

Rethinking Humanism

by

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Abstract

This thesis aims to show a similar understanding of humanism in the respective philosophical works of Jean Curthoys, Hannah Arendt and Luce Irigaray in order to present a way of thinking that is genuinely humanist.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

At the centre of the humanist perspective is the idea of ‘the human being’ – an idea that is designed to represent, in general terms, actual human beings in the world. Humanist thought, then, potentially provides a coherent way of being able to think about human life irrespective of the boundless differences that exist between each person. Yet, despite this potential, the humanist perspective has more often than not been shaped in accordance with the particular biases of Western culture. Consequently, the idea that came to dominate the humanist perspective is one in which the human being is essentially white in appearance and male in form. And from these distortions, all manner of other distorting abstractions arose which served to undermine the worth of those human beings who did not correspond to this limited view of humanity.

This mode of humanist thought, fraudulent insofar as it failed to represent all of humanity, had reached its peak by the time of the modern era. But it was only when modernism itself began to decline that the inherent biases of such thought became undeniably apparent. Yet, what has followed from this realisation has not been a reworking of humanist thought (at least not in any enduring way) but rather new modes of thinking, incorporating similarly distorting abstractions. Indeed, over the past several decades, *all* types of humanist thought, dominant and marginal, have largely given way to a so-called postmodern perspective which, in its most extreme forms, deconstructs the human being to the point of non-existence. For this reason, this kind of deconstructionism is seen by many of its adherents as the definitive solution to the prejudices of humanist thought. For where the human being as such is relatively absent from thought, definitions pertaining to it which only extend to a privileged few are wholly precluded. And so, too, it is maintained, is the possibility that such thought will contribute to the real-life situations of oppression to which such unbalanced definitions give rise.

However, despite the hopes of some, the faults of modern humanism have not been remedied by the deconstructionist turn. For the centuries-old biases which seek to divide humanity into superior and inferior beings are so deeply ingrained in Western culture that the theoretical erasure of the human being only obscures them, so allowing their proliferation more or less unheeded. Thus, from this observation alone it can be surmised that thought concerning human life in which the human being is, for all intents and purposes, missing, is *necessarily* prevented

from asserting each person's immeasurable human worth as well as their fundamental right, by virtue of such worth, to exist free from oppression. Accordingly, deconstruction (or at least its most abstract versions) is no less dehumanizing (indeed, perhaps even more so) than the faulty humanisms it sought to replace.

Consequently, what we have today are two prevailing modes of competing thought: one which spuriously attempts to quantify the intrinsic worth of each human being (primarily, though by no means exclusively, along the lines of sex and race) and another which refuses to validate the concrete existence of human beings altogether. What the following analysis seeks to make unequivocally clear, is the necessity of a mode of thought that is grounded in reality; one which reflects and affirms the actuality of human life in all its rich variety and fluidity; and, not least, one which insists upon the immeasurable human worth of each and every individual. Such thought, which places the human being at its centre, is unavoidably humanist, though of a very different kind to the forms which have abstracted from human diversity and which have, until now, dominated this perspective.

Accordingly, it is the central claim of this thesis that this mode of concrete humanist thought is the only type capable of successfully countering the competing abstractions of current perspectives and, thus, the only type capable of overturning those present-day oppressions which serve to unjustly divide and diminish human life. In order to unravel the many aspects which comprise this claim, the respective philosophies of Jean Curthoys, Hannah Arendt and Luce Irigaray shall be considered in turn. For each of these three philosophers brings to light, in profoundly original ways, a different angle on the matter.

And so Chapter 2, in setting up the foundations for the central argument, looks at the philosophy of Jean Curthoys who argues against the tendency of certain feminist deconstructionists towards extreme abstraction – an academic practice which focuses solely on 'sameness' and 'difference' as concepts removed from the concrete realm of human life and, as such, necessarily precludes any theorising at the level of real women and their real experiences. In making this argument, Curthoys presents an alternative mode of thought with her presentation of 'the perspective of the oppressed' (which is simply one way of referring to the type of humanist perspective being argued for here). It is through this perspective, shows Curthoys, that the immeasurability of each one's human worth comes unmistakably to the fore along with the moral imperative to oppose at all costs any notions to the contrary.

From this, Chapter 3 considers the philosophy of Hannah Arendt who looks at what happens when ideologies confusing scientific reasoning with an understanding of history abstract from the real life conditions which conflict with the ideology. She also explains how the 'privileging' of the contemplative over the political leads thinkers to disconnect from the world, the worst manifestations of which can be seen in totalitarian ideology. In arguing against this mode of abstract thought, Arendt insists that the plurality of human life, both in terms of quantity and quality, is that which must remain in focus lest the intrinsic value and uniqueness of each person be crushed under the weight of oppression.

Lastly, Chapter 4 addresses the philosophy of Luce Irigaray who claims that Western culture is based on modes of abstract thought which stem from Platonic metaphysics and which posit the concept of the perfect human being as male. Obviously, such a notion clearly denies the sexual specificity of women. Thus, she stresses that we must think in ways which reflect the fact of there being at least two sexes that equally comprise the human species, for until this fact becomes central to our thought, spurious notions which hierarchically situate men over women shall endure to the detriment of everyone.

Chapter 5 concludes that the appeal for a turn to a humanism grounded in reality, when it is considered in the united light of these three philosophies, is both extremely well-founded and unrelentingly urgent. For until this appeal is significantly heeded, people everywhere will continue to endure the harms of abstract thinking which denies each one, to varying degrees, her or his rightful claim to full humanity.

Chapter 2 – Jean Curthoys and the Perspective of the Oppressed

“...there is an indissoluble connection between a disciplined and authentic life of the mind (at whatever educational level) and the realisation of egalitarian and libertarian social values.” (Curthoys, 1997: vii)

It is this indissoluble connection, so shrewdly perceived by feminist philosopher Jean Curthoys, that forms the foundation of her book, *Feminist Amnesia*. Namely, it is through her understanding of the relationship between clear thinking and the comprehension of moral issues that Curthoys is able not only to reveal but also to critically analyse the increasing intellectual confusion within (but not confined to) feminist academia and the corresponding decline in a feminist bearing of moral responsibility. It will become evident that what ultimately emerges from Curthoys’ analysis is, as shall be seen, a realisation of the urgent need to return to a certain humanist perspective – a largely forgotten perspective which affirms the fundamental fact of our humanness and the needs which stem from that. (Curthoys, 1997)

Feminist Amnesia

In the opening of her argument in *Feminist Amnesia* Curthoys recalls what has been forgotten in feminist academia which is, in brief, the moral basis from which the second wave feminist movement emerged. The vast majority of current representations of second wave beginnings put forward by contemporary feminist academics are simply not true, she alleges. Such representations, or misrepresentations, seek to define the early second wave as promoting a “philosophy and politics of ‘sameness’ or ‘equality’” in which women were encouraged to become ‘like men’. (Curthoys, 1997: 57). Curthoys acknowledges that while such philosophies of ‘sameness’ were indeed present in the early second wave, they were aberrations at best. Rather, the spirit that infused the inception of this movement was drawn from the counter-cultural philosophies and politics of liberation which were circulating at that time. (Curthoys, 1997: 1-12)

The obvious question at this point, then, would be why has early second wave feminist thought been so misconstrued by so many contemporary feminist academics? However, the complexity

of Curthoys' answer to this question can only be grasped through an understanding of the theoretical foundations of early second wave thought. For this reason, what follows next is a relatively brief description of those theoretical foundations, referred to by Curthoys as 'liberation theory'. (Curthoys, 1997)

*Liberation theory explained*¹

Liberation theory (on Curthoys' rendition) takes as its starting point the unequivocal fact of each person's irreducible humanness. What flows from this is the insistence that each human being is intrinsically valuable to other humans for no reason other than that they are human. Such value, therefore, is unquantifiable (i.e., no one human can rightfully be considered *more* valuable – and hence, *more* human - than any other). Succinctly put, "...respect is due to the human being as such and is not a matter of degree..." (Weil cited in Curthoys, 1997: 13). Thus the concern of this theory is human oppression or, in other words, situations where the immeasurability of each one's human value is denied so that some are, without grounds, deemed superior (fully human) while others are correspondingly deemed inferior (less than human). Implicit in this concern are the human consequences which flow from differentially classifying the intrinsic worth of human individuals and which range from harmful to catastrophic. (Curthoys, 1997: 15-29)

Central to this theory is the way in which power relations work to sustain distorted perceptions of human worth. Specifically, where oppression occurs, those who are privileged by such situations (which therefore cast them either willingly or reluctantly, consciously or thoughtlessly into the role of the oppressor) are seen as *naturally* superior. That is, such superiority is seen as an objective and independent quality of the human being who is deemed as such. It is not immediately obvious, then, that the privileged group achieves their status only via a corresponding evaluation of the underprivileged group as naturally inferior. Namely, the disproportionately powerful position of the former *depends* upon their appropriation of power from the latter. (Curthoys, 1997: 15-29)

¹ The tenets of liberation theory, notes Curthoys, were most evident in the early second wave feminist movement in the way they informed women's consciousness raising groups. However, the most notable example of its existence as actual feminist theory can be found in Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* (Firestone 1979) (see Curthoys, 1997: 27-28).

In light of this, Curthoys makes the observation that the ‘fully’ human of society are seen as such due to the assumption that their particular attributes (be they maleness, whiteness, etc) are inherently more valuable. That is, there is an assumption that it is the supposed value of one’s qualities that gives us our degree of human worth. For example, there is a general assumption in most societies that masculine attributes are of a greater *objective* value than feminine attributes so that those who better embody the former (necessarily men) are therefore more valuable because of this. However, when the workings of power become visible, it is seen that an inflated value is bestowed upon those who hold the power only *because* they hold the power – their particular qualities are only deemed valuable following this initial evaluation. The supposed worth or value of one’s attributes does not determine one’s perceived human worth. Rather, the reverse is the case. (Curthoys, 1997: 15-55)

Thus it can be seen that there is no objective basis to the idea that any one person is innately more or less valuable than another. In actuality it is through the hidden workings of power that hierarchical (binary) relations between opposed groups of people are constituted. And while the power dynamics remains hidden, their psychological effects (one’s internalisation of the idea that one really is naturally superior or inferior) ensure that oppression is perpetuated. (Curthoys, 1997: 15-29). As Curthoys notes, “power works best when its character as power is obscured” (Curthoys, 1997: 19).

Accordingly, where the operations of power remain covert, the responses to oppression by the oppressed are necessarily caught up in such mechanisms (albeit unknowingly) and, as such, cannot result in a situation where oppression is ended in its entirety (and this is a crucial aspect of what shall shortly be revealed as a fundamental human need). For instance, neither a closer association with the oppressor (in the hope that some of the latter’s status will ‘rub off’ onto the oppressed individual), the adoption of the oppressor’s attributes (an attempt to assimilate with the oppressor) nor an inversion of the status quo (where the tables are turned and the oppressed become the new oppressors) can ever achieve absolute liberation. What these responses do illuminate, however, is the striving to fulfil a particular human need. This need is clearly one for a basic level of human respect, which is to say, a need to be recognised as fully human. (Curthoys, 1997: 15-55)

“...human beings have a fundamental need to be recognised as human by other human beings... (and) ...no specific quality is posited in the definition of ‘the human’ other than the satisfaction of this need itself.”
(Curthoys, 1997: 23)

This human need can be said to equate to a minimal claim of human nature. Namely, what makes us human *is* this fundamental need. There are no secondary attributes in addition to this constitutive need which could put measure on our immeasurable human worth (and where secondary attributes have been incorporated into ideas of human nature, they have only served to bolster the comparative evaluations of human worth, e.g. men are more fully human than women, Caucasians are more fully human than non-Caucasians, etc). Accordingly, for this need to be properly satisfied, each human being must recognise and affirm the intrinsic, immeasurable human value of all other human beings. Such recognition must be reciprocal for one’s intrinsic human value can only be validated by another who has been equally granted that same recognition. (Curthoys, 1997: 23-29)

For this reason, attempts to satisfy this need within the nexus of power, in which human value is *always* seen as asymmetrical, are inevitably doomed to failure. Yet it is through such failure that the true nature of our needs can be illuminated. That is, when attempts to satisfy this need via an improvement to one’s status or position are discovered to be futile (as demonstrated above), the power relations which render such attempts ineffective become visible and are then able to be seen for what they are – utterly antithetical to basic human need. Through this revelation, the need to oppose power becomes increasingly apparent. (Curthoys, 1997: 23-29)

Accordingly, to experience this revelation is to attain an autonomous understanding of human value – autonomous in that it is arrived at independently, outside the illusions of the prevailing social order. Thus autonomy within this framework corresponds to one’s independent recognition of one’s dependency on others (for one’s primary human need depends on the proper recognition and respect of others) rather than an overcoming of a dependency on others which is often what is thought of when one speaks of autonomy (Curthoys, 1997: 15-55). To achieve it is to have completed a good part of what Curthoys calls the ‘Socratic quest’ element within liberation theory – Socratic due to the obligation of each individual to ‘know thyself’ and thereby attain a certain type of understanding,

“... an understanding which combines self-knowledge, knowledge of the workings of power and a strong ethical stance and which qualifies, therefore, as what I would describe as wisdom.” (Curthoys, 1997: 18)

Indeed, autonomy within this framework is inseparable from the ethical stance which prioritises the need for human respect above all else. Namely, once autonomous, there is an undeniable moral imperative to act against the power structures which serve to oppress certain groups of people – moral because such actions are not conducted solely for one’s own sake but for the sake of all humanity. It is this basic ethic within liberation theory that Curthoys says gives it its peculiarly Christian character. However, this ethic which calls on us to love one another (for, to fulfil the fundamental needs of others is a loving act) is categorically *not* a moral edict borne out of Christian relativism. Rather, the worthiness of this ethic is that it is an *objectively* moral position (Curthoys, 1997: 41-55). As Curthoys notes, the human suffering borne out of oppression and the behaviour that arises from it equates to

“an intelligible response to oppression, one which anybody would have in these psychological circumstances and so one which, therefore, cannot stem from the specific psychology of women, or of peasants, or of the colonised.” (Curthoys, 1997: 25)

Namely, the ethical stance advocated in liberation theory gains its objective ground due to its universal relevance – there is no one human being that can exist beyond the boundaries of the fundamental need for basic human respect or the moral obligation that accompanies this need. (Curthoys, 1997: 15-55)

Herein ends this reconstruction of the basic tenets of liberation theory and, at this point, the indissoluble connection referred to in the opening quote of this chapter should be clear. Namely, to think about and theorise human problems and their solutions *directly in relation* to human needs (that is, to take a humanist perspective) is to engage in a ‘disciplined and authentic life of the mind’. Thus the link between this type of intellectual undertaking and the ‘realisation of egalitarian and libertarian social values’ is demonstrated by the way that such thought reveals the moral obligation of each one to extend basic care and respect to all human beings.

Why liberation theory has largely been forgotten within feminist academia

The question as to why liberation theory has largely been forgotten within feminist academia can now be taken up. To summarise Curthoys' response to this question, such 'forgetting' was at least in part a political (if not altogether conscious) move within certain feminist academic circles which were unable to reconcile the power won through feminist political successes with the moral obligations inherent to the early second wave to oppose such power. And it was the overwhelming feminist turn to deconstructionist philosophy around the mid-70s that provided the means necessary to effectively 'forget' liberation theory. (Curthoys, 1997: 1-12)

To explain, because this particular philosophical perspective, these days often described broadly as 'postmodern', substitutes language for human beings – more precisely, relations between conceptual or linguistic items for human relations² – it more readily (though not necessarily) conceals the basic issue at stake within feminist academia, which is the liberation of real-life women from the many and varied forms of oppression that are specific to them. Thus, by relocating human problems onto an abstract plane – in this case, language – the power mechanisms which differentially situate people in society and the moral obligation to oppose such power on the basis of its inherent unjustness can become, at best, ambiguous and, at worst, utterly lost in obscurity. (Curthoys, 1997: 68-118)

Where feminist theory operates to obscure the actuality of human relations, it takes on, for Curthoys, a 'surrational' essence. That is, while it appears at first glance to be theoretically sound, its subtle yet radical departure from reality and what is behind that – the desire to embrace power while drawing its vitality from appearing to oppose it - necessarily gives rise to irrationalities in its arguments. To elaborate, such surrational theory, due to its unwavering commitment to difference, is often posed by its theorists as an antidote to the alleged orientation to 'sameness' in early feminist thought. This intense focus on difference - which is always theorised in terms of its supposed innate subversiveness (thus, automatically rendering

² Curthoys is clear that, within the deconstructionist perspective, language is always primary. It unequivocally supersedes the human being as the central concern and, accordingly, cannot be interpreted as a metaphor for the human being (see Curthoys, 1997:105-106).

‘sameness’ as innately oppressive) - is unlike the more theoretically sound versions of feminist deconstructionism which also theorise around difference but in ways that focus on concrete differences which have been obscured and need to be asserted. Consequently, the angle on difference in ‘surrational’ theory represents such an extreme degree of abstraction that all possible theoretical foundations inevitably fall away. (Curthoys, 1997: 68-118)

Accordingly, it is those instances of feminist deconstructionist theory which operate at the highest level of abstraction and therefore produce the greatest amount of intellectual confusion which, for Curthoys, comprise the greatest threat to the realisation of objectively grounded moral values. For surrational theory only gives a *semblance* of morality, achieved via its explicitly self-proclaimed feminist position (Curthoys, 1997: 68-118). And this is important because such theory, being precluded from seeking acceptance on intellectual grounds must, instead, seek it on political grounds. As Curthoys states,

“...it is not the position that theories often *are* chosen on political grounds; it is the position that they *ought* to be so chosen.”
(Curthoys, 1997: 80)

So, where ‘truth is political’, all types of claims can be justified on the basis of their real or purported political stance and this is so whether or not such claims accord with reality or covertly perpetuate human harm. (Curthoys, 1997: 77-80)

Curthoys concludes the argument she makes in *Feminist Amnesia* with, among other things, a final implicit appeal for a return to feminist academia of a way of thinking that fully restores the intellectual integrity and moral values exemplified by the early second wave (which certainly should not be read as a nostalgic longing for the early second wave’s re-materialisation, the current historical context rendering this an impossibility in any event) (Curthoys, 1997: 157-160). Thus, of the many things that can be taken from *Feminist Amnesia*, it is the implications inherent to Curthoys’ final appeal – the need to make room in current academic thought to reintroduce the human being – that warrants the greatest attention.

What has been lost though the forgetting of liberation theory

While the preceding synopsis of *Feminist Amnesia* illustrates in general terms how de-humanized thinking has led to instances of intellectual confusion and an obscuring of objectively given moral values, the specific losses borne out of this process that have been most detrimental for humanity shall now be addressed. Four aspects of this loss will be considered below. While there is some overlap, each point is presented as theoretically distinct for purposes of conceptual clarity.

The loss of a perspective which enables us to best grasp human reality

“The radical may be an articulate member of this disenfranchised class or an alienated member of the dominant social group. In either case, (s)he becomes a spokes(person) for the cutting edge of crisis and the need for historical transcendence. The radical is therefore the one who becomes most acutely conscious of the absolute horizon of the ‘ought’ that is revealed in times of crisis” (my parentheses) (Ruether, 1981: 168)

The radical referred to in the above quotation of liberation theologian, Rosemary Radford Ruether, refers to a person whose ‘radical substance’ has been derived via their particular perspective - that is, the ‘perspective of the oppressed’ evident in liberation theory. It can therefore be inferred from Ruether’s quote that to take such a perspective is to best be able to see oppression as it occurs in the lives of humans which is simultaneously to see its inherent unjustness and the need for its urgent abolition. Perhaps the reason that the ‘perspective of the oppressed’ can give the greatest insight into human affairs is this - because the world’s most disenfranchised are the furthest from having the fundamental need for human respect fulfilled, they are in the best position to identify the true nature of this need as well the existing obstructions to its satisfaction. (Curthoys, 1997: 15-55)

This is not to say that this sharpness of perspective is the exclusive property of the oppressed. Rather (as Ruether’s above quotation makes explicit) it is a perspective in which anyone can conceptually situate themselves, thereby reorienting their point of view so that it aligns with

that of the oppressed. Indeed, the greatest value of this perspective is its ability to give rise to a ‘solidarity with the oppressed’ without which the universal need for human respect will go largely unperceived and so too will its satisfaction. Consequently, there is a great loss within feminist academic thought wherever this perspective has been wholly replaced with the non-human perspective of pure language (as is evident in the most abstract forms of feminist deconstructionist theory). (Curthoys, 1997)

The loss of the type of thinking most conducive to listening, understanding and caring

In losing liberation theory as the primary theoretical basis for the articulation of feminist issues, there has been lost the type of thinking which is arguably most conducive to an “openness to the ‘other’” (Curthoys, 1997: 54). This is because the type of relatedness-to-others promoted in liberation theory can only be achieved by way of a deepened capacity to listen to and understand the points of view of others who may be wholly different from oneself. (Curthoys, 1997: 53-55)

As Curthoys’ argument makes clear, once the irreducible humanness of the oppressed individual has been validated, she is conceptually raised to the level of humanity, both in her own mind and in the minds of those others who recognise her intrinsic worth. By virtue of this new and just positioning, she is accorded due respect to develop her own voice in and through the presence of a patient and receptive audience (Curthoys, 1997: 30-55). The humanizing effects of being listened to in this way is made clear in the following extract of author, Sharon L. Moe, which describes certain elements of the work of liberation theologian Nelle Morton,

“Nelle Morton writes of the power of “hearing someone into speech.” Being present to someone who is unable to articulate her or his inner thoughts and feelings, and offering gracious, respectful space until the words are shaped and spoken, is a redemptive gift we can give one another. It is an example of how the power of listening can redeem and re-form us.” (Moe)

The relatedness between people which is borne out of listening and understanding is also evident of a type of care – a mutual care of one for the other which serves to always uphold the basic humanity of each individual. For, when one’s intrinsic value is affirmed, one becomes seen as an end in oneself and is therefore treated accordingly. (Curthoys, 1997: 53-57)

“For precisely what it is that we seek is that no one’s life be thought to be intrinsically more valuable than anyone else’s. It follows from this that we shall have a genuine concern for them which was not possible when we were either in competition with them or were overwhelmingly dependent on their social position.” (Curthoys, 1997: 57)

Yet, to return to the observation made at the beginning of this point, our potential for a deepened capacity to listen to, understand and care for one another must first be comprehended at an intellectual level if it is to be achieved. And where feminist academic thought does not relate directly to human beings, comprehension of the human need and potential for what is, essentially, ‘love of the other’ is made all the more difficult. (Curthoys, 1997)

The loss of our ability to properly think of ourselves as human agents

To refer to the preceding point, a situation in which each one has been accorded the due respect to develop their unique voice and be heard in the world suggests the *agency* of the speaker. Indeed, liberation theory provides a way of thinking about human beings as agents capable of effecting change in the world (albeit, within the context of human interdependency and within the confines of each one’s particular limitations). Moreover this theory enables us to think of ourselves as *moral* agents – individuals who *ought* to engage with their capacity for agency in order to effect change for the sake of others as much as themselves (Curthoys, 1997: 30-55)

However, notions of human agency (and, with it, notions of moral responsibility) are absent in the highly abstract versions of contemporary feminist theory. This type of theory, by prioritising language to the utmost extreme, is precluded from seeing human actions as anything other than “...an effect, not a cause, of ‘the text’ or ‘the signifier’” (Curthoys, 1997: 110). In this same way (that is, via a wholly abstract focus on language) this type of theory is

hindered from properly identifying the man-made workings of power, its relation to oppression and its inherent unjustness. Accordingly, power as something which can and ought to be opposed within the context of liberation theory is rendered more or less unchallengeable within wholly abstract feminist theory – a circumstance which only reinforces ideas of human helplessness. (Curthoys, 1997)

To think in any terms other than those of human agency only encourages a passive acceptance of grossly unjust situations of oppression. By contrast, when one thinks of oneself as a more than just a pawn of social forces, one is partaking in the mode of thought that,

“...aims at breaking through the pervasive ‘culture of silence,’ that defines the oppressed condition, by an inner resurrection of soul that transforms a person from an object of conditions which determine his reality and consciousness to a subject of (her/)his own history and destiny.” (my parentheses) (Ruether, 1981: 178)

Human beings must be able to think of themselves as possessing the ability to effect change in the world lest situations of oppression continue ad infinitum.

The loss of the idea of the human being as anything other than oppressive

The most abstract forms of feminist deconstructionist theory unreservedly reject any fixed concept of the human being. Implicit in this rejection is a wholesale denunciation of humanism given that this philosophical approach always affirms some kind of notion of what it is to be human. From certain feminist angles such a rejection of humanism seems quite understandable when it is considered that the predominant forms of humanist thinking, as they developed out of the Enlightenment, define humanity in terms which favour the white male at the expense of all others (Curthoys, 1997: 109-111). Hence the common feminist deconstructionist charge that “(H)umanism...necessarily posits its ‘Others’”. (Curthoys, 1997: 22). Yet this particular feminist argument against humanism loses its significance in the light of liberation theory.

“...the puzzle is why it is assumed that it is impossible to redefine what it is to be human in a way which does not (posit its ‘Others’).

Why is the only solution to abandon, rather than to reform, our idea of humanity?" (Curthoys, 1997: 110)

Indeed, liberation theory, it has been shown, provides a concept of the human being which does not 'posit its Others'. Such a concept is informed by the 'perspective of the oppressed' which recognises that each person is irreducibly, immeasurably, human and therefore of equal intrinsic value (irrespective of whether or not such value is hidden by the circumstances of oppression). Accordingly, this idea of humanity extends equally and unreservedly to each and every person. (Curthoys, 1997: 15-55)

The fostering of this idea of humanity within feminist academia - an idea which corresponds to the actual existence of different, yet equally human, people living in the world - is especially important for those who are already branded 'less than human'. They, more than all others, need the idea of humanity conceptually restored (in ways which include them and, thus, correspond with reality) to best enable their need for human recognition to be satisfied. To 'think away' humanity is to bolster the status quo in which people, so many of them unjustly dehumanized, live divided. (Curthoys, 1997)

Thus, only when our thought starts with this all-inclusive conception of the human being can the possibility for human respect be realised on a world-scale. For, where the human being becomes invisible to thought – as is the case in the most abstract forms of feminist deconstructionist theory – oppressive injustices experienced within humankind are less able to be defended against on the grounds of basic human dignity, which are, in the end, the only appropriate grounds of defence where human oppression is concerned. (Curthoys, 1997)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Jean Curthoys clearly shows that liberation theory is the product of a type of humanist thinking which illuminates the perspective of the oppressed. And it is only through this perspective that the need of each one to be recognised and valued as irreducibly human can become apparent. More specifically, liberation theory is a philosophy which lights the path in the search for human respect. It provides a way of thinking about human relations as those which can and must occur on level ground (a ground, that is, which has not been skewed by power). When people are able to stand level to one another (level purely with respect to the

reciprocal recognition of each one's intrinsic worth) the unique differences between individuals that are presently used to justify false ideas of superiority (full humanness) and inferiority (sub-humanness) would serve to expand and enrich human experience rather than reduce and divide it. Liberation theory is, thus, exemplary of the type of thinking that Curthoys insists be renewed within feminist academia. For in providing this way of thinking which places human love at its centre, liberation theory clearly shows us that it is not only within each one's capacity to work towards non-oppressive relations, it is each one's moral duty to do so.

Chapter 3 - Hannah Arendt and Plurality

Abstract thought and common sense

"We need to learn 'simplicity' and to unlearn 'the simplification of abstract thinking', to become fluent in the art and the language of 'concrete' thoughts and feelings, and thus to comprehend that both abstract notions and abstract emotions are not merely false to what actually happens but are viciously interconnected." (Arendt, 1970: viii)

Crucial to the work of 20th century philosopher Hannah Arendt are an unhesitating confrontation with, and comprehension of, reality as it is concretely experienced. By means of her phenomenological approach, Arendt illuminates both the human tendency (from modern times at least) to take flight from reality and how this is ultimately at odds with fundamental human need. For Arendt, it is a fundamental need of *all* human beings to continually affirm the reality of their shared world lest the meaning of what it is to be human and, with it, the intrinsic worth of each person, fade into insignificance – thus opening the way for all manner of human deprivations, degradations, and atrocities. Thus, to somewhat rephrase Arendt's quote above, where we shield ourselves against the inherent unpredictability and uncertainty of reality by engaging in unreal or abstract thought, we pose grave dangers for the lives of actual human beings.

Human plurality

Reality, for Arendt, is inextricably tied to human experience. And the primary experience, or condition, of human life is that we exist in plurality. That is, "...men (people), not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world" (my parentheses) (Arendt, 1998: 7). Unlike 'Man', each person (or human being) is born into a web of pre-existing, though ever-changing, human relations. To grasp this elemental condition of human existence is to appreciate the fact of human interdependence. However, this is not to deny the distinct individuality of each human being. Indeed, it is the unreproducible uniqueness of each and every person that gives full significance to what Arendt means by plurality. We are plural because there is no one person who could

properly substitute or replace another. For this reason, not one human being is ever, nor ever could be, superfluous. (Arendt, 1998: 175-247)

Accordingly, one's particular uniqueness always has the potential to enrich the human world by bringing into it something completely original and unexpected. And it is this human capacity to begin something new in the world that, for Arendt, equates to freedom. Thus, Arendtian freedom is a specific type of freedom that can only be realised through human actions (which necessarily entail the enactment of new beginnings). Because each human action potentially adds a new dimension to reality, it is, for Arendt, both constitutive of reality and beneficial to plurality. (Arendt, 1998: 175-247)

To clarify, Arendtian human action, as action in a shared world, is comprised solely of the public words and deeds of a person or persons (and this shared world Arendt often refers to as 'the political realm' and so to human action as 'political action').³ Thus, the words and deeds constituting distinctively human action must be public so that they can be received as widely and as objectively as possible by other human beings who may then judge them and subsequently act upon such judgements (thus creating an unending chain of never quite predictable and often spontaneous political actions). And though, as touched on above, it is through this process that human freedom is realised, this is not necessarily the case. For, to act in ways which result in suppressing or denying human plurality effectively reduces freedom. Accordingly, to be free is to be able to act without restraint in ways which are unexpected and spontaneous while to perpetuate freedom is to act in ways which affirm and celebrate human plurality. Thus, Arendt makes clear that, for the sake of enduring freedom, political action should always be positively oriented toward plurality. (Arendt, 1998: 175-247)

Only when a political action is complete can its meaning be determined amongst the plurality of people before whom this action played out and, thereafter, added to the store of shared human knowledge. By virtue of its origins in human plurality, this store of knowledge, described by Arendt as 'common sense' (that which is given to us by our five senses and

³ It is important to note here that the shared world and the human action to which it pertains are clearly distinguished by Arendt from what she conceives of as non-political realms and non-human/apolitical action. For example the repetitive action of labour, which is a feature of the private and/or social realm and which concerns our most basic recurring needs for food and shelter, is common to all animal existence and is, thus, neither political in character nor distinctively human in type.

confirmed by a considerable plurality of publicly-situated human beings) is the best means we have of discerning the facts of our existence. For, as Arendt notes, “without (common sense) each of us would be enclosed in his own particularity of sense data which in themselves are unreliable and treacherous” (Arendt, 1994: 476). Thus, for Arendt, common sense provides the fabric of our ‘world-in-common’ which is vital for our continuing existence *as human* ⁴. Suffice to say, the world-in-common is deeply rooted in the reality of concrete human experience and the greater the number of unique perspectives which contribute to the fabric of this world, the richer and more inclusive it becomes. (Arendt, 1998: 175-325). As author Margaret Canovan comments on Arendt’s views in this regard,

“(People) have a common awareness of reality, not when they are all seeing and thinking in identical ways, but, on the contrary, when they are all seeing and thinking about the same objects from their own different points of view....each (person), looking at it from (her or his) own point of view, will supplement every other (person’s) point of view, providing them all with a rich and concrete sense of reality...” (my parentheses) (Canovan, 1974: 82-83)

Without this world in which our plural existence is both validated and cultivated, and without the wealth of common sense that this presupposes, we are in danger of losing sight of, among other things, the intrinsic value of each person as an irreplaceable contributor to the shape of reality. And this danger is ever-present, for the world-in-common is by no means imperishable. It needs the constant renewal and repair that can only be achieved through political action, which is to say, a plurality of ceaselessly interrelating, interacting human beings whose vastly different perspectives but common worldly orientation ensure that the immeasurable worth of each person remains in sharp focus. (Arendt, 1998: 248-257)

⁴ Arendt envisages the world-in-common as that which separates human beings from non-human animals and the natural realm that is their sole domain. Only by virtue of this world are we “able to save ourselves from the futility of nature by building an artificial world to house us” (Canovan, 1994: 82). It is, therefore, the place where we each attain our humanness and where human life is given its meaning.

Losing oneself in thought

In her work Arendt makes clear conceptual distinctions between the active life (which naturally includes political action) and the life of the mind. It is because *both* pertain equally to the human condition that the prioritising of one at the expense of the other is necessarily harmful for human existence. It therefore causes Arendt considerable distress that contemplation – as one aspect of the life of the mind – has come to dominate human existence. (Arendt, 1998: 12-21)

To explain, contemplation, or thinking, is necessarily a solitary pursuit. That is, it is an internal activity. It requires one to withdraw into oneself which automatically involves one's temporary withdrawal from the world. While thinking is done for its own sake (it is an end in itself), it holds great value for the world in its ability to sharpen judgement and encourage conscientious political action (Arendt, 1978: 19-238). Implied in this, then, is the need for the thinker to frequently return to the world – the “touchstone of reality” (Canovan, 1974: 82).

Yet this unequivocal need for the constant balancing of the contemplative life with the active life has been obscured from the time of late antiquity. Indeed, Arendt traces back to the early beginnings of the philosophic tradition the absolute privileging of the contemplative life over the active life - the former being associated with eternal truth and the latter being negatively aligned with the crudity and chaos of material existence. In this way, the notion of political action has been subsumed by the category of action in general. Consequently, its importance as a particular and unique aspect of the active life (the *vita activa*) can no longer be clearly discerned. (Arendt, 1998: 12-21)

“My contention is simply that the enormous weight of contemplation in the traditional hierarchy has blurred the distinctions and articulations within the *vita activa* itself...” (Arendt, 1998: 17)

Thus, where the importance of political action (which necessarily entails the thinker's frequent return to the world) is concealed from view, the thinker is at risk of becoming unanchored from the world – of *losing* her/himself in thought. That is, the necessary solitude required for thinking gives way to isolation and loneliness and, in so doing, utterly estranges the thinking

being from everybody, including themselves – they become ‘homeless in the world’. What follows, notes Arendt, is a mode of thought which is no longer grounded in reality or framed by common sense. Namely, by virtue of her/his inability to adequately discern reality (the function of common sense) the ‘homeless’ thinker falls back onto the safety of necessarily abstract ‘consistent fiction’. (Arendt, 1994: 460-479)

“Being homeless in the world, they had no basis for common sense, no community to assure them as to what was real and what not; and in their loneliness they could only turn to the reassurance of a consistent fiction.” (Canovan, 1974: 37)

This ‘turn’ is akin to a rejection of plurality. It not only deprives the common world of one’s own unique perspective but also serves to undermine the perspectives of others. For the validity of the public words and deeds of others is indeed weakened by the withdrawal of each potential spectator from the common world. Accordingly, once plurality is denied in this fashion and all ties with common sense are severed, the intrinsic worth of each unique human being becomes difficult to ascertain. Thus, the abstract thinking that replaces common sense necessarily gives rise to human oppressions. And it is this particular concern that has prompted Arendt’s writings on ideology as a potentially catastrophic form of abstract thought – one which, by virtue of its abstract theoretical content, obliterates all concrete understandings, while simultaneously encouraging, by virtue of its external effects, one’s withdrawal from the world. (Arendt, 1994: 460-479)

Ideological thinking

Though Arendt wrote about ideological thinking within the context of the major totalitarian regimes of the 20th century (i.e., Hitler’s Germany and Stalinist Russia), this mode of thought is evident in all types of oppression. However, totalitarianism, as arguably the most extreme form of human oppression, perhaps highlights most clearly how the abstract thinking of ideology is, as Arendt says, viciously interconnected with what actually happens. (Arendt, 1994: 460-479)

As Arendt simply states, “An ideology is quite literally what its name indicates: it is the logic of an idea” (Arendt, 1994: 469). Accordingly, ideologies are unique in their combining a question of philosophy (that is, an idea) with the logic of science (hence the suffix ‘logy’). Thus

from the outset this form of thought oversteps its boundaries by trying to contain the empiricism of science within the discipline of philosophy and the intangibility of philosophical contemplation within the discipline of science. For it is not the particular object of the idea which warrants scientific analysis (“The word ‘race’ in racism does not signify any genuine curiosity about the human races as a field for scientific exploration...” [Arendt 1994: 469]), rather it is how this idea is seen as shaping the course of history (Arendt, 1994: 460-479). As Arendt notes,

“the result of this application (of a particular idea to the course of history) is not a body of statements about something that *is*, but the unfolding of a process which is in constant change. The ideology treats the course of events as though it followed the same ‘law’ as the logical exposition of its ‘idea’.” (Arendt, 1994: 469)

To explain, the idea of an ideology forms the basic premise from which a sequence of logical deductions spring. When this idea, or basic premise, is applied to history, past events are re-conceived so that they appear to fit into the chain of logic inherent to the ideology. In this way, the whole of history is then reduced to a logical sequence which can be fully known to the logician and, thus, predicted in advance. (Arendt, 1994: 460-479)

So long as the logic remains true - that is, so long as there are no contradictions within the internal logical sequence of the idea as it is applied to history- any factual contradictions can be explained away. In other words, where reality bumps up against the logic of an ideology, it is reality (as the source of contradiction) rather than the ideology (as the apparent epitome of indestructible logic) which is seen, at least by the ideologist, to be at fault (Arendt, 1994: 460-479).

That reality does, to put it mildly, ‘bump up against’ the logic of an ideology is, notes Arendt, utterly inevitable.

“Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything in the development from the premise, and that no experience can teach anything because everything is comprehended in this consistent process of logical deduction.” (Arendt, 1994: 470)

Thus, plurality is made redundant in this type of thinking which seeks to validate its ‘truths’ outside of the realm of human interaction. Indeed, actual human experience, though it may inform the basic premise of an ideology, is swiftly departed from throughout the process of logical deduction lest it call into question the very substance of this process. Subsequently, there are severe human consequences wherever modes of thought attempt to forcibly reshape reality so that it fits into an abstract logic and Arendt’s observations in this regard shall now be considered. (Arendt, 1994: 460-479)

The vicious interconnection between abstract thought and what actually happens

Using the examples of Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia, Arendt demonstrates the worst possible conclusions of abstract, ideological thought. In the former, Darwin's theory of evolution was distorted into an ‘Ideology of Nature’ which deduced logically the eventual extinction of ‘inferior’ races whereas, in the latter, Marxist philosophy was twisted into an ‘Ideology of History’ which predicted the death of class. The states of affairs which were, respectively, the theoretical conclusion of these two ideologies were taken for granted as foregone conclusions. When they were then acted out on actual human beings the results were the death of millions upon millions of people. For in those extreme totalitarian conditions, the authority of logic was no match for the factual reality which served to undermine it.

“Whoever agreed that there are such things as ‘dying classes’ and did not draw the consequence of killing their members, or that the right to live had something to do with race and did not draw the consequence of killing ‘unfit races’, was plainly either stupid or a coward.” (Arendt, 1994: 472)

Though ideological thinking does not necessarily lead to the worst extremes of totalitarianism, it is nevertheless conducive to oppression in all its various forms. And while the harm that such thought poses may be felt more acutely by some than by others, it touches all within its range. Namely, this mode of abstract thought immobilises, to varying degrees, each person that dwells within its sphere of influence (Arendt, 1994: 460-479). Because the new beginnings inherent to

human action pose the greatest threat to the ‘unbreakable logic’ of abstract thought, such thought – in an act of self-preservation – works to constrain each person into a state of inaction and, in so doing, destroys their inner freedom.

“Freedom as an inner capacity of man is identical with the capacity to begin...” (Arendt, 1994: 473)

The rejection of plurality, which is both a precondition of ideology as well as its effect, is the most effective means of quashing the human capacity to enact new beginnings. For with each succeeding logical deduction of abstract thought, one moves further and further away from the world-in-common in which the significance of plurality is upheld. From this unworldly position one is prevented from being able to see, let alone act upon, the inherent unjustness of any situation where the fact of human plurality and uniqueness is covered over by fictitious notions of human superfluity and interchangeableness. Consequently, the surrendering of one’s freedom to abstract thought potentially risks the freedom of all. (Arendt, 1994: 460-479)

Our obligation to the world

Though the denial of plurality and its consequences is to the detriment of all, there are none more egregiously affected than those people who are explicitly dehumanised through this process – that is, those whose specific human qualities categorically (and paradoxically) render them subhuman. Such people, by virtue of this process, are at best, uprooted or, at worst, treated as utterly superfluous. As Arendt explains,

“To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognised and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all.” (Arendt, 1994: 475)

Accordingly to be uprooted or superfluous is necessarily to be silenced, to be treated as ‘less than human’. Consequently, the many multitudes of people in the world who are made superfluous assume the most burdensome consequences of abstract thought. Their relative impoverishment provides the most acute living example of ‘the vicious interconnection between abstract thought and what actually happens’. Incidentally, it is hoped at this juncture that one can clearly see, as per the previous chapter’s discussions of Curthoys’ philosophy, the

power relations at work in this scenario though they are not expressly referred to by Arendt as such. And like Curthoys, the inherent wrongness of such power relations leads Arendt to refuse outright any notion that such power can be compromised with. Rather, it must be opposed entirely, for, as Arendt notes:

“One must remember that in choosing the lesser of two evils one still chooses evil.” (Arendt)

Accordingly, in light of the inherently unjust conditions to which so many human beings are subject there is, in Arendt’s philosophy, an implicit obligation upon each person to act (i.e., to share their unique perspective with as many people as possible) as best they can within the constraints of their particular situation. For each public action brings with it an opportunity for world renewal and enrichment. That is, when one makes oneself seen and heard in public, so long as it is done in the spirit of plurality, one potentially opens the way for others to be seen and heard in kind (Arendt, 1998: 175-247). Accordingly, to act ‘for love of the world’⁵ in this way firmly situates one in the realm of the real, rendering them able to see most clearly what *is* and, thus, past the confusions of abstract thought which always threatens plurality. In this way, such action is no less than a simultaneous realisation of the Socratic wisdom and Christian love referred to in Chapter 2 herein.

It should now be clear, then, that Arendt’s appeal to become fluent in the language of the ‘concrete’ is indeed necessary and as timely as ever. For, if abstract thought gives way to real-life injustices, it stands to reason that thought grounded in reality, in plurality, is best placed to right them. The first step in this direction is described by Arendt as follows:

“...the basically simple principle in question here is...that one can resist only in terms of the identity that is under attack. Those who reject such identifications on the part of a hostile world may feel wonderfully superior to the world, but their superiority is then truly no longer of this world; it is the superiority of a more or less well-equipped cloud-cuckoo-land.” (Arendt, 1993: 18)

⁵ *For Love of the World* forms the subheading to Elisabeth Young-Bruehl’s biography of Arendt (2004). It captures beautifully both what inspired Arendt and what she sought, through her work, to inspire in others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is implicit within the philosophy of Hannah Arendt that in order to counter notions of 'less than human' we must affirm each one's 'fully human' status. As has been seen in Chapter 2, this cannot be done through faulty humanisms which fail to recognise the unquantifiable humanness of each and every person, nor can it be achieved through the kind of deconstruction which refuses to acknowledge the concrete existence of *any* human beings. Indeed both these perspectives, given as they are to various degrees of abstraction and ideological reasoning, imply an indefensible and unworkable compromise with the power structures in which they are inextricably caught. Rather, an affirmation of each one's irreducible humanness is only possible through a mode of humanist thought that is firmly rooted in common sense. Namely, one that is shaped by *human plurality* which, therefore, both reflects and promotes the need for each and every necessarily unique person to act in the world and be heard.

Chapter 4 - Luce Irigaray and 'the other of the other'

“We cannot share the world as it already is, with the exception of the natural world... 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.”

(Irigaray, 2008: 136)

It is clear from her prolific body of work that contemporary feminist philosopher, Luce Irigaray, is both acutely aware of and deeply concerned about the inherent abstractness of mainstream Western thought. How we think, notes Irigaray, largely determines our material existence. Accordingly, when prevailing modes of thought do not correspond to the intrinsic value of each utterly unique yet equally human individual (which is to say, the *concrete reality* of 'humans here and now'), human beings everywhere are denied, albeit to different degrees, the right to a fully human existence or, in other words, the right to equally share in and contribute to the world. (Irigaray, 2002; 2008)

The absence in Western thought of women as women

What makes Irigaray's take on abstract thinking unique is the particular feminist hermeneutic she applies to this phenomenon. A philosopher of sexual difference, Irigaray believes that the sexual specificity which marks each person is a fundamental aspect of human ontology. That we are at least two sexes – female and male – is an ontological fact of human existence. Implicit within this ontological claim is the irrefutable fact of our embodiedness which, aside from always being sexed in one of at least two genders, encompasses certain cognitive faculties that mark us also as thinking beings. Our experience of thinking – indeed, our experience of everything - is *always* an embodied experience. Accordingly, women and men alike are beings of flesh and mind with neither sex being more or less endowed with one or the other of these two indivisible qualities. Thus, Irigaray makes clear that though women and men are placed differently in the world (that is, their differently sexed morphologies give rise to different types of lived experience and subjecthood), they have an equal and unqualified claim to full humanity and all that this necessarily entails, not least the right to be granted recognition as an irreducibly human individual. (Irigaray, 1985; 2002; 2004)

For Irigaray, it is the failure in mainstream Western thought to properly identify our ontological condition – i.e., as corporeal, sexually dimorphic beings – that constitutes the heart of its abstractness. Irigaray traces this clear departure from reality back to Plato⁶. It is Platonic metaphysics that firsts posits the notion that the world of ideas is the fundamental site of reality and, therefore, infinitely more real (and, thus, infinitely more worthy) than the physical world and all it contains (including physical human beings). Or, in other words, the Platonic ‘Idea’ or ‘Form’ is thought of as the ‘essence’ of things, while the different types of matter that constitute the physical world are thought of as more or less imperfect copies of their corresponding Forms. Because Plato reached this conclusion in an era of overwhelming male-bias, it is not surprising that the Form of the human being is one which has, from Plato’s time onward, primarily been regarded as de facto male. Consequently, men and women are not seen as different manifestations of the same Idea of ‘the Human’ but, rather, as better or worse approximations of it. (Irigaray, 1985: 243-364)

Accordingly, Irigaray posits that mainstream Western thought, despite initial appearances to the contrary, conceives of humankind as sexually monomorphic or, to be more precise, as solely sexed in the masculine. Thus, humankind is conceptually reduced to an exclusively male species in which each one’s value (which is to say, each one’s ‘humanness’) is primarily determined by how closely they embody the male ideal. Needless to say, those that fare worst within this conceptual framework are women. In this scenario – which is our present-day scenario – women have no sexual specificity of their own. They are at best imperfect men, forever barred from recognition as fully human by virtue of their perceived anatomical incompleteness. Women are thus the exception that proves the rule; the ‘Other’ that confirms the ‘sameness’ of human/male morphology. (Irigaray, 1985a; 1993; 2004; 2007)

“...the feminine has become, in our languages, the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract non-existent reality.” (Irigaray, 2007: 12)

⁶ Irigaray charges Western philosophy, beginning with Plato, as being the source from which all abstract thought in the West originates – “(philosophical discourse) lays down the law to all the others.” (Irigaray, 1985: 159).

Clearly, there is a tremendous gulf between the reality of human existence and the abstract thought which characterises mainstream Western discourse. And there is a constant attempt to bridge this gap through further abstractions. As has already been shown, the sexual specificity of women, which posits them as one half of a sexually dimorphic species, is explained away through notions which reduce them to a poor replica of the male sex. In a simultaneous move, the ‘burden’ of our physicality⁷ is also explained away by this mode of abstract thought that is overwhelmingly weighted against women. For, despite the fact that embodiedness is an undeniable concrete fact for each human being, all aspects of human corporeality (and with it, notions of ‘vile’ immanence) are conceptually shifted onto women whose inferior status is more or less confirmed via this theoretical move. Correspondingly, the mind as the human quality which most corresponds to abstract notions of Platonic reality is, in an act which conceptually severs mind from body, conceived to be more rightly the property of men. In this way the conflation of ‘Man’ with ‘the Human’ is additionally fused with notions of pure transcendence.⁸ (Irigaray, 1985; 1985a; 1996; 2004)

Consequently, where women *as* women – sexed independently from men – do not feature in predominant modes of thought, their material circumstances amount to greater or lesser degrees of oppression. And this type of oppression is of the character set out in Chapter 2 – namely, it is underpinned by hidden relations of power which seek to divide humanity into a hierarchical binary relation. In this instance, Irigaray is referring to hierarchical relations between women and men in which the latter wields the power over the former. And, like both Curthoys and Arendt, Irigaray sees no solution to this situation other than to oppose, utterly and completely, all relations of power wherever they exist. Accordingly, there is a certain synchronicity between Curthoys’ understanding of genuine feminist principles and her own.

“When (women’s) movements aim simply for a change in the distribution of power, leaving intact the power structure itself, then they are resubjecting themselves, deliberately or not, to a phallographic order.” (Irigaray 1985: 81)

⁷ For, in Plato’s view, physicality, which is always an imperfect copy of the Idea, obscures its truth and, as such, is indeed a burden.

⁸ Though Plato specifically theorised a split between body and soul (rather than body and mind), Platonic philosophy nevertheless paved the way for current notions of the Cartesian subject which is comprised of two separate, disconnected aspects - thought (mind) and extension (body). Needless to say the Cartesian perspective confers value only upon the former aspect.

However, this is not to deny the fact that many men also experience oppression in the present ‘phallographic’ order.⁹ For, as shall be seen in the following discussion of topological space, the primary oppression of women (which all women experience differently depending on their particular worldly situation) provides the foundation upon which all manner of oppressions unfold and from which none are wholly immune. Suffice it to say, though, that it is mainly women, by virtue of their exclusion in Western thought, who are most deeply embedded in oppressive relations, which is to say, silence. For where women’s specificity is denied altogether, as Irigaray is asserting, they are necessarily unable to express themselves *as* women. (Irigaray, 1985; 1985a; 1996; 2004; 2007)

Women’s silence

With respect to the silencing of women – silencing of women *as* women - Irigaray notes that their dehumanised status not only bars them from being extensively listened to as equals (equal with respect to their human value) but from being able to properly articulate their experiences in the first place. For, as Irigaray shows, if one scratches the surface of Western language, its apparent universality gives way to a covertly masculine perspective – one that exclusively follows the lines of male morphology and, as such, one which ill suits the needs of women to express themselves in and on their own terms.

“...the feminine grammatical gender itself is made to disappear as subjective expression, and vocabulary associated with women often consists of slightly denigrating, if not insulting, terms which define her as an object in relation to the male subject. This accounts for the fact that women find it so difficult to speak and be heard as women.”

(Irigaray, 2007: 12-13)

Language is a prominent theme in Irigaray’s analysis of the connections between abstract thought and human harms. This, no doubt, is in part because she is influenced by – and indeed

⁹ Irigaray’s reference to the ‘phallographic order’ is her particular way of describing our present Western social order in which the phallus is highly esteemed as *the* symbol of male power which, in turn, is always equated with domination and, hence, oppression (Irigaray, 1985).

a leading proponent of – feminist deconstruction¹⁰ (which, in itself, is a somewhat problematic description of her position¹¹). Yet, Irigaray’s focus on language is perhaps mostly due to her understanding that human beings predominantly *think* in language. It is through our language and the further thought it gives rise to that we shape our world. Thus, Irigaray exposes the fact that it is our present language, formed outside the perspective of women, on which the present-day monosexual culture has been built. And it is here that Irigaray’s Lacanian background becomes relevant, for her theory that women *as* women are conceptually erased prior to the process of language formation – an erasure which ensures that any resulting language will be vulnerable to both abstraction and misogyny – has its roots in Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory. (Irigaray, 1985; Whitford, 1991)

Irigaray’s psychoanalytic approach to the problem

To explain, Lacan separates the world into two realms (or two successive psychological stages); the pre-language, maternal realm of the imaginary (in which the infant is still somewhat symbiotically attached to its mother and in which the most elementary bodily needs and functions make up the majority of experience) and the symbolic order (the paternal realm of intelligible language into which one enters as a separately identifiable subject and in which the ‘messiness’ of one’s corporeality is conceptually, if not actually, left behind in the maternal realm). Yet, the imaginary does not cease to exist for one after they have entered the symbolic order. Rather, it is merely repressed – a necessary step lest the chaotic incomprehensibility of the imaginary disrupt the ordered representations of the symbolic. Accordingly, one might visualise the symbolic order as a contained sphere of meaning whereas the imaginary is an

¹⁰ At this point it is important to clarify that Irigaray’s particular deconstructionist method does not give rise to the type of surreational theory discussed in Chapter 2. Rather her philosophy, concerned as it is with the “conditions (of dominant discourses and) their effects “ (Curthoys, 1997: 80) and what these mean for actual human beings, provides it with firm theoretical foundations. And though one would be hard-pressed to find Irigaray’s philosophy being described, on the whole, as humanist, her insistence that the actuality of human beings in the world be recognised as such nevertheless infuses her work. Hence, there is arguably a certain humanist element throughout all Irigaray’s philosophy which is exemplary of the type being argued for in this thesis.

¹¹ In reinforcement of the previous footnote, Irigaray, like Curthoys (see Chapter 2), is deeply concerned with the tendency of certain feminist theorists to deconstruct the human being to the point of conceptual non-existence (resulting in, what Curthoys calls, ‘surreational’ feminist theory). Of this practice, which necessarily neutralises sexual specificity, Irigaray states, “It would be better to designate and express what is before claiming to neutralize or create in ignorance of what is erased in these processes...Women and men exist. Why sacrifice their reality to belonging to an abstract human kind that remains ill-defined?” (Irigaray, 1996: 128). Thus, for Irigaray, such thought is no less abstract (and, thus, no less dangerous) than the thought borne out of Platonic metaphysics.

inexplicable pulsating gush which surrounds the symbolic order forever threatening to perforate its boundaries and disrupt its meanings. (Felluga; Whitford, 1991)

Working within a Lacanian framework, Irigaray sees that the imaginary, as the realm of ‘pre-meaning’, lays the foundations for language formation. That the formation of language has created an order in which the female sex, as non-derivative from the male sex, goes entirely unrepresented is, for Irigaray, indicative that there is something deeply amiss in the realm of pre-meaning. For this reason, Irigaray makes the assertion that a figurative murder of the primal mother has, via the mandate of the present symbolic order, taken place within the maternal realm of the imaginary and that this act was committed in order for the male child to discard the corporeality in which his mother enshrouded him (associated as it is with the most fearsome death and decay) and thereby ascend (transcend) to the realm of language (the symbolic order) where the law of the father reigns supreme. The infant daughter, on the other hand, by virtue of her perceived maternal destiny (a perception made in light of her female sex), was never granted full exit from the maternal realm – a fact which Irigaray claims attests to women’s lack of sexual differentiation in the present order and all the deprivations that this lack entails. (Irigaray, 1995: 34-52)

Thus, for Irigaray, we live in a male symbolic order in which all things are represented in terms of a particular male perspective - one that, by and large, confines men and women (both symbolically and socially) within a hierarchical binary relation in which the former’s greater privilege comes at the expense of the latter’s right to a full human existence. It is this general circumstance which leads Irigaray to describe women as the substrate upon which men construct their world and from which they draw their power. Everything about Irigaray’s use of the term ‘substrate’ implies silence, subservience and immobilisation. Consequently, it is clear that this position significantly constrains women from acting in ways which could lead to their positive re-evaluation in the current order (which would necessarily change that order) and thus free them from the deeply negative values with which they are presently associated and upon which their oppression is erroneously justified. (Irigaray, 1995:47-52)

The substitutability of women

From this observation, Irigaray shows that what little value there is for women in the current order is distorted in type and reflective of women’s substrate-like position. Specifically,

Irigaray claims that the role of wife and mother, as it is has been shaped through the predominant male perspective, is the only role available in the current order that heralds any recognisable value for women. Yet Irigaray cautions that this apparent value ought not to be confused with the actual immeasurable worth of mothers (who bring human life into this world) and genuine lovers (who affirm such life through their love). Indeed, the infinite value of these human (and, with respect to the mother, uniquely female) capacities is concealed in the present order by virtue of its reductive conception of the wife/mother 'role' – a conception which reduces women's maternal and erotic love to a function primarily designed to perpetuate the male genealogy (Irigaray, 1996: 19-33). "In other words" says Irigaray, "a woman's love is defined as a familial and civil duty". (Irigaray, 1996: 22)

Thus the limited conception of women in the present order is conflated with the reductive role of wife/mother in ways which obscure, even further, the irreducible human value of each woman. To explain, the unrepeatable singularity of each woman (which always affirms her unique female sex) is necessarily concealed by pervasive notions of sub-humanness and carnality. Correspondingly, the narrow confines of the wife/mother role are such that there is no room for the particularities which differentiate and distinguish each woman as an unrepeatable, unique, femininely-sexed human being. Consequently, it is possible for *any* woman to assume this role that is, at least in the perspective of the present order, a woman's destiny. And, by virtue of this, women are seen as utterly replaceable and interchangeable with one another. (Irigaray, 1995: 55)

In this regard Irigaray claims that women today are generally reduced to silent units of exchange within a masculine currency in which one woman is readily substituted for another - "one woman + one woman + one woman" (Irigaray, 1995: 55). That this creates tension between women, who must vie with one another for this sole position of male esteem, is of much concern to Irigaray. For women's tendency to exist together in rivalry, rather than in solidarity, is a situation which only intensifies their oppression. (Irigaray, 1995: 45)

[The urgent need for a topology of open spaces](#)

The overall problem, as Irigaray sees it, is one of space or, more precisely, a lack thereof. There is no space, metaphorically speaking, between the sexes - that is, between women and men.

They are fused together by spurious notions of sameness which reduces each man to greater or lesser versions of ‘the Same’ (i.e., ‘the same of the Same’) and each woman to the status of ‘the Other of the Same’. This, in turn, also indicates a lack of space within the realm of each sex – that is, a lack of space between women and a lack of space between men. For Irigaray sees that the substitutability of women is a result of their compression into an ill-fitting and abstract definition of ‘Woman’ as it is delineated in the present order. Thus women exist together in such suffocating confinement that the uniqueness of each one, along with the shared specificity of their female sex, has no space within which it can be recognised, let alone flourish (Irigaray, 1995: 55). Men, too, exist together within the airless boundaries of ‘Man’ which have been drawn so tightly that they necessarily exclude the particular singularities that render each man unique – hence Irigaray’s description of men in the present order as “a sort of undifferentiated magma...” (Irigaray, 1996: 48)

Accordingly, Irigaray’s identification of the current order’s spaceless-ness is seen by her as both the cause of abstract thought and its consequence. It is no less than a self-perpetuating cycle of absurdity. For where human beings are not afforded the conceptual space to step back from one another and perceive “what and who we are as humans here and now” (Irigaray, 2008: 136), the reality of human beings as they actually exist in the world is almost inevitably excluded from thought. And where thought refuses to correspond to the real existence of human beings, its concoctions inevitably play out in real life to the detriment of human beings everywhere. Indeed, thinking is how we make sense of the world and wherever abstract thought is present in any significant way, there will be attempts to squeeze human life into its abstract patterns lest the world cease making sense. (Irigaray, 2002; 2007; 2008)

That the way the world makes sense at present favours some more than others is clear but, as Irigaray clarifies, each human being is oppressed to some degree by the spaceless-ness of the current order. Accordingly, if each human being is to live a full and rich existence that is necessarily free from oppression, she/he needs space in which to become - “To become means fulfilling the wholeness of what we are capable of being.” (Irigaray cited in Braidotti, 1994: 111). Thus ‘becoming’ for Irigaray is at once a life-affirming and reality-affirming movement that frees human beings from those spurious definitions of abstract thought which seek to reduce and rigidify each one as either same or Other (Whitford, 1991: 47).

The recognition of sexual difference as an ethical obligation

Consequently there is a dire need for spaces to open up between us and this must, asserts Irigaray, begin with a distancing of one sex from the other. For if such a space were to unfold between the two sexed genres, it would bring with it the clarity of distance in which each sex could recognise the other's irreducible difference. The very act of recognition would affirm the other's right to exist on her/his own terms free from oppression – that is, to exist as 'the other of the other' rather than 'the Other of the Same'. (Irigaray, 1996: 103-108)

“Recognizing you means or implies respecting you as other, accepting that I draw myself to a halt before you as before something insurmountable, a mystery, a freedom that will never be mine, a subjectivity that will never be mine, a mine that will never be mine.”
(Irigaray, 1996: 104)

To be authentically recognised in this way is to be brought out from under the cloak of abstract thought and perceived in the clear light of reality. That is to say, it is to be acknowledged and valued as irreducibly human; as one of the (at least) two sexed genres which together constitute humanity; as a manifestation of the indissoluble connection between body and mind; and as an unrepeatable, unique, individual whose intrinsic human worth always defies quantification. (Irigaray, 1996: 103-108; 2008)

Indeed, to create such a relating space between the sexes is simultaneously to bring into everyone's view the particular uniqueness of each and every human being or, in other words, an opening of space between the two sexual realms is conducive to a simultaneous opening of space within each realm so that the uniqueness of each woman comes into view for all other women and, correspondingly, the singularity of each man comes into view for all other men. Consequently, in the open, space-filled topology that Irigaray envisages, women are no longer an unlimited source of interchangeable, undervalued 'functionaries' destined for the 'wife/mother' role. Rather, through each woman's new recognition of the other as a distinctly unique, undeniably female (yet never substitutable) being, it is conceivable that women (in their infinite diversity) could then start to redefine, through speaking with one another in the development of a language which positions them as subjects, what it is to exist *as* a woman,

sexually differentiated from man – thus shoring up the boundaries (or the surrounding space) of their genre and safeguarding it from the dangers of abstract thought. (Irigaray, 1996; 1995; 1993; 2004)

Correspondingly, the possible relating spaces that an open topology could create between men would also allow them to view each other in the light of reality – that is, outside of the concept of Man (the measure of all things), without the foundation of a feminine substrate and as just one half of humankind. In short, the reality-based perceptions of self that an open topology could lend to men could conceivably allow them to be (and thenceforth become) in ways which correspond to the factual reality of their limitations and, thus, in harmony with the concurrent becomings of the other half of humankind – women. (Irigaray, 2004: 52-61)

Accordingly, it is made clear by Irigaray that for relating spaces to open up, abstract thinking and the oppressions to which it gives rise must be opposed at every turn. And on this, Irigaray notes, to stay grounded in reality one must constantly remain aware of the fact that the human species is equally comprised of both women and men with neither being reducible to the other (Irigaray, 1993; 1996; 2002; 2004; 2008). So long as this is persistently acknowledged and respected, human beings will be free to boundlessly become.

“The unity that (women and men) form, from the beginning, as human species is of course only a first reality from which to initiate human becoming. What the ultimate unity will be, we cannot anticipate: it will depend upon the cultivation of one’s Being by each one and upon the cultivation of the relation between the two.”
(Irigaray, 2002: 106)

Consequently, implicit in Irigaray’s appeal is the ethical obligation on the part of each person to continually affirm the reality of sexual difference so that each human being may eventually become without restraint and in accordance with their particular sexed morphology (which, to reiterate, always places women differently in the world to men – though equal with respect to human value - and, hence, gives rise to different lived experience). Or, in Irigarayan psychoanalytic terms, it is an ethical obligation to reverse the matricide in the imaginary and alter the order of the symbolic so that it is representative of *all* humankind. Moreover it is an ethical obligation which corresponds to the Socratic wisdom and Christian love which

characterises the work of both Curthoys and Arendt. And it is through the fulfilment of this ethical obligation that Irigaray perceives the building of a world which can be shared by all – a world in which the reality of each person as ‘the other of the other’ is both central to our thinking and affirmed in our material relations. (Irigaray, 2008)

Conclusion

In conclusion, Luce Irigaray makes it irrefutably clear that to think about the *actuality* of human beings - that is, to think “what remains unthought” (Irigaray, 2002: 108) – is the only way to clear up the confusions of currently prevailing abstract discourses and, thus, begin the urgently needed process of human healing. Indeed, every carefully chosen word of Irigaray’s philosophy aims to reveal that we are each always ‘the other of the other’ but until there is a significant realisation of this, certain people will continue to be unjustly treated as ‘the Other of the Same’ while certain others will remain shackled to the impossible (and ultimately undesirable) ideal of ‘the same of the Same’.

Chapter 5 – Conclusion

It is not in contention that the philosophies of Jean Curthoys, Hannah Arendt and Luce Irigaray are all highly original. Accordingly, the common message at the heart of each of these three philosophies – that we must, to the best of our ability, ground our thinking in reality – is enhanced when the particular angle of each is incorporated into a larger picture. For instance, Curthoys' explanation of the perspective of the oppressed as that which can remedy the harms of extreme deconstruction, Arendt's account of human plurality as that which must be privileged over ideology and Irigaray's insistence that sexual difference be asserted in the face of insidious monosexual notions illuminate different dimensions of the same problem – the existing tendency towards extreme modes of abstract thinking and the inevitable, always unjustifiable, losses of human freedom which result from this tendency. For freedom, on all three accounts, is simply for each human being to be regarded free from the distortions of pure abstraction. That is, to be regarded in one's unrepeatability as an immeasurably valuable human being – worthy of being seen and heard as such and, thus, of equally contributing to the richness of our shared human world.

However, the different layers that Curthoys, Arendt and Irigaray add to our understanding of this issue do not meet with one another merely at the moment of conclusion. Rather, there are significant points of connection between these three philosophies throughout. For each viewpoint, by demanding that *every* human being be unequivocally recognised as such (which necessarily entails a clear acknowledgement of each one as immeasurably valuable, constitutive of human plurality and sexed in at least one of the two genres which equally make up humankind), calls upon each one of us to look beyond the seeming naturalness of oppression. Only in this way can the inherent *unnaturalness* of oppression come into view and, simultaneously, insight be attained concerning one's own existence in relation to the lives of all others - namely, that we are each of immeasurable human worth and that this worth can only be validated within relations of reciprocity (e.g., the full validation of one person's worth requires the full validation of *every* person's worth).

Since this insight can only be reached independently - outside of the abstractions of the status quo and, thus, through a deep connection with reality - it is characteristic of the Socratic wisdom which is made explicit in Curthoys' work but which is just as present at an implied level throughout the work of Arendt and Irigaray respectively. Moreover such insight,

regardless of how it is specifically theorised within the respective works of Curthoys, Arendt and Irigaray, makes clear the moral obligation on the part of each one to unconditionally oppose any notions which serve to quantify (or indeed, nullify) the unquantifiable worth of each human being. Consequently, this moral obligation is at the same time a duty to fully oppose hidden relations of power (Curthoys), to act for love of the world (Arendt) and to aid in human becoming (Irigaray). Indeed, the different ways that this obligation is expressed throughout the three preceding chapters serve to illuminate the same ethical stance of all three philosophers – namely, that we are each bound to act humanely with respect to other human beings for all our sakes. Only through such loving action can the type of shared world that Irigaray envisages and that Arendt places as central to the existence of humankind be created. For this reason, the theme of Christian love associated by Curthoys with this stance is no less evident in the philosophies of Arendt and Irigaray even though it is not overtly referred to as such.

Ultimately, the respective philosophies of Curthoys, Arendt and Irigaray all seek to make visible the immeasurable human value of each unique person and, in doing so, highlight the gross injustice of any situation where one's rightful claim to full humanness is undermined. And, at this point, we are brought back to their shared central concern which is also the central concern of this thesis: the need to return to a form of humanist thought which reflects the intrinsic value of each human being. It is a need which extends to all areas of human life, whether privileged or impoverished, and one that can only be met through the cooperative efforts of as many people as possible – efforts that equally concern each one's capacity to listen as well as to make themselves heard. For the contribution of each one's necessarily unique perspective can only enhance our sense of reality and, thus, secure our thought more firmly within its humanising light.

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