Perverse ethics

The body, gender and intersubjectivity

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Abstract This article explores the possibility of an ethical intersubjective relationship through the reconfiguration of the body. The violence of Western culture derives from a particular gendered fantasy of bodily organization. The Western body is constituted through a fear of lack and of loss, or, in psychoanalytic terms, of castration. The subject defined by castration attempts to defend itself against these dual threats by folding in upon itself, thereby precluding any relation with an other. The belief in lack and its partner, scarcity, informs the socio-political structures that mark the current era. However, there are other ways of imagining the body. By re-imagining the body, it becomes possible, not to avoid loss, but rather to alter its meaning. This act allows for a non-appropriative intersubjective relation to come into being.

keywords *body, ethics, difference, intersubjectivity, perversity, polymorphous*

There is one way of looking at value, a way that counts it up and holds onto it. One is the only number in this mathematics: more is just one repeated; less is unthinkable. The favoured operation is addition, the pile getting higher and higher. Subtraction is double-edged – it depends on from whom it is taken away. All effort is expended to be the one taking, not taken from. Giving never occurs to any-one. Nor does this system trust multiplication – far too uncertain. Controlling division is what it is all about. Informing this idea of value, and simultaneously informed by it, is a particular philosophy, mathematics, a way of counting and accounting, of organizing the uni-verse: the values of value. These values – the reification of one as the only number, the preservation of this one against all threats – evaluate us and devaluate some of us, all but one.

Call it a philosophy, an ideology, an economy or a math, this one instantiates a system that succeeds by making itself seem reasonable, by making any other way of thinking unreasonable. The number one is the base of this system, in the sense that the number 10 is the base of Western maths. It is the figure that makes sense of the whole structure. One becomes all, and anything else is virtually unthinkable. My project is to try to think of another kind of numbering that avoids this systemic violence. To do so, we

would need to think of something other than one, to imagine something different.[1]

One is, after all, the basis of an ethics – a way of relating to others – a dangerous ethics, the one by which we live. The danger comes from fear: one is afraid of none, and so it is haunted by loss. The Western body is organized by loss – that is, in psychoanalytical terms, castration. An economy develops out of attempts to defend the subject against the threat of loss. To avoid this risk the subject folds in upon itself and thereby precludes any relation with an other. The fear of loss leads to the socio-political structures that define our era: multinational capitalism, the culture of consumption and the exploitation of and intolerance towards those who are other, not-one.Yet, none of this is inevitable. What I want is not valuable, but priceless, beyond cost and profit, something that cannot be assimilated into capitalist systems of exchange.

I have to start with one, because that is where we are. For psychoanalytic theory and for French feminism, the one, however problematically, is the number of the phallus. Irigaray (1983, 1985) notes that, in Western culture, the male sex is one. This already marks the violence of the economy of castration – what I will call the phallic or masculine[2] economy – for the unification of the male genitals requires either the obliteration of the testicles or their assimilation into the penis. However, this operation seems necessary to exalt the penis to its position in the masculine order: unique, hard, potent. The subject defined by this order coincides with the bourgeois subject: he is an individual, stalwart, powerful, even if he can ever only be a fantasy. The masculine subject is marked by a fantasy of completion. Ideally, though no one can ever live up to this ideal, he exists in and for himself, desiring no commerce with any other. Justified by the belief that he is one, he recoils from the thought of being more or less. Rather, he defines himself as one against those who are different, those always inferior others who do not measure up to his standard.

In classical psychoanalysis, there is one sexual organ, the penis, and this one is the measure of both sexes. One is not certain that the woman has sexual organs, as certainty comes through vision. As Irigaray has noted, the problem with the female body for psychoanalysis is that it sees nothing when it looks at the woman, and therefore believes she has nothing to see (Irigaray, 1985: 47). She, who never had a penis to lose, nonetheless suffers the castration complex, because every one believes she must envy this organ (Freud, 1965: 110). Her own organs are discounted in this scopophilic system. It starts from the beginning in childhood. Freud claims that the vagina is undiscovered before heterosexual intercourse takes place (and even then its importance derives from its complementarity to the penis). Even worse for the girl, the clitoris is nothing but an inferior penis, always smaller than the male organ in this system where size matters. The problem is that she is not, after all, a little girl, she is a little man (Freud, 1965: 104).[3] The girl's difference is obliterated in this reductive comparison with the man, with the phallus, which discounts her inasmuch as she is not 'one of the boys'. The rule of the penis is that every body be judged

according to one ruler. No body is left unscathed by the operations of the phallus, although by no means are all bodies affected in the same way.

The brutal severity of the phallic order derives from its belief that it is under siege. Lacan notes in 'The Seminar on "The Purloined Letter"' (1972) that possession of the phallus is always temporary and, therefore, the man[4] always has something to lose, is always vulnerable. The economy of the one, the masculine economy, makes every relationship into an equation as a way of staving off the imminent danger of otherness. The risk that the other poses is unbearable in this system and, in an attempt to avoid that risk, all transactions are tightly regulated; every exchange is infinitesimally calculated (and calculable). As Hélène Cixous (1981) points out, the goal is to streamline each equation, so that there is no remainder, nothing left over to complicate the deal, no hard evidence that the relationship ever took place. Such a remainder would raise unsettling questions that the phallic subject desperately wants to foreclose, questions about who owes what to whom, though really the answer is unimportant. The danger is in the question's implicating the subject in an exchange with the other, threatening his masterful unity (Cixous, 1981: 47).

'There is something of One', Lacan claims in his 'Love Letter'. He adds, 'This One has resounded endlessly across the centuries' (Lacan, 1982: 138, 139). This number steals the hope of a sexual relation. One fills up all the space there is; where one is there is no room for any other. To use Lacan's terms, in place of the *Autre* is the *autre*, the *objet a*. This object, 'the domestication of the Other', protects the subject from the open encounter with another subject, with radical otherness, and substitutes in the place of that other subject an object which is small and countable (Gallop, 1982: 40–1). The number one 'short-circuits fluid desire by fixing it onto an object', ensuring that its subject suffers no contamination from the other because it has no intercourse with the other (Gallop, 1982: 41). The object that is substituted for the other ensures that phallic sexuality will always turn back upon itself. Recognizing only one form of genitalia (those of the male, the penis, the only one of value), this subject can never reach the other.

As much as the phallic subject would like to avoid commerce with the other entirely, he is still trapped within intersubjectivity, language, the Symbolic. He must, therefore, accept his dependence on otherness, his Symbolic debt. Cixous argues that the phallic system is driven by a fear of this debt, which the man desperately seeks to deny:

> Giving: there you have a basic problem, which is that masculinity is always associated – in the unconscious which is, after all, what makes the whole economy function – with debt. . . . The child *owes* his parents his life and his problem is exactly to *repay* them: nothing is more dangerous than obligation . . . For, the moment you receive something you are effectively 'open' to the other, and if you are a man you have only one wish, and that is hastily to return the gift, to break the circuit of an exchange that could have no end . . . to be nobody's child, to owe no one a thing. (Cixous, 1981: 48)

The masculine subject seeks the safety of autochthony, in the belief that this might shield him from the other. It cannot do so, however, because the debt must be assumed if one is to enter into the Symbolic realm, to avoid

madness. The gift, even (especially) the gift of life, assumes its German meaning of poison: it poisons his life. This structurally mandated intercourse with the other threatens the unity of the phallic subject, who will make it his goal to allow as little circulation (movement, life) as possible.

The phallic defense against the gift, against intersubjectivity, then becomes a strategy of investment. The gift is sublimated, turned into the investment. The latter is acceptable because of its boomerang-like ability to return to the subject. It is at this level, in their response to the gift, that Cixous differentiates the masculine and feminine economies. For the masculine subject, the preoccupation is always with the profit that his outlay will yield and I therefore consider it more correctly termed an investment (Cixous and Clément, 1986: 87). Following this strategy, the man gives only what is absolutely necessary. In all his dealings, the masculine subject is governed by the principle of thrift which seeks to limit risk. As possible, he recuperates his investment with the goal of the greatest profit, the greatest pleasure (Cixous, 1981: 47). This is not to say that investment is easy for the man; he is constantly forced to balance the desire for maximum acquisition at minimal cost with the risk of failure that this entails. Investment is the business of his life and so he busies himself with his commodities. Each object is obsessively counted and calculated, researched and reasoned, so that the investor can hold on to it for ever, even (especially) when he 'gives' it away.

The phallic economy is obsessed with the proper, with property. The goal is for an interaction that is clean (*propre*), that leaves no trace, no mark that the subject was ever vulnerable. Frightened by the wound that the other implies, the subject attempts to pile up property to assure himself that he will not suffer any loss. Correlative to his investment planning is the man's policy of saving, of keeping money in piles and out of circulation, of holding back something in reserve so that finally, when all debts are called in, he may still have something for himself, he may not lack, he may not be castrated. The terrible question of the other's desire is obliterated, although this can only be accomplished by obliterating the other (Žižek, 1989: 114). The desire for a proper property (*propre*, in its meaning of 'belonging to the self') dictates the ingestion of the other. Otherness is appropriated and assimilated to the body of the subject. The masculine subject is the ultimate market player; he cannot lose, because even his losses can be transmuted into profit. Indeed, this can be seen in the corporate practice of taking a loss which is eventually recuperated and transmuted into greater gains. The question then becomes, at what cost?

For Cixous, whose work relies upon Bataille's concept of expenditure (1986), the crucible of any system is the way in which it handles loss. In the phallic economy, loss is the ultimate disaster, that which must be forestalled at all costs. Since the body has been sacrificed for the sake of the genitals, for the promise of the phallus, the penis is all that is left, and loss (that is, *its* loss, castration) is death. Rather than suffer loss, this economy is prepared to kill, to do anything to make sure the deal goes well. But, perhaps, the easier thing to do is to close up around the penis, that part of

the male anatomy that represents loss, so as to protect and preserve it. This is accomplished by mourning, by withdrawing back into the self those cathexes made outside of it:

> Man cannot live without resigning himself to loss. He has to mourn. It's his way of withstanding castration. He goes through castration, that is, and by sublimation incorporates the lost object. Mourning, resigning oneself to loss, means not losing. When you've lost something and the loss is a dangerous one, you refuse to admit that something of your self might be lost in the lost object. So you 'mourn,' you make haste to recover the investment made in the lost object. (Cixous, 1981: 54)

Fearing the cut of castration, the man cuts himself off from the world first, in the hopes that (at least) one man *is* an island. Yet, to be entirely severed from the world, to have no libidinal ties to any other, is to be dead. This economy is death-oriented, death-dealing, 'basic structure of property relations defined by mourning' (Cixous, 1981: 54).

The phallic economy is dedicated to the prevention of loss and pain, to the prevention of negativity within this system. Because of the fear of lack, castration is a loss of control, and is therefore devastating, it is nothing short of a calamity. The subject of this order, coincident with, not coincidentally, the bourgeois subject of in the Enlightenment, represses loss and becomes a subject believing in his own control. (This can be seen in the subject's belief in the possibility of control over pain through modern medicine.) In repressing loss, the phallic subject effectively 'loses loss', and that loss then returns to haunt the phallic economy (Cixous, 1981: 55). And, this is, indeed, a system of creating ghosts, of separating body and soul and body and mind: the result of which is aggression, carnage and death. Pain becomes a negative that this system must tame in order to function. De Sade, who represents a self-proclaimed threat to this Enlightenment episteme despite his obvious phallic investment, chooses the opposite route. Pain and loss are embraced (especially those of the other). He critiques those philistines and bourgeois who so desperately seek to avert pain and instead authored a bedroom philosophy of imposing pain, of violence. Yet, choosing the opposite fails to get de Sade out of the system.[5] The adoption of pain is no answer to the phallic problem of loss, because it reproduces the binary in which pain can be only positive or negative.

What I wish to question is the ideology that underlies the belief in lack and loss. The phallic subject fears lack, whether it is the lack of the penis or of the mother's milk, and this fear is compounded by childhood memories of helplessness. The stockpiling of goods emerges as an attempt to stave off lack, and capitalism's relentless acquisitiveness can hereby be understood as a reaction formation. Paradoxically, the belief in lack requires its proliferation. Capitalism creates scarcity, because it comes to rely upon an ideology of lack to keep its values high. As a system, it systematically and strategically produces these scarcities – famines and recessions – in order to strengthen its own position (Ross, 1994).[6] Similarly, the phallus requires the belief in castration (very few castrations actually

occur, after all) in order to keep the system going, to assure the masculine subject that it, or what it possesses, is valuable.

The belief in lack, the fantasy of a Malthusian war for survival, subtends (what passes for) the phallic relation to the other. It operates under the principle of the zero-sum and its main principle is appropriation. Any gain to one can only be a loss to the other. However, this is only one conception of value, a conception of value as one, and it relies upon a number of assumptions about price and cost. It also raises a number of questions: Why is something taken always taken *from* someone else? Why should possession require the dispossession of the other? Why cannot one be enriched through an exchange that does not impoverish the other? The very rules of the exchange, the terms that give each transaction its meaning, are complicit with the phallus.

A challenge to this system would require the creation of another maths, another way of understanding value, another set of axioms. Without the overwhelming fear of loss, numbers might be able to form different kinds of equations. Irigaray envisions:

> Exchanges without identifiable terms, without accounts, without end . . . Without additions and accumulations, one plus one, woman after woman . . . Without sequence or number. Without standard or yardstick . . . The greatest value would be at the same time the least kept in reserve. Nature's resources would be expended without depletion, exchanged without labor, freely given, exempt from masculine transactions: enjoyment without a fee, well-being without pain, pleasure without possession. As for all the strategies and savings, the appropriations tantamount to theft and rape, the laborious accumulation of capital, how ironic all that would be. (Irigaray, 1985: 197)

She recognizes that our bodies, and thus our lives, are phallicized, but that this is not the only way that we may live in the world. I share with her the desire to find another way of relating to others; one that would make possible an intercourse that does not annihilate. What I want is to find a way of touching the other that is not informed, circumscribed by the logic of loss.

How can these systems be rethought? One way is by returning to and questioning the terms of Cixous's (1981) title: what is the choice between the phallus or the head? Her words are an implicit critique: the masculine economy embraces the phallus, the transcendental signifier that makes the whole system work. But, we have heard quite a bit about the phallus already. More unusual is the alternative she proffers – the head. Cixous begins her analysis of the effects of the male economy on women by citing two stories. The first is the story of Hera and Zeus's referring to Tiresias the question of whether men or women derive greater pleasure from sex. This reminds her of the second story, that of Sun Tse's attempts to make soldiers of the king's 180 wives. Instead of learning their lessons, the women laughed and chattered among themselves. Sun Tse only succeeds in his task when he beheads two of the wives. The remaining wives then silently go about Sun Tse's war drills. This story illustrates the effect of the masculine

economy on the feminine: decapitation. Women, Cixous notes, are able to keep their heads:

> . . . only on the condition that they lose them – lose them, that is, to complete silence, turned into automatons. It's a question of submitting feminine disorder, its laughter, its inability to take the drumbeats seriously, to the threat of decapitation. If man operates under the threat of castration, if masculinity is culturally ordered by the castration complex, it might be said that the backlash, the return, on women of this castration anxiety is its displacement as decapitation, execution, of woman, as loss of her head. (Cixous, 1981: 481)

Decapitation, the submission of feminine disorder to male order, functions for the woman as castration does for the man and is a backlash of his castration.[7] Decapitation for Cixous is the loss of the voice; it silences the woman. For her, the taking back of that voice through *écriture feminine* becomes a political imperative.

Yet, surely the head is not the opposite of the phallus? The phallus itself has a head; there is no binary here, but an exceedingly complex relationship. Cixous's metaphor of phallus and head generates a multiplicity of meaning that escapes her. What is decapitation? Humans, Margaret Atwood has pointed out, deceived by the evolutionary accident of the neck, believe in a separation of the head and the body:

> The trouble is all in the knob at the top of our bodies. I'm not against the body or the head either: only the neck, which creates the illusion that they are separate. The language is wrong, it shouldn't have different words for them. If the head extended directly into the shoulders like a worm's or a frog's without that constriction, that lie, they wouldn't be able to look down at their bodies and move them around as if they were robots or puppets; they would have to realize that if the head is detached from the body both of them will die. (Atwood, 1988: 91)

The loss of the head is not the loss of the *mind*; such logic would partake of the masculine economy that creates binaries in the first place. Rather, Atwood exhorts us to re-member the dis-membered Cartesian mind and form: the loss of the head *is* the loss of the body.

Freud, too, discusses the sacrifice of the body for the phallus. However, unlike Cixous, Freud does not consider this to be a tragedy. Rather, it is part of the normal maturation process, the move from polymorphous perversity to the genital stage. Children renounce the body in order to reorganize their sexual drives around the phallus. This is true both of male and female children, the latter focusing on the phallicized clitoris. Still, in women, this process is never complete, closed in, sewn up. Women, Freud admits, seem to hold on to polymorphous perversity:

> It is an instructive fact that under the influence of seduction children can become polymorphously perverse, and can be led into all possible kinds of sexual irregularities. This shows that an aptitude for them is innately present in their disposition. . . . In this respect children behave in the same way as an average uncultivated woman in whom the same polymorphously perverse disposition persists. . . . Prostitutes exploit the same polymorphous, that is, infantile, disposition for the purposes of their profession; and, considering the immense number of women who are prostitutes or who must be supposed to have an aptitude for

> prostitution without becoming engaged in it, it becomes impossible not to recognize that this same disposition to perversions of every kind is a general and fundamental human characteristic. (Freud, 1962: 57)

This passage fascinates for its multiple slippages. Woman and infants are grouped together, but not, as Freud's turn-of-the-century audience would expect, to remark upon their shared innocence. Rather, both are *formerly* innocent, now seduced and depraved – polymorphously perverse. Class plays an odd role here, as it is the 'uncultivated' woman who is the most strongly polymorphously perverse. Prostitutes are the most infamous example, strengthening the tie that Freud makes between lower-class status and non-genital sexuality. However, he seems to undo this link when he mentions women who 'have an aptitude for prostitution without becoming engaged in it' (Freud, 1962: 91). It is not very clear what this 'aptitude' might be, though for Freud it is clearly separate from the desire to support oneself and one's family. Nor is it obvious who these women are. (Perhaps frustrated, female, early capitalists?) Nonetheless, these presumably upper-class, women, who have no need or opportunity to utilize their gifts, are the group that allows Freud to generalize about polymorphous perversity, so that now it is 'impossible not to recognize that this same disposition to perversions of every kind is a general and fundamental human characteristic' (Freud, 1962: 91). To be human, at a profound level, is therefore to be perverse. Indeed, this bold claim is reflected in the structure of the *Three Essays*, which begins with the essay on sexual aberrations before moving on to 'normal' sexuality, in order to show the affinities between the two. Indeed, it is questionable as to whether they even comprise two distinct entities, since, for Freud, 'normal' human sexuality *is* perverse.

So, we are told that polymorphous perversity is 'natural', but requires the instigation of a seducer. It is characteristic of infants but also of grown women. Lower-class women are depraved, but so too are wealthier women. And finally, everyone is perverse. The logic of perversity is the logic of either/or. Even more, the logic of perversity is also not the logic of the adult man. Despite their initial, infantile disposition towards perversity, men, unlike women, are, somehow, willing or able to renounce polymorphous perversity in favour of the genital zone:

> In spite of the gaps in our knowledge of infantile sexual life, we had to proceed to an attempt at examining the alterations brought about in it by the arrival of puberty. We selected two of these as being the decisive ones: the subordination of all the other sources of sexual excitation under the primacy of the genital zones and the process of finding an object. (Freud, 1962: 100)

The abandonment of polymorphous perversity is one of only two 'decisive' requirements for sexual 'maturity'. Yet, men are the only ones who quite accomplish this feat. Women seem to hold on to/out for something else.

Women, too, pass through the phallic stage, but they do not stay there very long. In the lecture on 'Femininity', Freud states that both the little girl and the little boy experience the phallic stage in the same way, according to the same law. The only difference is that, instead of a small penis, the girl has an even smaller clitoris. We are now, according to Freud,

'obliged to recognize that the little girl is a little man' (Freud, 1965: 104).[8] In order for the 'little man' to become a woman, he (she? it?) will have to renounce the activity of the clitoris for the passivity of the vagina. Here again, the feminine position is illogical, or perhaps has a different logic. For women actively have to make themselves passive. But, it is not a question of adding the vagina to a feminine genital zone. Freud argues that with 'the change to femininity the clitoris should wholly or in part hand over its sensitivity, and at the same time its importance, to the vagina' (Freud, 1965: 104). If so, this new sexuality can only ever be perceived by women as a loss. And that loss is one of sensitivity, sensuality, pleasure: a loss of the body.

Still, adult women, we were told, continue to be polymorphously perverse, not being willing to give up their bodies. It is here that I would like to relocate Cixous's idea of masculine and feminine economies as phallic and perverse, respectively. The masculine economy is phallic; it is an order, a mode, an imaginary based upon the phallus. It functions as synecdoche, demanding the masculine body be reduced to the penis, in hope for the phallus. And, it is this reduction that is so dangerous, because it requires men to deny the pleasure of the body, to close down the body, to shut it out. And since the body has already been sacrificed, castration is the ultimate catastrophe, death.

To imagine an economy that functions otherwise, I want to re-member the body, to reconnect the genitals to the body in an appeal to polymorphous perversity. For Freud, this implies the pre-genital organization of the body that occurs before the genitals are cathected as the only sites of pleasure, before the order of the *proper* is imposed upon this original perversity, flattening it and forcing it to conform to the shape of the phallus. I am not advocating a return or regression to *that* polymorphous perversity, but rather I want an alternative to the fantasy of castration. Like any originary story, perversity is a myth that signifies contemporary longings more than ancient (in this case, personal) history. Each subject is born into a symbolic economy that organizes it, from the moment it is declared to be either a boy or a girl. This is a post-castration world, in which every subject has been Oedipalized, every subject has a gender. What I am looking for are other responses to Oedipalization, responses that refuse the terms of lack.

The Oedipal complex, after all, is continuous with the phallic economy, subtended by the ideology of scarcity. For the boy, it is a defence against loss. This complex is the mechanism through which the boy attempts to protect himself from the threat of castration. In the myth of the primal horde, the father is killed because the horde will not tolerate his hoarding of the women, who at that stage constituted a limited resource. The starting point for my discussion, for any discussion of ethics and economies, is the always already Oedipalized subject. The subject who wants to challenge the terms of the discussion will need to create her body, a perverse body, anew. Each subject must take up a position with respect to castration. However, what I want is to take up a position that has no respect *for* castration, that is, a perverse position.

For Derrida (1979), the perverse subject is what we call 'woman'. In *Spurs*

(1979: 59, 61) he suggests that the woman, the perverse subject, maintains a position of disbelief towards the phallus:

> The feminine distance abstracts truth from itself in a *suspension* of the relation with castration. . . . It is with castration that this relation is suspended, not with the truth of castration – in which woman does not believe anyway . . . *Woman* . . . no more believes in castration's exact opposite, anti-castration, than she does in castration itself. Much too clever for that . . . she knows that such a reversal would only deprive her of her powers of simulation, that in truth a reversal of that kind would, in the end, only amount to the same thing and force her just as surely as ever into the same old apparatus. . . . She who, unbelieving, still plays with castration, she is *woman*.

Derrida's subject, this woman who is perverse, a subject with the powers of simulation, is able to laugh at castration, and that laughter undoes the deadly seriousness of the phallic Law. Her body is not organized around the phallus and she is not organized around anything. She who is decentred can, therefore, turn, both around and away from the question of castration: perverse (pervert), from Latin *pervertere*, to turn the wrong way, turn around: *per-*, completely + *vertere*, to turn. She refuses to believe (or disbelieve) in castration, scarcity and lack; she does not credit this system based upon credit and debt. Her position is that of the coquette, who teases the man with her ability to make light of castration: 'Now I have it, now I don't.'[9] In my recasting of Derrida's argument, the import of this gesture – that is, of being a woman – does not derive from the move of suspension, the deconstructive move *par excellence*; suspension is insufficient to undo the logic of castration. In fact, the suspension of castration is the faith of the fetishist, whose refusal to see difference has been so dangerous to female and feminized bodies. Rather, what interests me is the ability to play, the failure to treat the phallus seriously, since this gesture renders the phallus impotent.

The understanding of the subject that I am advocating draws on the work of Cixous, Irigaray and Michéle Montrelay. However, there are some differences. Like Montrelay, I, too, desire a body that is not organized by the phallus. However, I do not believe that centring on the female genitals, as does Montrelay, will save the body (our bodies). As Gallop (1982: 29) points out, 'centre' derives from the Greek *kentrein*, 'to prick'. Even Montrelay's concentric (cunt-centric) femininity is betrayed by the prick (Montrelay, 1978: 86; see also Gallop, 1982: 29). Replacing one centre with another is not the answer to the problems of the phallus.

Cixous, too, is problematic in a different way. She wants to equate femininity with being open and masculinity with being closed. My concern is that open and closed are insufficient to represent the range of possibilities embodied in perversity. Moreover, open and closed cannot provide an alternative basis for an ethics. These categories continue in the tradition of binary thinking about the body, and thus remain bound up with the logic of the phallus. Open will not be enough to safeguard women. After all, as Irigaray suggests in 'And the One Doesn't Stir without the Other', open is exceedingly dangerous to the woman who might flow out and not make it back in a deadly haemorrhaging (1981: 63).

In perversity, my position is closest to Irigaray (1985: 28) when she lets the woman's sex organs become her whole body, her whole body become sex organs. However, I am unwilling to reify sexual difference as she does. That is because in those places where she focuses solely upon the female sex (1985: 26), there is a tendency towards bodily reduction. In opting for perversity, I seek to understand the body in all of its innumerable forms. My concern is the way in which bodies – any bodies – can relate to others when not cut off from themselves.

The perversity or de-centring of the body is empowering. Not insisting on bodily unity (the phallic response) or its binary opposite, bodily fragmentation (the valorization of the castrated body, which is risky in so far as it may lead to an ultimately mortal dismemberment), perverse subjects offer a different alternative. They offer a way of living the fragments, ways of connecting and reconnecting the fragments. Thus, the perverse body is not a body without organs[10] – except when that is what it desires (to be). Instead, it is a body that is continually remaking itself, even when remaking itself over and over again in the same way. This ability radically to recreate itself changes the meaning of the centre. Since the centre is not immutable, not eternal, it loses its metaphysical import. This leaves the centre – if and when and for what time this body even has a centre – no more or less important than any other part or parts.

The excess implied by this perverse position, which does not limit the woman's response to a reductive yes or no, marks this subject. She declines the binary opposition that the phallic economy makes of the body and the genitalia. For her, the body *includes* the genitals. They are part of its multiplicity, a multiplicity that exceeds and, therefore, undoes the phallic economy. The lavishness of the feminine defies the phallic system of counting and accounting, threatening its principle of thrift with perverse circulation. She declines the false binary between sexual difference and sexual indifference, insisting that such an opposition – the one or the other – is itself representative of the violent logic of the phallus. Desiring difference, she also desires that this difference be not subject to obliteration, as within a phallic economy. What I am asking for here is that there be difference that matters, but that does not matter in the same bloody way as in the phallic economy. Surely sexual indifference is a cause of this brutality. However, the perverse answer to brutality is not to reify sexual difference, but to fantasize a body not reduced to any one of its parts.

The difference that perversity makes is in the subject's ability to relate to the other. Because the perverse subject is not driven by the relentless need to assimilate difference to itself, to sameness, she is able to have the kind of relations with the other that the phallic one precludes. This is not to say that the encounter with the other is free of risk. Both Cixous and Irigaray metaphorize this economy as fluid and qualitatively different from phallic rigidity. Fluids mingle, each changing in the other. Neither one will ever be the same after the exchange. But she is willing to face the danger, unlike the phallic subject, whose imperative is to foreclose any danger, to avoid any brush with death (the risk that the other poses within the phallic order). In a perverse economy, the difference of the other is experienced

differently, or rather, the difference of the other is experienced. The perverse subject is able to 'move into the other without destroying the other' (Cixous, 1981: 55). The sexual relation becomes possible.

Perversity does not accept the terms of the phallic economy. Rather, its subject acknowledges that pain is a part of life, that some loss will occur that cannot be transcended. Unlike the phallic subject, the one who can recuperate (almost) any loss, the perverse body takes risks, and therefore it can and sometimes *does* lose. The perverse woman, not submitted to a system of mourning, admits loss into her life. She suffers loss, experiences loss and not because loss is sublated, turned into future gains or apocalyptic rewards. She does not compartmentalize death and loss to defend herself against them – she knows well that doing so would only carve up her body, carve up her life into tiny fragments that would be then alienated from her for ever. Rather, she senses that death is part of life and the one cannot be forestalled without the sacrifice of the other, while a fullness that is truly full will also have some emptiness. And so, loss becomes something other than annihilation.

Lack is axiomatic within the phallic economy, a tenet taken on faith that renders phallic maths meaningful. The woman's infinite questioning of lack, her refusal to accept the axioms which make the system work, undoes the force of its phallic logic.

> When you say I love you – staying right here, close to you, close to me – you're saying I love myself. You don't need to wait for it to be given back; neither do I. We don't owe each other anything. That 'I love you' is neither gift nor debt. You 'give' me nothing when you touch yourself, touch me, when you touch yourself again through me. You don't give yourself. What would I do with you, with myself, wrapped up like a gift? (Irigaray, 1985: 206)

The phallic vocabulary is shown to be empty, marking only the vanity of the penis's self-love, unable to convey the language of the love of the other. In the space of the perverse subject's disregard for castration, in the space of the body, an entirely new way of reckoning is able to form. Another kind of exchange is imagined and life becomes conceivable.

Notes

1. In a forthcoming work, I connect this different way of thinking of the body with the practice of magic, as is evident in the work of women writers from cultural minorities in the Americas. Because of space constraints here, I will restrict myself to discussing the theory that underlies this different bodily organization and its impact on ethics.
2. I use 'masculinity' and 'femininity' in Lacanian terms. These terms are not meant to refer strictly to biology, but rather to the discursive positions that the subject takes up with reference to castration. I would, however, argue more strongly than does Lacan that this positioning cannot be simply divorced from biology. We might think of it as analogous to the process of *anaclisis* (*anlehning*), where gender 'leans upon' sex.
3. This is a problem to which I will return.
4. I say man, not necessarily in reference to biology, but as 'man' is the

position that this subject has assumed: his choice, however, is not unconstrained.

5. In the language of the unconscious, opposites may simply mask similarity. Such insights are among the things I love best about psychoanalysis, and why I turn to it – despite my very real critique – to develop an alternative ethics.
6. Loss, after all, is not simply natural. There is, of course, the loss that is part of life. We must all face death. But there is also a kind of loss that is produced, paradoxically, in the effort to deny loss. When the phallic stockpiles food to forestall his own starvation, he produces loss for others. It is this second kind of loss that I seek to prevent. The first loss, death, is inevitable, but it is not the real impediment to establishing an ethical intersubjectivity.
7. In the editorial process I was asked whether castration, as a passive act, can backlash – that is, do something active. The question is highly instructive. Psychoanalysis is precisely a discipline that questions the division into active and passive. To deconstruct this fundamental opposition, psychoanalysis touches on the logic of the unconscious – a logic fundamentally different to Western rationality. Ultimately, I argue in this article, the desire for an alternative ethics requires us to access – perhaps, to create – different forms of logic.
8. The reason that we are 'obliged to recognize' this is, Freud explains, that the girl (like the boy) desires the mother. Active desire on the part of the infant girl relegates her to masculinity because Freud cannot conceive of a desire for a woman on the part of another woman: it is only as a man that one can desire a woman. The poverty of this notion of desire reflects a tremendous lack (of imagination).
9. Might this flirtation not leave the Law with a bonus of pleasure through her body? Gallop (1982: 78) cautions that the concern that a polymorphic other can be useful to the Law. Lacan, too, seems to hold on desperately to the possibility of female *jouissance* as the only sortie from the closed system he inscribes, but he nonetheless also wishes to escape, or, at least, to be reassured that there is some exit. But, as Gallop suggests, the woman's seduction of the Father is a strategic move that offers opportunities that open rebellion to the Law would not: the woman can enchant the man into revealing his desire, his penis, the phallus which works only by remaining veiled, just as the ideology of scarcity functions only when it is naturalized (Gallop, 1982: 78). And, after all, Gallop notes that simply to revolt against this Law, against the Father, *is* the Oedipal struggle, merely switching from the female to the male position. Better to '[l]et him take possession of you, let him have orgasm from you, but without subjugating you to his law' (Gallop, 1982: 91). The perverse subject is not one who fears pleasure.
10. Here, I use the phrase in the sense employed by Deleuze and Guattari (1983). I am suggesting that the schizophrenic subject may be an option, but cannot be the *only* option.

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