
ETHICS OF BREATH:
TOWARDS NEW
ETHICAL SPACES OF
INTERSUBJECTIVITY

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Introduction

My aim in this presentation is to establish a platform for an ethics of otherness, ethics of breath/life, an ethics as a place for the future conversation of (mild) gestures – such as compassion, forbearance and care. While we all know and recognize radically the need of others (including animal others, and, in a way, even nature) to take in and give out breath, at each and every moment, we still reside in our life-worlds, in the grip of most elemental fears of losing the ground beneath our feet, constantly protecting ourselves and taking more than we possibly need (of ourselves, of nature) for ourselves, and causing others to suffocate by not getting their food of life – air. We always realize too late that there was a life. Already for Marx it was clear that “alle Naturkräfte aus- und einatmende *Mensch*” is an aspect of humanity that has been radically forgotten in the course of history.¹ But why do we keep forgetting air in philosophy? Luce Irigaray once wrote: “I breathe, therefore I am.”² Why are then we still evading this phenomenon, perhaps the only one that could bring us closer to our own becoming as ethical beings, towards a new form of mutual conversation, a conversation of humanity perhaps, as also implied in this becoming? It is from our bodies, impregnated as they are by the air we breathe, that we can perceive another being in pain, a being living at the edge of their body-self, a body of which “arithmetic of breathing” (J. Butler) is dangerously threatened. This economy is sacred because it is related to the question of forming a community, looking thus at something that is bigger than we are, and yet, something that is only possible within and for ourselves. My analyses in this short presentation are based on the so called ‘sacred economy of breath’, in-

formed both by Indian philosophy (*prana*) as well as by French feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray (*Between East and West*, “The Age of the Breath”).

1. Breath as intercultural phenomenon

Breath is arguably the most prominent anthropological constant for human beings of the world, carrying rich epistemological and ethical implications. Different macrocosmic and microcosmic designations for wind/breath (or wind/spirit) in the history of religions and philosophies (*mana*, *orenda*, *ka*, *ruah*, *prana*, *atman*, *aer*, *psyche*, *pneuma*, *anima*, *spiritus*, *ik'*, *ki/qi* etc.) point to a common physico-anthropological phenomenon of life and, more importantly, to our common physiological roots, which are not conceived as a substance of *human nature* but as a primal phenomenon prior to any philosophical or metaphysical theory. According to Tadashi Ogawa, ‘breath’ has an intercultural potential, for “all humanity is aware of this phenomenon.”³ Be it ‘qi/ki’ as ‘breath/expiration/inspiration,’ ‘pneuma’ or ‘prana’ etc., they all point to our human, common *and* communal relatedness. But to take this argument as the “old metaphysical idea concerning the relation between microcosmos and macrocosmos (...) is not correct.”⁴ As a phenomenological phenomenon, *breath* is related to the coexistence of world and I (Ogawa relates it to Heidegger’s “mood” [*Stimmung*], Schmitz’s “Atmosphere” and K. Held’s “Fundamental Mood” [*Grundstimmung*]), thus overcoming the dualist-substantialist thought: “[T]hese phenomena preceding all other moments of the lifeworld (...) make it possible for human beings to be in the world.”⁵ Apart from its implications for phenomenology, breath as a primal cosmological-biological phenomenon also precedes all ethical (and social/political) reflection: as we will see it is ‘breath’ that provides the human community with its first and primal *experience* and act of *communication* (both in the pragmatic sense), i.e. of the *being-in-the-world(-with-others)* mode.

But I would first like to discuss the role of breath (*prana*) in Indian thought. It is in Indian Vedic thought, approximately four centuries before the *Samkhya-Yoga* system (i.e. between 900–700), that we find the most ancient elaborations of the concepts of cosmic wind/breath

outside the Semitic area. Indian concept of *prana* (etymologically from **an*, 'to breathe'; later in Indian philosophy replaced by *atman*) is both the original cosmological as well as an epistemological concept. We find references to wind and breath in the *Samhitās* (the oldest parts of Vedic collections), but the most ancient testimony and elaboration for the so-called 'Wind-Breath Teaching' ('Wind-Atem-Lehre')⁶ we can find in the philosophy of nature of *Jaiminiya upanishad brahmana 3.2.2.* and *4* (JUB). The teaching is an example of a typical Vedic macro-microcosmic analogy between the macrocosmic Wind (*vayu*) and microcosmic breath (*prana*). From the cosmological point of view, the wind is the only 'complete' deity since all other deities/gods/elements/phenomena (sun, moon, stars, fire, day, night, waters etc.) return to him during the enigmatic stillness of the night, while he never stops blowing. But at the most abstract level, it is the difference between the perishable (day, night...) and imperishable or 'eternal' (Wind) that had led to the so-called Wind-Breath Teaching, and later to the concepts of *atman* and *brahman* in Indian thought. In an epistemological sense, breath in (wo) man is the most important of the five vital powers (breathing, thinking, speech, sight, hearing) since it is only breath that is present during deep sleep. Of course, in the moment of death, breath returns to its macrocosmic eternal origin, the Wind. In an idiosyncratic Vedic plural all five vital powers are called *pranas* (i.e. 'breaths'; this marks the very beginning of Indian epistemology) – after the first of them, breath. Breathing as the most important vital power is thus equated with life itself and later with person's self (*atman*). Finally, as a term for life, *prana* is the essence of a living body. It is from this natural constellation that we can search for new (inter)subjective modes of thinking/feeling in the process where ethics of breath will enable us to think beyond (post)metaphysical ethical modes, based on reason and/or justice, even compassion as a virtue.

2. Towards the epistemology of breath

In his *Essays on Radical Empiricism* William James, departing from his philosophic predecessors and paving the way also for the rise of phenomenology in Europe,⁷ gives an epistemological prominence to the

universal and anti-metaphysical (and anti-representational) phenomenon of breath:

I cannot help that, however, for I, too, have my intuitions and must obey them. Let the case be what it may in others, I am as confident as I am of anything that, in myself, the stream of thinking (which I recognize emphatically as a phenomenon) is only a careless name for what, when scrutinized, reveals itself to consist chiefly of the stream of my breathing. The 'I think' which Kant said must be able to accompany all my objects, is the 'I breathe' which actually does accompany them. There are other internal facts besides breathing (intra-cephalic muscular adjustments, etc., of which I have said a word in my larger *Psychology*), and these increase the assets of 'consciousness,' so far as the latter is subject to immediate perception; but breath, which was ever the original of 'spirit,' breath moving outwards, between the glottis and the nostrils, is, I am persuaded, the essence out of which philosophers have constructed the entity known to them as consciousness. *That entity is fictitious, while thoughts in the concrete are fully real. But thoughts in the concrete are made of the same stuff as things are.*⁸

As a pragmatist, I find James' contention to be one of the key features in the long process of dethroning Kantian and related philosophical arguments from the past. It can serve our goal to develop an embodied ethics of breath and philosophy of religion, the latter being based on breath's closest cosmological kin – the spirit. Recently, one of the leading American pragmatist scholars, Richard Shusterman, has critically pointed to the above James' elaboration on breath in his *Body Consciousness*.⁹ Shusterman finds James' argument as "not convincing" – moreover, he is convinced that James "seems to confuse the question of how consciousness is felt with the questions of how and whether consciousness exists. That we feel something through our breathing movements does not mean that this something is essentially no more than such movements". Shusterman thus takes James' definition of breath as the essence of consciousness as an "exaggeration".¹⁰ Given Shusterman's appreciation of Eastern (Indian) philosophy and different mind-body techniques (yoga, Zen), this stubborn insistence on technical details ('did James decide to limit the breath of thought to exhalation?' etc.) strikes one as odd. While on the one hand he is willing to grant breath (as understood by James) a certain, if limited, value (for example, breathing contributes "to sharpening consciousness so that one can perceive and think more

clearly and deeply” for Shusterman)¹¹ he does not realize its full epistemologico-ethical significance. But the stream of our breathing deserves a more sensible approach. One of my goals is thus to open the new epistemological plane for an ethical elaboration of breath as a spiritual gesture.

3. Ethics of breath: A dialogue with Luce Irigaray

Let me begin this concluding part with an excerpt from Judith Butler’s *Frames of War*:

What I sense is that the ultimate source of these poems from Guantanamo is the simple, almost primeval, arithmetic of breathing in and out. The origin of life and the origin of language and the origin of poetry are all there, in the first breath, each breath as if it were our first, the anima, the spirit, what we inspire, what we expire, what separates us from extinction, minute after minute, what keeps us alive as we inhale and exhale the universe.¹²

There is a task still to come and to be realized: namely, being attuned to the process of a new *spiritual* transformation of humanity in order to become enlightened enough to be able to hear the voices of the other, to discern the signs and gestures inviting us to begin a dialogue with her or him, or with the Nature in one of her beautiful incarnations. And last but not least, it is a task to respond to the call of the other person, or a nonhuman animal and their breathing in an ethical way. For to breathe is to be alive and to feel the living around us. Let me cite from Irigaray’s essay “The Age of the Breath”:

Miming the living, the diabolic does not breathe, or does not breathe any longer. It takes away air from the others, from the world. It suffocates with its sterile repetitions, its presumptuous imitations, with its wishes deprived of respect for life.¹³

I think the introduction of a breath into the ethics and philosophy or theology in general is perhaps one of the most important events in contemporary thought. ‘Breath’, as William James has observed, was ever the original of ‘spirit’. But it was a classical tradition from Plato to Hegel, even Heidegger, that has repressed and obscured this essential link and transformed it to a metaphysical thought that suffocated the world of the other, and of the Nature. It is one of Irigaray’s greatest merits to bring the cultivation of breath to the forefront of philosophical analyses,

also in a dialogue with Yoga, an ancient Indian wisdom of ethical and spiritual respiration.

We all live in a global civilization where a certain *plenitude* is governing our lives. It is not a spiritual plenitude but rather a mass of voices, gestures and signs that allows us Westerners to possess various goods and to live our lives, but also constantly to produce our lifeworlds where there is no more space for a silence, where we take a deep breath only to egoistically accomplish our new tasks; and consequently, to impose them to others, including other cultures. A truly intercultural dialogue cannot begin on this ground.

Before we proceed to the ethics of breath, in order to understand the relation between macrocosm and microcosm, it is necessary to introduce the middle term, namely *mesocosm* (expressed in a ritual as a third term of the triangle structure *the ritual-the cosmic realities-the human body/person* in the Vedic-Upanishadic context). I also propose to imagine a possible contemporary ethical term for the mesocosm: a gesture.¹⁴ For to approach breath in an ethical sense we need to imagine and construct new ethical plane. In his analysis of ancient Vedic texts Michael Witzel pledges for the reconstruction of this term. As already mentioned, within the Vedic magical interpretation of the world, we face different analogies or magical 'identifications' between the macrocosmic and microcosmic realities or gods (for example Sun-eye, Wind-breath, Earth-body, Waters-semen, Fire-speech etc.). This is a thought using different obvious (such as between Sun and the eye or Wind and breath) or some more hidden and esoteric, (between Moon and mind) 'mystic' links/correlations and equivalents/identities. There exists a nexus (*bandhu, upanishad*) between two single entities in the *Vedas*. In my opinion, it is crucial to understand these ancient magical correlations between the human and 'divine' realms to accomplish our task, i.e. to be able to formulate an outline for a contemporary embodied ethics as a new economy of our intersubjective-'mesocosmic' rituals, i.e. of *embodied ethical gestures*, based on breath as vital power. Only this way gestures will have the potential to connect the intersubjective realms of our existence.

I would finally like to turn to Luce Irigaray's philosophy and ethics of breath. In *Sharing the World* Luce Irigaray wrote that it is "to her, as living nature, that I have to abandon myself in order to preserve my

own life". For Irigaray, we have "to seek help in nature"¹⁵ in order to be able to survive. Our past and our future meet in one single moment of a new sensitivity for our breath and life, two key phenomena to which we need to pay attention in our times. But how is body related to this economy of ethical gestures? What is an ethical gesture springing from the embedded and embodied life of an individual, man or woman? A gesture, like the ancient rituals, is now a presence of a touch, a word, or thought in the space of proximity – within the mesocosm. Here there is presence of us and nature. For Irigaray, this proximity is explained as a "communion with the real presence of the living". Furthermore, with 'being in nature' I bear the other(s) within me. This is the [e]mbodiment, for a moment, an unlimited life in order to make him present to me, with me. Which is not without the mystery, the enthusiasm and the reserve, but also the risk, that inspire such a human, and more than human, gesture. We were, we are, two.¹⁶

In *Between East and West*, a text encapsulating her idiosyncratic relation to Indian religions, we can read that the first and last gesture of both natural and spiritual life is to breathe (by oneself).¹⁷ Elsewhere Irigaray explains how important the role of the mother/woman is in this process:

The divine appropriate to women, the feminine divine, is first of all related to the breath. To cultivate the divine in herself, the woman, in my opinion, has to attend to her own breathing, her own breath, more even than to love ... Becoming divine is accomplished through a continuous passage from nature to grace, a passage that everyone must realize by oneself, alone ... The feminine breath seems at once more linked with the life of the universe and more interior. It seems to unite the subtlest real of the cosmos with the deepest spiritual real of the soul. Which inspires a woman appears to remain joined with the universe's breath, related to the wind, to the cosmic breathing ... In this way, the woman can welcome the other in her soul.¹⁸

Woman shares her breath preeminently by keeping it 'inside'. By a 'feminine economy of the breath' she is keeping (and cultivating) breath inside the body and sheltering in herself the first seed of nature, the Warmth or Love, which is the eternal longing in Nature for Spirit (in Irigaray this is the spiritualization of the body, or nature). The first breath of the world we share, both in nature (macrocosm) and in woman (mi-

crocosm) is at the same time the possibility of a space-between, inter-subjective or *intercorporeal* (in the widest sense of the term) space/plane of gestures (mesocosm) where our lives coexist in a community beyond all differences (culture, sex, age, even species). A *bodily-spiritual* gesture of keeping and sharing the breath is an ethical gesture of respecting the life of the universe, for Irigaray.

In “Ethical Gestures toward the Other”, Irigaray explains in a new context the key feature of the third phase of her work, namely ethical gestures. According to the human body, the first autonomous gesture is breath, air being the very first food of life. In *Genesis*, it is said that God *breathed into his nostrils the breath of life* (Gen 2.7).¹⁹ For Irigaray, to become spiritual it is necessary to transform this vital breath “into a more subtle breath” (of loving, etc.) which corresponds to our transformation of natural life into a spiritual life.²⁰ I find the most important element in Irigaray’s third phase of the work in the incipient relation with the other as a woman – a relation based in her respect for life. There is yet another element present in Irigaray: silence. It is “the laying out of a space-time that must remain virgin in order for a meeting to happen. It is openness that nothing occupies or preoccupies – no language, no values, no pre-established truth”.²¹ Silence is a threshold still (or again) to be revealed to us. I understand it as a substratum of a ‘mesocosm’, a *pure gesture* of a deserted intercorporeal space-between still to be inhabited by us.²²

I have already argued that the mesocosm is a space-between (for the intercorporeality) and that it could be understood as a place (like the ancient rituals, for example) of a mysterious transition from pure gesture to the first ethical gesture of (wo)man. The economy of ethical gestures, and later the way to the embodied ethics, has its origin in the macro/microcosmic awakening of life that comes to us as breath or is breathed into us. This is then the origin of any embodied ethics, claiming to enter into the intercorporeal realm of humans (and the living nature) via gestures.

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Notes

- ¹ K. Marx, *Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte* ("Kritik der Hegelschen Dialektik und Philosophie überhaupt"). English translation: R. C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx – Engels Reader*, Second Edition. W. W. Norton & Company, New York/London 1978, p. 115.
- ² L. Irigaray, *The forgetting of air in Martin Heidegger*, tr. Mary Beth Mader. The University of Texas Press, Austin, TX 1999, p. 163.
- ³ T. Ogawa, "Qi and phenomenology of wind", *Continental Philosophy Review*, 31, 1998, p. 324.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 325.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 326.
- ⁶ See M. Boland, *Die Wind-Atem-Lehre in den älteren Upanisaden*. Ugarit-Verlag, Münster 1997.
- ⁷ Cf. Patrick L. Bourgeois, "From Common Roots to a Broader Vision: A Pragmatic Thrust of European Phenomenology", *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, 70, 3, Summer 1996, pp. 381–397.
- ⁸ W. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA 1976, p. 19. For my citation see "Does 'Consciousness' Exist", in: W. James, *Writings 1902–1910*. The Library of America 38, New York 1987, pp. 1157–1158. James' italics.
- ⁹ R. Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK 2008.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154. Shusterman underpines his argument also with the fact that "we clearly continue to breathe when we are unconscious" Interestingly enough (as we will see later in the second section of my paper), Indian Upanishadic philosophy defines the preeminence of breath over other vital powers of (wo)man (such as speech, sight, touch etc.) precisely on the grounds that breathing does not wane during the sleep).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.
- ¹² J. Butler, *Frames of War. When is Life Grievable?* Verso, London 2009, p. 60. This passage originally appeared in M. Falkoff, *Poems from Guantánamo. The Detainees Speak*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 2007, p. 72 (from A. Dorfman's Postscript).
- ¹³ L. Irigaray, "The Age of the Breath", in: *Key Writings*. Continuum, London 2004, p. 166.
- ¹⁴ See *Upanishads* (tr. and introduced by P. Ollivele), Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, p. lii (Introduction): "The central concern of all vedic thinkers, including the authors of the Upanisads, is to discover the connections that bind elements of these three spheres to each other. The assumption then is that the universe constitutes a web of relations, that things that appear to stand alone and apart are, in fact, connected to other things."
- ¹⁵ L. Irigaray, *Sharing the World*. Continuum, London 2008, p. 42.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 43.
- ¹⁷ L. Irigaray, *Between East and West*. New Age Books, Delhi 2005, p. 5 (Introduction).
- ¹⁸ L. Irigaray, "The Age of the Breath", *op.cit.*, pp. 165, 166 and 167.
- ¹⁹ For an analysis of Irigaray's elaborations on the Spirit see Part IV of *Teaching* (ed. by L. Irigaray and M. Green, Continuum, London 2008).
- ²⁰ L. Irigaray, "Ethical Gestures Toward the Other", *Poligrafi*, 14, 57, 2010 (forthcoming). The manuscript in with the author. Cf. p. 1ff.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.
- ²² Cf. for pure gesture and its relation to *a life* in G. Agamben, *Potentialities*. Stanford University Press, Stanford/California 1999, p. 79 (in his essay on M. Kommerell's criticism "Kom-

merell, or On Gesture”): “Beyond the gestures of the soul and gestures of nature there is a third sphere, which one may call pure gestures ... This ‘pure gestures’ have given up all claim to reality”. According to Kommerell, with Agamben, what is at issue now is to find a way to the profane mystery as an intimacy of living here and now, a new initiation “into life itself” (p. 84).

B i b l i o g r a p h y

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7. Irigaray, L. (2005), *Between East and West*. Delhi, New Age Books.
8. Irigaray, L. (2008), *Sharing the World*. London, Continuum.
9. Irigaray, L. (2010), “Ethical Gestures Toward the Other”, *Poligrafi* 14, no. 57, 3–23.
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14. Shusterman, R. (2008), *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*. Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.