaving, and conceiving of the human becoming and that of the world. Turning
towards birth and not towards death is a manner of privileging life and of wondering about its
cultivation and sharing instead of developing techniques and knowledge, particularly as a
compensation for our lack of life and energy.

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

SDS: One of the central problematics of Heidegger’s thought is the attempt to rethink the
relationship between life and Being, beyond Western metaphysics and its technicity. Since at
least The Forgetting of Air, you have been involved in a deep and extended engagement with this
aspect of Heidegger’s work, addressing many of his own limitations with respect to a new
ontology of life. The ontological dimensions of your work are frequently overlooked, at least in
many Anglophone contexts, but they are on clear display in the titles of your two new books,
both of which are concerned with the question of Being. In your contribution to the edited
volume Feminist Interpretations of Heidegger (“From The Forgetting of Air to To Be Two”), you
trace your passage from your critique of Heidegger’s own critique of metaphysics in The
Forgetting of Air to your own affirmative ontology of sexuate difference in To Be Two. Could
you further elaborate on this passage with respect to your two new works, emphasizing the role of ontology in your thinking? What is the passage from *To Be Born* to *To Be Two*? From *The Forgetting of Air* to *Through Vegetal Being*?

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

The evolution of my thinking—notably from *To Be Two* to *To Be Born* and from *The Forgetting of Air* to *Through Vegetal Being*—is determined by a desire, but also a necessity, to free our life, its development, and our sharings from the perspective of our past metaphysics on being. If the early Greek culture still entails a perception of being as living, a constructed being was little by little substituted for the living being. How can we return to a perception of the latter? In *The Forgetting of Air*, I above all endeavor to liberate life from its paralysis within a conceptual representation of the world and all living beings. In *To Be Born* I try to provide living
beings, beginning with our own, with an ontological status through thinking about our origin as living. Born of two, and two different beings, we can exist only by providing our being with an ontological status ecstatic with respect to our origin. But ontological here does not mean constructed, but instead the expression of a reality and the possibility of dealing with life as such and its cultivation. The process is more or less the same regarding the passage from *The Forgetting of Air* to *Through Vegetal Being* in which I reflect on the manner of behaving towards nature and living beings, including my own, after having liberated them from the ascendancy of past metaphysics over our perception of them. About the passage from *To Be Two* to *To Be Born*, I could say that I try to go from a mere phenomenological approach to a new ontological perspective as far as being is concerned, which requires us to modify the logical background of our traditional way of conceiving of subjectivity and all living beings.

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