

Life, Death, and Participation

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Abstract

Participation is an integral component of life, death of the other, and philosophy. There have been countless discussions on how to best participate in each of these three areas, but very few where all three have been linked together. In this paper, I have attempted to provide a close and careful study of the concept and practices of participation, as well as some of the limits imposed on participation. I have chosen to address this problem by utilizing selected works of Luce Irigaray, as they pertain to participation in life a sexed identity and Jacques Derrida, as they address his ethic of mourning and methods by which one ought to participate in the death of the other. I have also infused my personal thoughts into both of these discussions. In addressing participation in philosophy, I once again turn to Irigaray and Derrida for examples of active participation in philosophy before discussing my organic and unbounded theories of philosophic engagement. I concluded by providing the argument that although there may be limitations to participation by some degree, the opportunities for participation in life, death of the other, and philosophy are plentiful and best chosen by the individual.

Life, Death, and Participation

Participation is defined as the state of being related to a larger whole, taking part in something greater than one's self. This holds true when discussing the way in which one ought to participate in life, in the death of the other, and in philosophy. Throughout this discourse, we shall engage in close and careful study of the concept and practices of participation; during this discussion, the limits of participation will also be explored.

It seems prudent to begin our discourse with thoughts on participation in life. Although there are countless works relating to how best take part in life and in living – more than could ever be discussed in one paper, I will be focusing predominantly on Luce Irigaray's article, "Introducing: Love Between Us," an exploration of participation in life as a sexual and sexed being, and providing some infusion of personal views. In this article, she enters into debate with Hegel and his views on relations between men and women. She states that Hegel's definition of love between women and men is

as it is still often practiced in our time, but also as it is defined by monotheistic, patriarchal religions, or... by theories of sexuality, like the Freudian one... [and] without managing to resolve the problem of the lack of spirit and ethics he observes. He also defines it in terms of his method. Which means that in order to overcome what he terms natural immediacy within the family Hegel turns to pairs of opposites. Hence he is forced to define man and woman as opposites and not as different.¹

What I find noteworthy (or at least more than merely semantic) is that Irigaray highlights that Hegel defines love in terms of *his* method and that *he* is forced to define man and woman as opposites. She brings our attention to this in much the same way that she makes us aware that "the capitalization of the living by a male culture which, in giving itself death as its sole horizon,

¹ Irigaray, Luce. "Introducing: Love Between Us." [I Love to You](#). Routledge, 1996. 20.

oppresses the female.”² These ideals run counter to those of Irigaray, who views “the universal [as it] consists in the fulfillment of life and not in submission to death as Hegel would have it.”³ She believes that we must move ourselves away from “the sacrifice of sexed identity to a universal defined by man with death as its master, for want of having... life flourish as the universal.”⁴ Sexed identity, for Irigaray is an integral component through which one ought to participate in life. It is through participation in life, especially through participation in love, as sexed identities that men and women come to fully realize their genders and each person experiences their unique singularity. Irigaray explains that

*this means that each woman will no longer love her lover as Man (in general), nor will each man love his lover as a woman (who can be replaced by another). The task of making the transition from the singular to the universal thus remains for each person in his or her own unique singularity. Each woman will, therefore, be for herself woman in the process of becoming, the model for herself as a woman and for the man whom she needs, just as he needs her, to ensure the transition from nature to culture. In other words, being born a woman requires culture particular to this sex and this gender, which is important for the woman to realize without renouncing her natural identity.*⁵

In essence, what Irigaray is doing here is recognizing the importance of each person in his or her own unique singularity, so as to say that I am not merely a man, but that I am a man that is a single, unique entity – perhaps as to say I am one lover that can neither love nor be loved like any other. Moreover, she takes the notion of a natural sexed identity and links it with the importance of its transition to and participation in culture.

Irigaray seeks to change culture as it exists to us now; she argues that for too long, “it has been said that happiness is found in the family, the genealogically male family... a family in which woman remains bound to nature and is given the task of... renouncing her own desire

² Ib. at 25

³ Ib. at 24

⁴ Ib. at 26

⁵ Ib. at 27

and her female identity.”⁶ Moreover, in terms of love within culture, Irigaray believes that love is more than just the method by which reproduction occurs, more than just a means to an end. In this vein, she insists that we need to understand that “our new principal task is to make the transition from nature to culture as sexed beings, to become women and men while remaining faithful to our gender. This task, which exists for all women and men, must not be confused with reproduction.”⁷ She argues that participation in this kind of culture, taking part in this kind of love as an end in itself, will serve to engender our children. These engendered children, born as a result of a love that is both corporeal and spiritual, born of sexed love in which lovers contemplate themselves and their lover, will find comfort in their parents, their community, and their world⁸ – serving to further cultivate the culture Irigaray has discussed.

Although Irigaray’s culture of sexed identities is appealing and would create great harmony between women and men, there are aspects of existing culture that significantly limit participation in life as a sexed being and which need to be addressed. One of the greatest barriers to reaching this harmoniousness is the ongoing propagation of the exploitation of women. As Irigaray has made clear, we live in a patriarchal society, and although great strides have been made on account of feminist visionaries, like Irigaray, it seems like the men who dominate society would rather maintain their status than try to create something better. To illustrate, Irigaray offered this Marxist view: “Marx defined the origin of man’s exploitation of woman and asserted that the most basic human exploitation lies in the division of labor

⁶ *Ib.* at 29

⁷ *Ib.* at 30

⁸ *Ib.* at 32

between man and woman.”⁹ Since Marx, views on the participation of women in labour has not changed too greatly, women are still being exploited in the workplace. All one need to do is open a copy of Business Week and see a headline like: “Women’s Pay: Why The Gap Remains A Chasm”¹⁰ to be reminded that we have a long way to go. Right now, studies show women receiving 77% of the pay of their male counterparts on average, although new studies are showing that this figure may be as low as 44% in some cases. This is because most studies “measure the earnings of those who work full-time for an entire year. Only one-quarter of women, though, achieve this level of participation consistently throughout their working lives.”¹¹ These women usually dip into part-time as a result of the need to attend the care of children and elderly parents. Studies have found that “outright discrimination against women probably accounts for only about 10 percentage points of the pay gap... Family responsibilities, too, typically still fall more heavily on women, and neither society nor employers have found good ways to mesh those with job demands.”¹² Irigaray’s need for a change in culture becomes apparent when faced with examples like this, where women are being penalized for their gender in terms of their ability to participate, proper compensation, and appropriate recognition in society. However, the barrier remains, how does one convince another with power that if they give up that power, something greater will come of it and if they do not, all will eventually suffer? Irigaray warns that “without a cultural identity suited to the natural identity of each sex, nature and the universal are parted, like heaven and earth; with an infinite

⁹ *Ib.* at 19

¹⁰ I cannot help but to think that this headline’s key words, ‘gap’ and ‘chasm’, are also very much the language Irigaray would use in some of her works.

¹¹ Bernstein, Aaron. "Women's Pay: Why the Gap Remains a Chasm." Business Week 14 June 2004. 11 Apr. 2007 <http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/04_24/b3887065.htm>.

¹² *Ibid.*

distance between them, they marry no more.”¹³ I believe that in order for great amount of change to come about, a great amount of people are required to participate in bringing about that change. Harmony can be reached if more of us simply tried to take part in something more than ourselves, even is simply taking part in the friendship of another.

Sadly, it is the case that all friendships have an end - death. With this understanding, we pass on to discuss one’s participation in the death of the other. For this discussion, we will examine Jacques Derrida’s The Gift of Death and The Work of Mourning to provide insight into participation and the impossibilities of participation as it relates to the death of the other. Although possessing the unique singularity that Irigaray mentioned in life, Derrida’s view is that upon death, one’s irreplaceability becomes truly seen; he states that “my irreplaceability is... conferred, delivered, ‘given,’ one can say, by death.”¹⁴ This “gift of death” is neither one’s to give nor one’s to take, but something that belongs to that individual alone. Derrida writes:

*I cannot take death away from the other who can no more take it from me in return, it remains for everyone to take his own death upon himself. Everyone must assume his own death, that is to say the one thing in the world that no one else can either give or take.*¹⁵

So it is the case that only I can die my own death, it is inevitable. Ironically, I spend my whole life anticipating, dreading, and preparing for my own death, but in the end, I will never experience it – it does not require my participation, but I will end up participating regardless.

Derrida reminds us that the death of a friend, or death of the other, is something that is inevitable in a friendship¹⁶; one will survive the other and have a responsibility to his or her lost friend. To this extent, using the words of Levinas, Derrida writes that, “I am responsible for the

¹³ Irigaray. 23.

¹⁴ Derrida, Jacques. The Gift of Death. Trans. David Wells. Chicago: The University of Chicago P, 1996. 41.

¹⁵ *Ib.* at 44

¹⁶ Derrida, Jacques. The Work of Mourning. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Chicago: The University of Chicago P, 2001. 1.

death of the other to the extent of including myself in that death... I am responsible for the other inasmuch as the other is mortal.”¹⁷ The survivor of a friendship is left to mourn, to take up the remembrance of the other, to say *adieu*.¹⁸ However, it is in the saying of *adieu*, in the mourning, that the otherness of the other, the true irreplaceability, becomes apparent. Although a friend with whom I may have shared a great deal in common, the otherness, the irreproducibility, becomes glaringly apparent when I attempt to participate in their remembrance. There is no way I could appropriately disclose the thoughts, feelings, inner-most desires, memories of laughter, stories of sadness, and all other elements that that are fully constituent of my friend. The work of mourning will always seem incomplete – yet it is my responsibility to say *adieu*.

Derrida faces and identifies the seeming impossibility of this task when he eulogizes his friend, Sarah Kofman. He writes of what he feels to be the ethic of mourning, how best to fulfil the duty to one’s friend. He argues that eulogies are no place for pity-seeking (eulogizing in such a way as to seek pity from the audience), narcissism (focussing more on the eulogizer than the deceased), and attempting to make amends with the deceased (apologizing for wrong-doings in life). When Derrida attempts to participate in this labour, he discovers that “we cannot say everything, that’s impossible, say everything about Sarah, what she was, what she thought and wrote.”¹⁹ Throughout his labour of mourning, it is apparent that Derrida is struggling to do the impossible, find the right words, and serve remembrance as best he can. He seems aware that his participation will not result in ultimate success, that something will be

¹⁷ Derrida. The Gift of Death. 46

¹⁸ *Ib.* at 47

¹⁹ Derrida. The Work of Mourning. 171.

lacking, that his eulogy will remain incomplete. He ends Kofman's eulogy by saying, "Given back. To the impossible, I mean right up to the impossible."²⁰ This impossibility is, indeed, a limitation to one's participation in the death of the other, but it is an obstacle that must be challenged nonetheless in order to fulfil the duty that one's friendship has charged him or her with.

Although Derrida's eulogies served as a valiant attempt to encapsulate a friend's life lost, I would argue that giving public eulogies and trying to sum the life of the other into words is not necessarily the only way to participate in the death of the other. Some prefer to bear witness to the life of their friends through the arts, be it to transform their feelings towards their friend into a symbolic painting or compose a deep, meaningful requiem. Some prefer to gather with other friends to tell joyous stories of their friend, and some merely to cry alongside others. Some participate through silence and prayer. Some participate by weeping uncontrollably for days. I would not agree that any of these ways of participating in the death of the other is less than meaningful when compared to writing a eulogy. I believe that the death of the other is a personal matter, a private matter, a matter of friendship, and a matter of choice – the fact that people participate in the way that they do, should it be out of love for the other, makes it known that their friend had a truly special meaning to them.

As we have discussed, there are many practises, ideals, barriers, limitations, and views related to one's participation in life and the death of the other. However, what we have yet to discuss is participation in philosophy, although we have been engaged in it since the outset of this paper. During this discussion, we will explore what it means to participate in philosophy

²⁰ Ibid. 188

and whether there is a right or wrong way of going about it. Let us begin by examining the methods by which the philosophers we have discussed thus far have gone about participating in the philosophy of life and death. In Irigaray's philosophy there is a noticeable use of unconventional language, defined as *Écriture féminine*, or gendered women's writing. Sarah K. Donovan of Villanova University writes that this is a result of Irigaray's belief that "that one must enter language (culture) in order to be a subject; she believes that language itself must change if women are to have their own subjectivity that is recognized at a cultural level."²¹ In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray takes it upon herself to address the works of Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas as they relate to sexual difference, love of same, and love of other. In Irigaray's essay, "Sorcerer Love", she challenges Plato on numerous aspects of a speech given by Diotima, as recounted by Socrates. After careful analysis and critique, the loss of love as the intermediary and the path between mortality and immortality was Irigaray's central issue of concern with Diotima's speech, as recounted in Plato's *Symposium*.²² Irigaray's example of using unorthodox language is consistent with other French feminist philosophers, as well as German idealists and numerous other philosophic groups. Critiquing and entering into dialogue with the works of other philosophers is a common practice.

What is not common, however, is Derrida's use of public eulogies as a means of communicating philosophy. This is what he offered in his book, *The Work of Mourning*. Through these eulogies, he was able to bear witness to the lives of his colleagues, comment on

²¹ Donovan, Sarah K. "Luce Irigaray." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. 11 Apr. 2007 <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/i/irigaray.htm#SH4d>>.

²² Irigaray, Luce. "Sorcerer Love." *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. Trans. Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. New York: Cornell UP, 1993. 33.

some of their philosophic achievement, and apply his ethic of mourning. But how is writing a eulogy a method of participation in philosophy? This is clearly not a standard philosophic argument, it is not a set of headings and treatises, and it is not a standard critique. However, I argue Derrida's creation of a eulogy is, indeed, evidence of *active* participation in philosophy as he creates it with some intention to spark dialogue and brings with it the potential for the generation of new ideas. In a similar vein, take these examples: The judgment of a court case in which a sleepwalker attacks her husband is a statement of philosophy, offering itself to a discussion on the philosophy of law and *mens rea*. The decision of a man to splatter an entire jar of raspberry jelly on a canvas is a statement of philosophy, creating a topic of conversation and debate for those engaged in the philosophy of aesthetics. A breakthrough in medical technology that allows the life energy of live cats to be used to heal cancer in a human being would no doubt be at the top of the list of issues for an ethicist to address. Whereas Derrida's eulogy is an *active* participation in philosophic exchange, the sleepwalker, the artist, and the scientist are not *actively* participating in philosophy, yet they are still contributing to the ongoing dialogue and thus, are participating in a *passive* manner.

Where true philosophic advance comes, however, is when individuals *actively* participate. I believe that *active* participation in philosophy is simply entering into dialogue with another, sharing arguments, and working together to allow the ideas to come to terms with themselves. In this sense, active participation allows ideas to bounce off one another, collide with each other, and merge to create new, complex idea, or break apart to gain greater understanding of their foundations. The way by which the ideas come to terms with themselves is intimately linked with the way by which we come to understand these new ideas, dismiss others, and

work to share with one another in the process. I see the dialogue, in whatever form it takes, and the ideas that emerge from it to be something organic, unbound by rules or philosophic traditions.

I argue that there is not necessarily a right or wrong way to become an active participant in philosophy, instead, it is more of matter of whether or not one desires to actively participate. Although there are a number of long-standing philosophic traditions, I don't believe that any of them have the force to limit the ways in which one may participate in philosophic exchange. My reason for saying this is simple, if the same diatribe is delivered time and time again, we go nowhere. If the same message is delivered through written word, song, dance, sculpture, and whatever else, it has new meaning, new arguments which can be formed from it, the chance for new knowledge to be uncovered. This, I believe, this how one should participate in philosophy – in any way he or she deems fit.

In summary, there are countless views on how one ought to participate in life, but the culture of sexed identities discussed by Irigaray seems to promise a great deal of harmony between the sexes and offer the best way by which to experience our unique singularity. Unfortunately, male domination of society and the exploitation of women are significant barriers to reaching this goal. However, through friendship, love, and taking part in something greater than one's self, this obstacle can be overcome. Sadly, what cannot be overcome is death of self and death of the other. Derrida's ethic of mourning outlines one best practice in the participation in the death of the other. Although it may seem that eulogizing a friend may be the best way to bear witness to their life, I offered that one way of participation in mourning may be more appropriate to one person and another to someone else while still honouring the

loss of someone with special meaning. Finally, both life and death hold a place within philosophy. Participation in philosophy comes in many forms, whether it be the use of *Écriture féminine* or engaging in dialogue through a eulogy. There are active and passive forms of participation in philosophy, but it is the active participants that offer the greatest potential for advancement of ideas and understanding. I argued that whether or not one desires to actively participate in philosophy is of a great deal more importance than how they go about it. Participation in philosophy should be something done in whatever way one sees fit. Participation is an integral component of life, death of the other, and philosophy. After careful consideration, although there may be limitations to participation by some degree, the opportunities for participation in each area are plentiful and are best chosen by the individual.

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