

Roland J. De Vries

Becoming Two in Love: Kierkegaard, Irigaray, and the Ethics of Sexual Difference
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Reading Kierkegaard can be both a liberating and a challenging experience for a feminist philosopher. His insistence on the unique subjectivity of the individual can be an empowering concept for a feminist reader, but these moments in his work need to be reconciled with others that include statements such as "the woman is and will be the man's ruination as soon as he contracts a continuing relationship with her" (Kierkegaard 1988a, 297). Misogynist statements appear all too frequently in Kierkegaard's writings, but he cannot be read as a misogynist in a straightforward way. He addresses his reader "indirectly" through utilizing no less than thirteen pseudonyms or characters that become the "voices" of different points of view on particular topics, characters that reappear in a number of publications, arguing with one another. Even his so-called religious writings under his own name cannot be taken to be Kierkegaard's final view as they are published strategically alongside the pseudonymous texts in order to cast attention away from his own authorship, claiming he writes as "without authority . . . as a reader of the books, not as the author" (Kierkegaard 1998, 12). Thus, whereas some feminist scholars have critiqued Kierkegaard for his views on women, others claim that Kierkegaard not only provides examples of women who are empowering, but also that his mode of indirect communication opens up a space in which women can find their own voice and subjectivity.¹

In *Becoming Two in Love*, Roland De Vries clearly follows the latter tradition. He draws on Christian notions of love, as explored by Kierkegaard in his pseudonymous and religious writings, and puts these into dialogue with Luce Irigaray's idea that respect of sexual difference is the basis of love, in order to discover whether men and women might form a unity through encounter and love (219). The book itself is structured in such a way that a reader not familiar with either Irigaray or Kierkegaard receives a solid introduction to the basic tenets of each thinker's work that later become relevant for De Vries's own argument. Part one outlines Irigaray's ethics of sexual difference as she develops the concept in the third phase of her writings. Part two investigates Kierkegaard's account of love and the development of his theory of human becoming. In the final and third part of the book, Irigaray and Kierkegaard are brought together into a conversation whereby De Vries aims to establish "a

¹ For a range of feminist views on Kierkegaard, see Léon and Walsh 1997.

theological ethics of sexual difference" (150). Although De Vries begins his book with an examination of Irigaray, in this review I will concentrate on his reading of Kierkegaard. The challenge for De Vries in this project is to demonstrate that the nineteenth-century Dane, shaped and influenced by his own patriarchal culture, has something of significance to contribute to contemporary feminist philosophy on the subject of love, in which Irigaray and her theory of radical sexual difference as the basis of love stands as a central figure.

As already noted, Kierkegaard employed a range of characters in his writings, and this technique allowed him to develop different views on issues; therefore, although some of these characters have indeed expressed deeply misogynistic views of women, Kierkegaard's characters in fact present a wide range of views on women. One pseudonym, Judge William, in a letter addressed to his errant nephew, praises the benefits of marriage as an example of ethical love that naturally completes the romantic forms of love pursued by his own philandering nephew. De Vries explores William's views on marriage and love and argues that although the Judge in his writing advocates an ethical view of women that refuses to reduce women to objects, nevertheless the Judge "elides woman as subject and defines her according to the identity and needs of man" (108). More broadly, De Vries notes that William's tendency to identify women with nature, with the finite, and as a bridge between man and his striving for the universal, leads to a view where women are little more than the means of opportunity for the self-development of men. De Vries is right in his analysis of the Judge. The following passage from *Either/Or* illustrates the Judge's implicit objectification of his wife:

One thing I thank God with all my soul for is that she is the only one I have ever loved, the first. And one thing I pray God with all my heart for is that He will give me the strength to never want to love another. This is the domestic prayer in which she joins me; for every feeling, every mood, acquires a higher meaning for me by making her party to it. (Kierkegaard 1988b, 386)

Although appearing to praise marriage and his beloved, the Judge's wife is never named in the letter. She has no voice or subjectivity of her own. She may well join her husband in this most earnest prayer, or she may sit quietly, enclosed in her own thoughts, silently enduring the sorrow that she is nothing more than background for her husband's feeling, moods, and happiness. Worse still, the nameless wife may lack all subjectivity, unable to even experience the sorrow of her lack of voice and identity. The reader will never know; the unnamed wife is nameless, her thoughts and identity are concealed and inseparable from her husband, the Judge. Feminist Kierkegaard scholar Amy Hall describes the Judge as an example of a man for whom his wife is little more than an economical continuation of his own pleasure (Hall 2002, 113). The Judge is unable to transform possessive or romantic love into a form of love that knows and respects the autonomy of the other. De Vries recognizes the limitations of the Judge's view on women. Nevertheless, he states: "we will insist that Judge William's account of human becoming is, in important ways, consistent with Irigaray's theory of sexual difference" (109). De Vries justifies this apparent consistency by arguing that the Judge recognizes the "imaginative process" by which human beings become selves. De Vries believes that this also establishes an important continuity between Judge William's account of subjectivity and that of Kierkegaard, a continuity that can form the foundation for a uniquely Kierkegaardian account of

sexual difference. De Vries argues that this continuity can be found in William's and Kierkegaard's respective theories of human existence and becoming, in which each sphere of existence (aesthetic and ethical) is both retained and taken up into higher spheres—such as the ethico-religious sphere. For both William and Kierkegaard, declares De Vries, "the sensate-physical is embraced and transformed within the higher ethical/religious sphere of existence" (144). Thus, it is this emphasis on incomplete identity, the self as always striving to reimagine and realize itself through various existence-spheres and surprising new worldviews, that De Vries discovers a "profound sympathy" between Irigaray and Kierkegaard (155). He argues that both thinkers believe that the identity of the self is not fixed, both provide an alternative vision of the divine, and both seek to overcome the binary opposition between men and women. Thus, De Vries identifies important points where Kierkegaard and Irigaray connect in their respective views that ethical intersubjectivity entails recognition of distinctiveness/difference, and support of the other in attaining that difference. Furthermore, in drawing attention to difference and individuality, both authors emphasize "indirect communication" as the mode of communication appropriate to beings that encounter the mysterious other, and as the mode of communication appropriate to constituting subjectivity. Irigaray does so in order to open up communication in a space that is not foreclosed by coded meaning. Kierkegaard does similar work in his indirect communication in particular, in order to interrogate the question of what it means to exist as a Christian in the world. Irigaray's driving question, "what is it to exist as men and women in the world," is mirrored by Kierkegaard's driving question, "how do I exist as a Christian in the world?" Both try to give voice to the sense of alienation and wonder that accompanies the person who asks the question.

De Vries also identifies an important difference between Irigaray and Kierkegaard. Whereas Irigaray begins with an ontology of sexual difference, Kierkegaard begins with individual subjectivity. Becoming a self in Irigaray's ontology is to respond to two fundamental rhythms or principles at work in the cosmos—two instances of the human: male and female. In Kierkegaard, separation is the result of an existential, epistemological, God-defined gap. De Vries notes that for Irigaray, the universal represents a denial of the two, whereas for Kierkegaard, the singularity of Christ as the one prototype entails one account of sexuality for both men and women. Yet De Vries does not believe that this basis precludes the development of a Kierkegaardian theory of sexual difference. De Vries argues that in Kierkegaard's account, men and women acknowledge their nature as becoming communicative in ways that affirm the dynamic nature of the self, the subjective distance between persons, and the secret relationship between each individual and God. In this ethics of sexual difference, patterns of communication that lead to possession, appropriation, and domination are broken as subjects encounter each other as for the first time. De Vries argues that this ethics of sexual difference is based on an ontology of human subjectivity, rather than sexual difference, or the irreducibility of women and men to one another. De Vries concludes that "Irigarayan indirection can be embraced within, or constitutes part of, a Kierkegaardian ethics of sexual difference" (207). Thus, Irigaray's theory of sexual difference is taken up into a Kierkegaardian and also theologically informed theory of sexual difference as developed by De Vries himself. This is perhaps where, as a feminist philosopher, I am most concerned by De Vries's project. My concern is that Irigaray's insistence on a strong ontology of sexual difference is in danger of becoming lost in De Vries's theologically informed account of sexual difference that

threatens to elide Irigaray. One of the most important gifts of Irigaray's work is that she insists on the centrality of transcendence in the encounter between men and women. For Irigaray, woman is essentially a mystery to man, and man to woman. This mystery is evidenced in the way that Irigaray describes communication between men and women in words and phrases that make possible an encounter in difference: "I hail you; I praise you; I thank you; I celebrate you; I ask you; I bless you; I offer you" (cited in De Vries, 205). As De Vries notes, the "secret vector" here would always be "Who are you?" It is a quality that De Vries notes comes "close at times to the quality of prayer" (Graham Ward cited in De Vries, 205). Prayer, in this sense, opens up to the divine, to the possibility of completely unexpected communication from the other—an encounter that contains the possibility of a radical challenge to my existing knowledge of the other person/the divine. It is this mystery that means wonder is at the basis of communication. Something similar to this sense of wonder is present in Kierkegaard's understanding of the communication between individuals and God. Kierkegaard's own attack on Christendom's appropriation of Christ occurs precisely because he believed Christendom had emptied the wonder and possibility for new creation, or fecundity, out of any notion of a relationship with the divine. Christendom had come to treat Christ as Judge William treated his wife: an occasion for self-transcendence that left the individual trapped in their own self-delusion and the other person, Christ, trapped in an enclosing reserve of secret sorrow. God weeps in secret sorrow, as Judge William's wife might weep, were her subjectivity not so completely effaced from his thoughts and his writings. In Kierkegaard's account, both God and the Judge's wife remain unloved, despite the claims of devotion by their respective lovers. By extension, both the Church and Judge William lack the sense of mystery and transcendence that infuses Irigaray's account of sexual difference as the basis of love.

Although De Vries argues that Kierkegaard himself places the self "under the constraint and discipline of a theological framework in which Jesus Christ is the one who fulfills the law and embodies love" (165), I would suggest that Kierkegaard's writing never simply presumes a theological framework. Rather, his mode of communication, as De Vries recognizes, is in the mode of "how," of plea, address, persuasion, exhortation. It is closer to Irigaray's idea of "love to you"—a plea to the other person, of addressing the other person as though the agapeistic or self-giving love is precisely the new and good news that has never been heard before. It is to ask, with Irigaray, "who are you?" and to understand that this question is the basis of respect, of recognizing both the otherness of God and our neighbor, neither of whom can be reduced to our property. It is asking the question—who are you?—that is the basis of love in both Kierkegaard and Irigaray. The mystery and wonder of love in both Irigaray's and Kierkegaard's writing threatens to disappear in De Vries's analysis at the point where the certainty of faith in Christ takes over.

In his introduction, De Vries himself acknowledges that his own theological presupposition is that "human becoming can only be understood and experienced with reference to Jesus Christ, the one in whom God created the world and through whom creation comes to fulfillment" (xvi). Throughout the book, this presupposition itself remains largely unquestioned or unexplained. That is, Jesus Christ is equated at various points with the formal commandment to love and the prototype of every relationship (including that of sexual difference), but there is no engagement with what this might mean. At one point, De Vries suggests scriptural arguments and

deference to the apostolic word might constrain how one frames and interprets actions appropriate to Christ as the prototype or standard or person for both men and women (171). Yet there is no recognition of the role the "apostolic word" has historically played in assigning particular roles for women—precisely at the point where critique is most strongly needed. It is significant that De Vries does not acknowledge existing feminist scholarship in any depth, nor does it take into account its critique of the masculinity inherent in Christian notions of God. In bringing together Irigaray's notion of love based on sexual difference with unexamined theological presuppositions, De Vries effectively elides Irigaray's demand for a radical discontinuity between men and women and posits a version of sexuate identity that almost effaces the question of sexual difference in light of a universal prototype, Christ. De Vries explains Kierkegaard within theological categories that are not defended or explained, but simply presumed. As a result, the center of De Vries's ethics of sexual difference is not the divine person of either Irigaray or Kierkegaard, but the Christ who is in danger of perpetuating (to bring together Irigaray and Kierkegaard) a masculine Christendom.

De Vries's study engages Kierkegaard and Irigaray on the nature and ethics of sexual difference in a way that openly and honestly engages with the important work of Irigaray, and brings Kierkegaard into conversation with contemporary feminist philosophy. Critical examination of his own theological presuppositions would have strengthened De Vries's reading of both Kierkegaard and Irigaray. De Vries explicitly claims "epistemic primacy" for his theological presuppositions that require him to "refuse" aspects of Irigaray's theological commitments (xvii). However, it is precisely because he privileges these presuppositions that De Vries is in danger of misunderstanding the gift of indirect communication as a model of ethical communication. Both Irigaray and Kierkegaard believe that it is indirect communication that enables new ways of listening and speaking of encountering others in their own subjectivity, thereby making possible relationships of love built on respect rather than domination in this world.

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