

Fall 2012

# Nourishing Difference for the Erotic Couple

Danielle Poe

*University of Dayton*, [dpoe01@udayton.edu](mailto:dpoe01@udayton.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl\\_fac\\_pub](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub)



Part of the [History of Philosophy Commons](#)

---

## eCommons Citation

Poe, Danielle, "Nourishing Difference for the Erotic Couple" (2012). *Philosophy Faculty Publications*. 12.  
[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl\\_fac\\_pub/12](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/phl_fac_pub/12)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of Philosophy at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlangen1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlangen1@udayton.edu).

# Nourishing Difference for the Erotic Couple

Danielle Poe

**W**ITHIN THE CONTEMPORARY, WESTERN WORLD, erotic relationships occupy a privileged place. In movies, novels, and music erotic relationships are frequently celebrated, mythologized, and exaggerated. The ideal in these images is an erotic relationship between a man and a woman in which they are so similar and so in love that they become one. As Luce Irigaray has taken great pains to reveal, the way two become one is that one person becomes subordinated to the other. Within these popular accounts of romance, patterns of patriarchy and subordination occur again and again to allow a man and a woman to become one. I want to propose a new model that I will develop out of Irigaray's work in which the erotic relationship of popular culture is discarded in favor of developing an ethics for the erotic couple. This model will apply to any monogamous couple, whether they are heterosexual or homosexual, and it will account for the ways these two can choose to cultivate and sustain passion, desire, and love for each other. I will argue that instead of trying to develop this relationship such that two become one, justice requires that we nurture the two as two. Letting the two be two will create justice within an erotic relationship and will also create conditions for justice outside of the relationship. I will use Luce Irigaray's work to re-imagine erotic relationships and the ways in which they might lead toward more just communities.

## The two

From the time that she wrote *Speculum of the Other Woman*<sup>1</sup> through to her most recent work in *Sharing the World*,<sup>2</sup> Irigaray has described human ontology as two, masculine and feminine. To be human is not to share some single universal characteristic; rather, every human is characterized by sexual difference, which ought to be cultivated in all of our relationships and can serve as the basis for respecting other kinds of difference. This cultivation of sexual difference in every relationship will be foundational for an ethical relationship in the erotic relationship, which will be the focus of this article. Irigaray writes in *I Love to You*:

Without doubt, the most appropriate content for the universal is sexual difference. Indeed, this content is both real and universal. Sexual difference is an immediate natural given and it is a real and irreducible component of the universal. The whole of human kind is composed of women and

men and of nothing else. The problem of race is, in fact, a secondary problem—except from a geographical point of view?—which means we cannot see the wood for the trees, and the same goes for other cultural diversities—religious, economic and political ones. (Irigaray, *Sharing* 47)

The cultural diversities that Irigaray lists are important differences that may need to be addressed prior to sexual differences in many contexts; nevertheless, ontologically sexual difference is prior to any other difference because it is always present and irreducible, which is not the case with other kinds of diversity. Thus, any account of ethics must address sexual difference in order to be fully ethical.

To preserve the difference in every relationship (not just in the relationship of the erotic couple), Irigaray stresses the need for a silence and an openness between each person. “What I know about you is not or cannot be what you are. To approach you presupposes the suspension of all judgment in a silence where I listen to you in your irreducible difference.”<sup>3</sup> For Irigaray, ethics begins by preserving the irreducibility of sexual difference in every encounter by suspending every final judgment, understanding, and articulation of who the other is. Instead, the subject approaches the other as someone who always has more to reveal and is more than can be understood and known.

Irigaray’s description of the two provides a model through which two people can realize possibilities that will benefit themselves and others, and this articulation of the two is especially important to consider when we think about erotic relationships. While the world has frequently become more just through the contributions of individuals who reject erotic relationships (Gandhi and Dorothy Day, for example), those people in an erotic relationship—who, after all, constitute a majority of the population—should also be part of creating a more just world and insuring that their relationship contributes to justice. To do so, the erotic relationship must be just in such a way that neither partner dominates the other. The erotic relationship can also create a more just world by inspiring the couple to work together to critique oppression and injustice and to create spaces in which others can live together peacefully. Central to the distinction between an erotic relationship that further reinscribes the status quo and one that creates a better world is valuing difference instead of privileging sameness. By always talking about people as “two” instead of proposing some generic and static definition of the person, Irigaray reminds us that people always encounter difference and that every relationship is shaped by the differences between people. Moreover, difference is what allows people to create new possibilities, while trying to overcome difference leads to subordination and violence.

### Relation and world

While much of continental philosophy has focused on the way individuals approach the world, Irigaray examines the relationships between people. She critiques relationships in which women are forgotten and subordinated, and thereby she creates imaginative space for new ways to relate to one another. In *Sharing the World*, Irigaray describes the kind of world that these relationships can create:

The world that we can share is always and still to be elaborated by us and between us starting from the perception and affirmation of what and who we are as humans here and now. Humans who endeavor to use their own energy as well as that arising from their difference in order to create: to create themselves, to help the other to create himself or herself while accepting their help, and to create a world in which we can live in peace and happiness while working towards the becoming of humanity starting from the natural belonging and world that are our own (Irigaray, *Sharing* 136).

Irigaray emphasizes several points in this passage that will be central for creating a more just world, or a better world. First, she stresses that people are human here and now. Grounded in the present, they do not need to focus on what could have been or what could be worse, but rather they can be attuned to present circumstances and being present to each other. Also, she emphasizes that the energy between people arises from each person and their differences. As people are present to each other, they respect their own energy and the other's energy; they do not seek to make the other's energy their own or to give their energy to the other. Most important, Irigaray underscores people's ability to create—they can create a world that is both properly human and properly natural, in other words a world of peace and a world of happiness. The idea that people create reminds us that part of being human and being two is that everything has not already been created. Rather, people are active in the world, and what they do can make the world better or make the world worse. She analyzes the possibilities by which, as two, a couple can use their energy, their desire, and their bodies to create a better world.

Irigaray challenges her reader to think about the ways in which encountering the other can contribute to genuinely new possibilities that promote a flourishing community. These relationships offer new possibilities by disrupting one's focus on oneself and encouraging her/him to critique assumptions about the world:

Grounded in the present—spatial and temporal; within myself and open to another world. The availability towards the transcendental dimension opened by the other undoes the weaving of the relations that structured the world for me, especially their bonds of subordination. For a

moment, the totality of the world is kept in suspense to welcome the other, a stranger with respect to my world. To this world I will never return unchanged: I will have gained a new freedom but lost the familiarity that I maintained with my own environment. Through the meeting with the other, what seemed to me closed has become partly strange because I distanced myself from my world in order to open myself to the world of the other.<sup>4</sup>

If I do not welcome the other and accept her/his otherness, the world is a totality. I am at the center of that which I encounter, and I understand myself and the world from this perspective. But when I open myself to the other, I am displaced from the center, and I begin to consider the world from the perspective of the other and from the perspective of us together. I can begin questioning myself and the world because I want to understand these from the other's perspective. In order to understand this perspective, I have to ask questions, listen, and watch because no matter how deeply I love, desire or feel a connection to the other, our perspectives are always different, always grounded in our own bodies and minds. When Irigaray uses the term "transcendental" in the above passage, she adds dimensions to it that give it a meaning grounded within the body and within the self but through which I am open to the other and to returning to myself in a new way. The transcendental is transcendent in as much as I go beyond an isolated world and isolated understanding in order to welcome the other. The other's world is strange, but there is wonderful possibility in this strangeness because the strangeness opens new paths, new possibilities. These paths and possibilities have implications far beyond learning about the other; they also have implications for the world that we inhabit. Subordination, oppression, and suffering are not inevitable; these bonds can be challenged and their consequences lessened.

### **The look and the limit**

In her article "The Look of Love," Kelly Oliver writes about Irigaray's philosophy and introduces the idea of the "critical eye" that allows the two to be critical of the world, including their relationship and one another. The critical eye is part of a loving relationship though, and it seeks to improve what it critiques rather than destroy what it critiques:

The loving eye is a critical eye in that it demands to see what cannot be seen; it vigilantly looks for signs of the invisible process that gives rise to vision, reflection, and recognition. The loving eye is a critical eye in that it insists on going beyond recognition toward otherness. The loving eye is a *critical* eye in the sense that it is necessary, crucial, for establishing and nourishing relationships across difference.<sup>5</sup>

While Oliver describes the role of the loving eye for an individual, its function for the two is to be used by them individually or by acting together, using

their respective perceptions together. As an individual, each of us uses the loving eye to see beyond the boundaries of the body in front of ourselves and see beyond what has already happened and into what the other is becoming, what we are becoming, and what we are producing. When we turn the loving eye toward our relationship, we are vigilant in making sure that we are adequately open to otherness in each other and that we do not try to become one, to become static and unchanging. When we bring our perspectives together and turn the loving eye outward, we must make a similar assessment as to whether or not we are open to the otherness in relationships beyond the two, whether our relationship as two opens us to others or encloses us in another version of isolation and solipsism, and whether we are creating a world that is more tolerant and just.

Not every look that passes between two people is loving, just as not every erotic relationship will create a more just world. For Oliver, the loving look is distinct by virtue of the energy and integration that it creates: "The gaze does not have to be a harsh or accusing stare. Rather, affective psychic energy circulates through loving looks. Loving looks nourish and sustain the psyche, the soul, as well as the body" (Oliver 71). Oliver uses the metaphoric language of "nourishment" to describe the loving look that passes between the two. This language is important because it indicates the way in which the energy that comes from the look becomes part of who we each are; it is a metaphor that indicates health in what the loving look produces.

One feature of erotic love that makes it especially well-suited for promoting new possibilities for flourishing is the way it integrates a conception of the person as both finite and limited but oriented toward transcending limits. For Irigaray, to be human is always to be limited and finite because humans are always grounded in sexual difference, and thereby difference marks every relationship. Once I acknowledge my limits and finitude, I can also acknowledge the many other differences that might mark an individual such as ethnicity, class, and citizenship. I will be on guard that I do not allow this particular perspective to determine my understanding of all experience. In order to support the limiting of my particular perspective as the only way to understand the world, the erotic relationship, especially in its carnal dimensions, can provide a continual reminder of the relationality that is always already part of my experience. The relationality can serve as a reminder that my actions impact others, giving me the opportunity to act with good will toward someone else instead of maximizing my own happiness at the expense of someone else. In the carnal relationship, our desire draws us each to the other. When we touch, we can experience pleasure, and the other's pleasure

increases my pleasure. Certainly, the carnal relationship is not fully identical to the erotic relationship and is not part of other relationships, but it can be a continual reminder of finitude, relationality, and difference. While moments in other relationships can include a carnal dimension, such as when I hug my children or my friends, the erotic relationship typically includes the most intimate of the carnal relationships in which I am fully naked and vulnerable, which nurtures the intimacy, trust, and creativity between us. Within the erotic relationship, we transcend our finitude and limits through our engagement with each other, but each of us also comes back to ourselves and preserves a space for the other. Within the erotic relationship, we appreciate the body of the other, but we also appreciate the other's intelligence, perspective on the world, and emotions. The appreciation of the other includes appreciation for who the person is now, but also for who that person will become.

### **Body and mind**

Whereas much of Western philosophy and theology has treated the mind and the body in a dualistic manner, in Irigaray's work the mind and emotions are always incarnate. The traditional dualism between the mind and the body privileges the mind and reduces the erotic relationship to a weakness: humans who are too weak to control our genital impulses give in to our desire, and with orgasm that distraction dissipates so that we can return to the work of the mind. When the body, the mind, and emotions are integrated and valued, the erotic relationship reflects the integration of immanence and transcendence. Immanence reflects the respect that we have for the other as a finite, limited being. Transcendence reflects the respect that we have for who the other is becoming through the interplay of the world outside of our relationship and the relationship itself. Through the erotic relationship, the couple can extend the boundaries of intellectual, emotional, and physical pleasure.

Instead of pleasure dissipating energy, the extension of pleasure through the intellectual, emotional, and physical creates energy by creating new paths for us to relate to each other. If the erotic relationship only entailed extending intellectual and emotional pleasure, then we could be satisfied by talking on the phone or exchanging letters. But we want more than the intellectual exchange; we want to see each other and touch each other. If the erotic relationship only entailed extending physical pleasure, then we could be satisfied by masturbation. But we want more than an orgasm, we want the physical pleasure to nourish the relationship. We care about our own pleasure, but part of that pleasure comes from giving the other pleasure. Through that integration of pleasure, the couple exchanges energy and renews energy.

A couple's ability to create energy happens as they move beyond the limits traditionally used to understand erotic love. For Irigaray, even the lovers' caress challenges the idea that we can make clear distinctions between light and dark, sight and touch, movement and permanence; the categories that philosophers have typically treated as separate and distinct inform each other and create a cooperation and complexity that none have when the concepts are separated. In the following passage Irigaray describes the lovers' caress: "Deep, deeper than the greatest depths your daylight could imagine, once again I caress you. Luminous night, touched with a quickening whose denseness never appears in the light. Neither permanently fixed, nor shifting and fickle."<sup>6</sup> Irigaray's description emphasizes that the caress is on-going and dynamic, and it challenges the notion that our love can be known once and for all in the clear light of day. This description emphasizes the need to preserve mystery because we can always find new ways to come together, new ways to appreciate our difference, and new ways to use those differences together to create new possibilities for others to dwell in the world. The way we change and develop comes directly from the erotic, embodied relationship that they have. Our love for each other is not purely academic and abstract; it is particular to the relationship between us, and we are irreplaceable within the relationship. Whereas much of popular culture emphasizes the substitutability of individuals, especially women, the erotic relationship that we derive from Irigaray's philosophy helps us understand how our unique personalities and bodies draw us to each other.

Irigaray's insistence on describing erotic love between the two as embodied signals a respect for the material that will help to create a more just world. Whereas other descriptions of love, and other kinds of love, emphasize intellectual or spiritual compatibility, Irigaray continually reminds us that to be human is to be embodied. According to the model that Irigaray proposes, to be a person who is not reducible to any abstract notion and who resists being subordinate within a relationship is to have a connection to one's sexual difference. Sexual difference is defined in relation to and with others such that awareness of the self requires awareness of others. An erotic relationship that respects sexual difference and respects the two, who do not become one, is already connected to and aware of others. To protect the two and our difference, each must be continually mindful of sexual difference and our relationships to others because sexual difference is dynamic and can never be defined once and for all. For the two to avoid solipsism with one another, we will have to continue to work to maintain sexual difference beyond our relationship.

The connection that we each have to sexual difference must be individually nourished regardless of our gender. Even gay or lesbian couples have a

relation to sexual difference that must be cultivated individually. Two women may have some commonalities in their experience of sexual difference, but they will also have many areas that have developed out of unique experiences. The experience of sexual difference is the same for all people in as much as it gives us an awareness that to be human is to be not-male or not-female and that my perspective will never be complete. The experience of sexual difference changes for each person in its positive articulation. To say that I am female combines my genealogy, my morphology, my biology, and my culture; hence, the definition of sexual difference is always changing and will be different for every person. The emphasis on sexual difference creates a limit to my understanding of myself and in turn limits the attempt to make the other just like me. Instead, we appreciate that we are two and that being two happens both within the relationship and beyond it.

### **Justice: from the two to community**

Erotic love between the two nourishes relationships and activities beyond us precisely because our love continually builds upon our relationship as two who give of ourselves, receive the other, and return to ourselves renewed. Instead of trying to make the other into an image of myself, I appreciate and nourish the other's difference just as the beloved appreciates and nourishes my difference. Through this appreciation and nurturing of difference, the beloved gives me back to myself:

You give me being. But what I love is the fact that you give it to me. Staying there is of little matter to me. I like your giving me a mirror which is not made of ice. Your flowing into me, and me into you. Receiving you melting molten, and giving that flow back to you. Without end (Irigaray, *Elemental* 44).

Again, Irigaray stresses the continual movement of passion between lovers. We do not consume each other, but we do not remain the same. The image of myself that the lover receives changes, challenges, and forms me in order to become more than I could be without the beloved.

Certainly, not every erotic relationship will open new paths for spirituality and justice in society. At times, erotic relationships become a means by which one person exercises control over the other and reduces difference to sameness. According to Irigaray, sexual energy is marked by its ambiguity, since Western society treats it as both sacred and consecrated as well as dangerous and forbidden. Sexual energy is both because it awakens energy that society sometimes ignores and represses, and other times society uses it for exploitation and profit. But Irigaray stresses that sexual energy can be cultivated, so that it helps

people to flourish instead of becoming something exploitative.<sup>7</sup> Many popular accounts of erotic love promote the idea that when two people fall in love they become one. The idea that two people become one fails to account for the fact that difference inspires much of people's initial attraction and that difference re-inspires their desire for each other. The appreciation of difference that is cultivated within the erotic relationship can also be applied outside of the relationship so that our appreciation of difference within our relationship shapes our appreciation of difference within the world.

One of the most important ways to move from maintaining justice within the erotic relationship to maintaining justice outside the relationship is to value difference and flourishing outside just as we do between us. We can critique institutions, ideas, and practices that reduce difference to sameness, both in theory and in practice. Hence, a just practice for the couple will be to pay attention to the material and bodily condition of others. While the two may have all of our basic needs satisfied so that we have the time and space to consider how the world can be better, our openness to critique and otherness will turn our attention to the fact that many in the world are subject to oppression, subordination, and suffering. Our pleasure in each other's embodiment can create a respect for the material and resist over-intellectualizing the suffering that others endure and must be addressed to create a better world.

For example, most couples in erotic relationships find ourselves caught up in the daily challenges of work, obligations to family and friends, and keeping up with household chores. We long for those moments when we can enjoy time together to talk and to make love, so that we reconnect both mentally and physically. If this is the limit of our relationship, we risk a solipsism in which our relationship is an island that removes us from the world. When we hear news of suffering in the world, we can shake our heads, feel sympathy, and possibly even give money to an organization to help alleviate that suffering. This reaction, although not lacking in sympathy, anesthetizes us to the injustice because we do nothing to address the suffering itself. We may have a very different response though if we remember the importance of the mental and the physical in maintaining our relationship. In this case, we have the sympathetic mental response and translate that into physical action. When we hear about the suffering of a homeless mother in our city, we may feel sympathy for her plight and take action to assist organizations that help single mothers find housing, learn job skills, and obtain childcare. This is an important step for those in an erotic relationship because it can be so tempting to bury ourselves in the relationship instead of allowing the blend of mental and physical needs to inspire us to apply that blend to the world around us.

The erotic relationship can inspire us to create a more just world because when lovers cultivate our desire and attraction, when sexual attraction is not reduced to instincts and dissipating energy, then we are each better people, and we are better together than we are apart. Rather than try to extend control over everything that I encounter in order to make it belong to me, I have a respect for difference. Instead of orienting myself and my projects toward an abstract horizon, my horizon is the beloved. I limit myself in order for the beloved to flourish, and we work together to correct injustice and create just conditions. The kind of ethics that the erotic relationship can inspire has a different moral force than other philosophical theories:

A mere moral imperative can neither inspire nor support such words [a way of honoring and accomplishing our humanity, of revealing ourselves one to the other and of loving each other]. It is the desire or the attraction between us that can breathe them in us: a desire and an attraction which are not reduced to the need of an immediate satisfaction of the instinct but find a mediation in a word where desire, love and thought mingle (Irigaray, *Beyond* 363).

The motivation for new ways of thinking, being, and living does not come from words abstracted from experience, nor does the motivation come from constantly encountering the same experiences. Lovers find the inspiration for newness when we encounter difference, especially when that difference is lived and embodied by someone to whom we are attracted and whom we desire. But we still will not create new ways of being if I merely succumb to the worldview of the other. The genuinely new happens when we cultivate our differences and our desires and find new ways to know the world and each other; the motivation to do so comes from loving each other.

Between lovers, two things happen that allow for new growth: maintaining space and bridging distance. The space prevents one person from overtaking the other; space allows both to contribute to the relationship. Yet if distance is the only thing between lovers, then we can each continue to dwell at the center of our own worlds and our horizons never change. When we bridge the distance between us, we remain two, but the horizon and the world become more complex and less complicated. The world becomes more complex because when I work with the beloved I am open to a perspective that is not my own and not controlled by either one of us; we each have an opportunity to glimpse the ways in which difference shapes the other and the world. The world becomes less complicated because we have the opportunity to accept difference as constitutive of flourishing, something to be nourished and cultivated rather than overcome and made identical.

The relationship of the two teaches us to approach each other and approach the world so that we have an appreciation of difference. Part of that appreciation though is that we are cultivating the other's flourishing and a world that can flourish. Our appreciation for difference must contain an awareness of the context of difference and maintain a critical perspective that will challenge both harmful differences and attempts to relegate difference to the same. Because love and desire for each other are grounded in our own body and the body of the other, we also have an awareness of the importance of the physical, and awareness that flourishing requires attention to the material well-being of people and the environment. The love that we have for each other arises and is sustained by who we are as irreplaceable individuals, which can inspire us to find the unique qualities and contributions of other people. Our love for each other also happens within a context that makes our relationship more or less challenging, which can move us to imagine what we can do to shape the context so that we can flourish and others can flourish. Finally, our love and support of each other's projects and desires can lead us to act and create change.

*University of Dayton*

*Notes*

1. Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Gillian C. Gill, trans. (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1985).
2. Luce Irigaray, *Sharing the World* (New York: Continuum, 2008).
3. Luce Irigaray, *Key Writings* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 74.
4. Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love*, Heidi Bostic and Stephen Pluháček, trans. (New York: Continuum, 2002), 89.
5. Kelly Oliver, "The Look of Love," *Hypatia*, 16:3 (2001): 73.
6. Luce Irigaray, *Elemental Passions*, Joanne Collie and Judith Still, trans. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 13.
7. Luce Irigaray, "Beyond Totem and Idol, the Sexuate Other," Karen I. Burke, trans., *Continental Philosophy Review*, 40:4 (2007): 359.