



Henry Isaac Venema
Brandon University, Brandon, Canada
ORCID: 0000-0003-3874-3902
e-mail: VenemaH@brandonu.ca

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.12775/RF.2020.052>

The Image and Likeness of God: Sloterdijk and Irigaray on Selfhood*

You're as loved as you were
Before the strangeness swept through
Our bodies, our houses, our streets --
When we could speak without codes
And light swirled around like
Wind-blown petals,
Our feet

Bruce Cockburn, *Isn't that what Friends are for?*

The Cartesian ghosts of modernism are incapable of understanding selfhood.¹ By taking the individual as the ontological foundation for

* The distinction between Image and likeness is taken from Genesis 1:26–27, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our own likeness [...]. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created him.’” Although most commentaries on this text do not claim that these terms represent much of a difference, for the purpose of this paper I take Image and Likeness as the difference developed by Paul Ricoeur between the sedimentation of the received past and the innovation in the present for the future, which is tied to the difference between agency and action. This is like the Reformational Philosophical tradition’s use of the concepts of structure and a moral religious direction of those structures. Cf. Herman Dooyeweerd, *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought* (Edwin Mellen Press, 1999).

¹ Peter Sloterdijk writes that Descartes’ “thinking thing remains a worldless authority [...]. The *res cogitans* bears some of the traits of a ghostly hunter, bracing himself

philosophical inquiry, selfhood is abstracted from the fullness of flesh and blood reality and fails to see selfhood as a plurality of interconnections with others that are essential to any attempt at self-understanding. As Paul Ricoeur points out, the self is disciplined into selfhood by way of others who are there prior to any notion we may have about our own identity. We pass through a hermeneutical “detour” by way of the other to come back to self. Here we discover *what* we take as self is in fact given to us by persons, texts and our historical situation. Selfhood is a self in relation with others, and therefore self-knowledge must consider our relational openness to otherness as foundational for who? what? where? and why? we are constituted in this way.²

It is this relation, or relational space between self and other that I want to explore in this paper. This is a fluid and dynamic space, that requires, as Zygmunt Bauman tells, a liquid self attentive to others.³ These are relations that constantly form and reform with others beyond me yet in relation with me. More than that, as Derrida explains

the other is in me before me: the ego (even the collective ego) implies alterity as its own condition. There is no ‘I’ that makes ethically makes room for the other, but rather an ‘I’ that is structured by the alterity within it, an ‘I’ that is itself in a state of self-deconstruction, of dislocation.⁴

This is an excellent description of selfhood: a dual process of construction and deconstruction with and through others that precede us, form us, and are within us. We are *structured* by openness to others that constitutes our being in the world. Every time we find or place ourselves in the opening to the other, we form a sort of *quasi-structure*, a construction process that needs to be continually deconstructed of self-absorption and the inertia of a fixed self-identity. These are movements of love that bind us to others or movements of hate that tear us apart. We either love others in fluid embrace or end up as Girard tells us in ever escalating cycles of violence.⁵ Love is the gift that makes life flourish, and no

up to go on forays into the realm of the recognizably extended before withdrawing once more to his worldless fortress in the extensionless domain.” Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres Volume 1: Bubbles, Microsphereology*, transl. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e) 2011), 338. Here after referred to as B.

² “The key notions of the network of action [and signification] draw their meaning from the specific nature of the answers given to the specific questions, which are themselves cross-signifying: who? what? why? how? where? when?” Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 58, cf. 95.

³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

⁴ Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *I have a taste of the secret*, transl. Giacomo Donis, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Web (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 84.

⁵ René Girard, *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoît Chantre*, transl. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2010).

matter how deep hate and violence has been woven into the fabric our broken lives, the goodness and capacity to love is deeper, or as Mathew Fox calls it, the “original blessing” of creation that remains and allows us to love each other in spite of our brokenness.⁶

This ontological exploration of loving relations and intimate connections seeks to explicate the fundamental or original goodness of being-in-relation. However, as Ricoeur rightly points out, this kind of “origin, to my mind, does not function as an ordinal, as the first in a series, as a beginning that could be dated, but as what is always already there [...] this concerns an anterior of the order of the fundamental rather than the chronological.”⁷ Even though we will only be able to describe a quasi-structure of intimacy because its structure is always in play, such description can still testify to the truth that *love is who we are* at a fundamental level. We all have the capacity to love at the heart of our being.

To live in intimate space *with* others requires a delicate mutuality that *respects* both proximity and difference. James Olthuis in *The Beautiful Risk*, explains that

with underlines the relational nature of life; it indicates connection between things, beings, creatures (identities), without fusion and without isolation. *With* has the force of a healthy (that is, loving) connection. To be-with is to be in-love-with. To be without love is to be in a poor painful, unhealthy state of broken connection. It is to be disconnected, dismembered. It is to be in-enmity-against, in-hate-to, care-less. *With* connotes vulnerability, mutuality, respect, and honor rather than domination or shame. It is the opposite of *under*, *above*, and *against*, all of which speak of control, mastery and independence.⁸

Being-with-others is a dynamic unpredictable place where we dance together in “the wild spaces of love”⁹ or as Peter Sloterdijk calls it, a *perichoresis* of love that celebrates each other as gift.¹⁰

⁶ “Since ‘blessing’ is the theological word for ‘goodness,’ original blessing is about original goodness. The forces of fear and pessimism so prevalent in society and religion need to be countered by an increased awareness of awe and goodness. This goodness is inherent in the in the beauty, wisdom, and wonder of creation. Goodness and creation go together as do goodness and God. As Meister Eckhart put it, ‘Goodness in the proper name of God the Creator,’” Mathew Fox, *Original Blessing* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), 7.

⁷ Paul Ricoeur, *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with Francois Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, transl. Kathleen Blamey (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 147.

⁸ James H. Olthuis, *The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 37.

⁹ Olthuis, *Beautiful Risk*, 12–13, 22, 65–66, 156–58, 179–180, 204–205, 236–239. B 586, B 603.

¹⁰ Richard Kearney puts it this way. “[...] we might say that the eschatological universal holds out the promise of a perichoretic interplay of differing *personas*,

Sloterdijk is particularly helpful in describing this intersubjective goodness of existence. He develops the idea of *perichoresis* in his 3-volume 2700-page work *Spheres*. In conversation with himself as a macro-historian, literary critic, and theologian,¹¹ Sloterdijk gives us a bio-psycho-social philosophical anthropology of extraordinary depth and scope. Beginning with an ontology of intimate space in Volume 1: *Bubbles*; then in Volume 2: *Globes*¹² *a history of mapping the universe and world by means of global-spherical metaphors*; and in Volume 3: *Foams*, develops a theory of contemporary social political space. However, this paper will only focus on Vol. 1: *Bubbles* where he develops a ‘nontheological’¹³ interpretation of John of Damascus’ concept of *perichoresis* to give ontological shape to intimate space, upon which Sloterdijk’s theory of social space is founded.

In *Bubbles*, Sloterdijk urges us to radically rethink our place in the world because the world has lost its security of being. We used to believe that we were contained and protected within celestial globes, or cosmic immune systems, but they have now failed.¹⁴ The so-called “out-

meeting without fusing, communing without totalizing, discoursing without dissolving. A sort of divine *circumin(c/s)essio* of the Trinitarian Kingdom: a no-place may one day be and where each *persona* cedes its place to its other (*cedere*) even as they sit down together (*sedere*.” *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2001), 15.

¹¹ Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres Volume 3: Foam, Plural Spherology*, transl. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e) 2016), 801–826. Here after referred to as F.

¹² Peter Sloterdijk, *Spheres Volume 2: Globes, Marcospherology*, transl. Wieland Hoban (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014). Hereafter referred to as G.

¹³ “For the present Spherology, these [theological] discourses are not interesting for their religious claims or their dogmatic willfulness; we are not visiting them as attractions from intellectual history. They are only of legitimate concern to us to the extent that, until recently, they had a virtually unchallenged monopoly on fundamental intimacy-logical reflection. Only Platonic erotology had been able, in contemporary adaptations, to break the predominance of Christian theology in the field of the theory of intimate connections [...]. Much of what preoccupies modern psychologists and sociologists concerning the concepts of intersubjectivity and inter-intelligence is prefigured in the theological discourses that, in thousand-year-old serenity, deal with the intertwined co-subjectivity of the God-soul dyad and the intelligence, cooperation, and condilection of the inter-godly Trinity [...]. It is in theological surrealism, as will be shown, that the first spheric realism lies hidden.” B 544–545.

¹⁴ “In dealing with metaphysical and post-metaphysical systems of thought, I use a common meta-language borrowed from immunology. I push the concept of immunity so far that it can include the treatment of insurance techniques, as well as juridical, therapeutic, medical, and biological systems. On top of this, I should mention the semantic, imaginary, and poetical constructs from immunity, I bring bio-immunity, techno-immunity as well as political, legal, and religious services of immunity under umbrella concepts and submit them to a common function of analysis.” Peter Sloterdijk with Hans-Jurgen Heinrichs, *Neither Sun nor Death*, transl. Steve Corcoran (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2011), 221. Hereafter referred to as N.

side world" that faces us has now little or nothing to do with human existence. Our knowledge of the outside offers "increasing evidence that mankind is towered above on all sides by monstrous externalities that breathe on it with stellar coldness and extra-human complexity. The old nature of *homo sapiens* is not up to these provocations by the outside,"¹⁵ and therefore we need a new way of thinking about the human situation. Where once we believed we were hemmed in by the providential care of God, we have lost our way, and now

taking part in modernity means putting immune systems at risk [...] modern people have had to learn how one goes about existing as a core without a shell; Pascal's pious and observant statement "the eternal silence of the infinite spaces fills me with dread" formulates the intimate confession of an epoch [...]. Living in the Modern Age means paying the price for shelllessness [...] [and] now that God's shimmering bubbles, the celestial domes, have burst, who could have the power to create prosthetic husks around those who have been exposed?¹⁶

Modernity here means, quite conventionally, the epoch in which the Old World broke out of metaphysical monocentrism.¹⁷

Subsequently humans need to create their own immune systems, safe places for living and self-development "through an artificial civilizatory world."¹⁸ What has been "irretrievably lost" is now compensated for by "large scale projects" such as "industrial-scale civilization, the welfare state, the world market and the media sphere."¹⁹ While we continually create these global "greenhouses" and measure our success by their grand completion, we have forgotten that intimate space is *where* we find out *who* we are. "What recent philosophers have termed forgetfulness of being [*Seinsvergessenheit*] is most evident as an obstinate willful, ignorance of the mysterious place of existence. The popular plan to forget both oneself and being is realized through a deliberate nonawareness

¹⁵ B 23.

¹⁶ B 23–24. Bruno Latour in a lecture given at Harvard University writes: "[...] one could say that Peter's [Sloterdijk] spheres and my networks are two ways of describing monads: Once God is taken out of Leibniz's monads, there are not many other ways for them but to become, on the one hand, spheres and, on the other, networks. I like to test those two concepts to see whether they begin to lead us to some testable conclusion – a thought experiment, remember, is indeed an experiment that, even though impractical, should be able to discriminate between arguments." Bruno Latour, "Spheres and Networks: Two ways to Reinterpret Globalization," *Harvard Design Magazine* 30 (Spring/Summer 2009).

¹⁷ F 20.

¹⁸ B 24.

¹⁹ B 25.

of the ontological situation."²⁰ While modern philosophical thought has given a great deal of consideration to *what* and *who* we are, we have forgotten the concreteness of our situation, and failed to see that *where we are* is intimately tied to *who* we will become. Sloterdijk wants to pose the question of 'where?' anew in a radical fashion that restores to contemporary thought the feeling for absolute localization in intimate space. Although "we are in an outside that carries inner worlds,"²¹ our shared inner worlds place us at the heart Sloterdijk's understanding of our existential-ontological situation.²² This is the initial "place that humans create in order to have somewhere they can appear *as those who they are*. Here, following a venerable tradition, this place bears the name 'sphere.' A sphere is the interior, disclosed, shared realms inhabited by humans – in so far as they succeed in becoming human."²³ In contrast to the modern isolated individual, to think humanity now means to think about the shared spaces in which we live, move, and have children. Culture is therefore based on "an acute relational secret [...]. That individuals do not exist except as particles or as poles of spheres; all that exists are only couples and their extensions. That which is considered as an individual is [...] most often only the resistant remainder of a failed or excavated structure of a couple."²⁴ The "I" that stands alone is a useless fiction that results from a breakdown and sundering of the primordial ontological bond between persons.

Sloterdijk's *Spheres* project is a "de-idiotization of the 'I'" who stands alone at center of the world.²⁵ This kind of ego/self "falls under the ontol-

²⁰ B 27.

²¹ B 27.

²² Latour explains that his own Network project and Sloterdijk's Sphere project both have "been elaborated against the same sort of enemy: an ancient and constantly deeper apparent divide between nature and society. Peter asks his master Heidegger the rather mischievous questions: 'When you say *Dasein* is thrown *into* the world, *where* is it thrown? What's the temperature there, the color of the walls, the material that has been chosen, the technology for disposing of refuse, the cost of the air-conditioning, and so on?' Here the apparently deep philosophical ontology of 'Being qua Being' takes a rather different turn. Suddenly we realize that it is the 'pro-found question' of Being that has been too superficially considered: *Dasein* has no clothes, no habitat, no biology, no hormones, no atmosphere around it, no medication, no viable transportation system even to reach his *Hutte* in the Black Forest. *Dasein* is thrown into the world but is so naked that it doesn't stand much of a chance of survival [...]. There is not the slightest chance of understanding Being once it has been cut off from the vast numbers of apparently trifling and superficial little *beings* that make it exist from moment to moment – what Peter came to call its 'life supports.' In one stroke, the philosopher's quest for 'Being as such' looks like an antiquated research program." Latour, "Spheres and Networks: Two Ways to Reinterpret Globalization": 139–140.

²³ B 28, e. m.

²⁴ N 145.

²⁵ N 28.

ogy of the thing [...] [as] substance [...] which maintains the cohesion of the world at its innermost point." Such a view of the self requires a "belief in solid bodies [...] [in] the tangible, the substantial, the fundamental" as the most real. Sloterdijk rightly dismisses this kind of thinking in favor of an ontology of the "most fragile" and intimate places where love and care flourish. His "serious intention to further the revision of substance fetishism and metaphysical individualism,"²⁶ provides us with an extraordinary ontological reflection on intersubjective relationships of intimate "mutual cohabitation." Here we find "the breathiest space, in a thin-walled structure, which, owing to its fragile form and transparent appearance, already gives us to understand that we are supported neither by a security in foundation, and less still by an *inconcussum* or some other rocky base, whether outside or inside" the self (N140). Rather, we are the support for each other in intimate shared space.

What Sloterdijk gives us to think about is the shape and structure of such loving spaces. Using the metaphor of the "sphere,"²⁷ he wants to gain "access to something that is the most real, yet also the most elusive and least tangible of things. Even to speak of gaining access is misleading, for the discovery of the spheric is less a matter of access than of a slowed-down circumspection amid the most obvious" everyday scenes of intimate connection.²⁸ This means that subjectivity is attuned and open to visitations by "nontrivial events" of arrival and inspiration, other persons that arrive without any effort on our part and breathe fresh air into our lives. Echoing Derrida, Sloterdijk tells us that we are hosts of the

²⁶ N 139.

²⁷ Elsewhere Sloterdijk explains the concept of the spherical as follows: "I understand the concept of the spherical as follows: it indicates a tension between openness and impenetrability. It might be said that spherical space is always co-determined by enigmaticness. It is only possible to participate in it in the mode of a being-in, without attaining an overview, either in a centrally panoptic way or from an outside bird's-eye view. In a sphere, one is simultaneously worked by something impenetrable. One is kept alert through the presence of something that cannot be illuminated or examined in more detail. A good part of that which is at stake always remains vague, opaque, unclear, and in this sense resistant. Here the borders of the objectivation are reached. The main reason for this can be easily stated: the human sphere, with which I am occupied, is also constituted by the proximity of a second psychic pole that, in everyday language, and more recently also in philosophical language, we call the 'Other.' If it is not interpreted as a controllable thing, this other is given in advance as something that I cannot ever penetrate and objectivate. It penetrates me more than I penetrate it. Strangely, it must be close to me before I can experience it as a co-being which remains enigmatic for me. It is very important to understand that proximity and impenetrability belong together, because only then can one grasp the fact that the principle position of idealism, which always associated proximity with transparency and distance with opacity, was an error." N 263–264

²⁸ B 78 "[...] intimacy, beyond its first sugary experience, can only be understood as an inscrutability within the most obvious." B 90.

foreign, the other, and the different, in a “matrix of the non-own. It is only with reference to such passings-through by the foreign that a tenable concept of what subjectivity could mean can be articulated in our times.”²⁹ Persons that inspire and remain arrive like “discreet visitor[s] at the door,” they catch us by surprise and bless us. Intimate relationships give us the necessary inspiration for life to function and flourish: the spirit of loving couples and their children, and the spirit of solidarity for social organization. “In spheres, shared inspirations become the reason for the possibility of humans existing together in communes and peoples. The first thing that develops within them is that *strong relationship* between humans and their motives of animation – and animations are visits that remain – which provide the reason for solidarity.”³⁰

Belonging in a strong relationship bubble is the thematic center of Sloterdijk’s ontology. A sphere or bubble has enclosing power that bonds two into a bi-unity, like two soap bubbles stuck together, one side facing each other, the other side facing the world, the two form an enclosing sphere.³¹ Ontology begins with Two that results in the autogenesis of the relationship as Three. To validate this claim, Sloterdijk turns to everyday scenes of connection and embrace that form the basis for his onto-anthropology: mother and child, lovers exchanging hearts, teacher and student, therapist and patient, siblings, twins and doppelgangers, as well as the evolution of interfacial space. Each of these scenes highlight different microspheres or layers of our “interlocked interiority”³² which is modeled to perfection by *perichoresis*.

Strong Relationships

To explain what he means by being in a strong relationship, Sloterdijk gives the Genesis story of the creation of Adam his own unique interpretation. First God creates a clay material hollow body, after which God breathes into a hollow body which “serves as a jug of life.”³³ The

²⁹ B 30.

³⁰ B 31.

³¹ “What is here termed a sphere is, in a first and provisional understanding, an orb in two halves, polarized and differentiated from the start, yet nonetheless intimately joined, subjective and subject to experience – a biune shared space of present and past experience. What is know in tradition as spirit is thus originally, through sphere formation, spatially spread. In its basic form the sphere appears as a twin bubble, an ellipsoid space of spirit and experience with at least two inhabitants facing one another in polar kinship. Living in spheres thus means inhabiting a shared subtlety.” B 45.

³² B 542.

³³ B 34.

clay ceramic Adam requires a supplement, “a pneumatic or noogenic bonus,”³⁴ an animation “by living breath.”³⁵ God is Adam’s co-inspirator, and when God breaths into Adam, Adam breaths back into a shared space between them, here there are two breath poles animating each other. While “pneumatic reciprocity, the intimate ability to communicate in a primary dual, is God’s patent,”³⁶ God’s breath creates a deep resonance of non-oppositional difference with Adam. Forgoing traditional hierarchical notions of God and subordinate Adam, Sloterdijk claims that there can be no great difference, or “sharp ontological asymmetry between the inspirator and the inspired.” This “results in a bipolar intimacy that cannot have anything in common with a merely dominating control of a subject over a manipulable object mass.”³⁷ Adam from the start is a correlative duality with God, an ontological twin, that “means being able to be understood and repaired – an idea on which all priesthood and all psychotherapeutic structures are based on to this day.”³⁸ God and the embodied soul form a “union that can only last on the basis of a developed bipolarity. The primary pair floats in an atmospheric bi-unity, mutual referentiality and intertwined freedom from which neither of the primal partners can be removed without canceling the total relationship [...]. The one breathed on is by necessity an ontological twin of the breather” creating a bond and the power to belong together, a “connecting force” called “solidarity.”³⁹

Sloterdijk reads the relationship between God and Adam as an “untainted-bi-unanimity” composed of “an oscillatory circuit of generosity that celebrates and elevates itself *in dulci iubilo*.”⁴⁰ It’s an anthropological myth of the purist form of intimacy: mutual love in non-oppositional difference. Such love creates a sphere of intimate safety and exclusivity inside itself, that simultaneously creates a psycho-social “immune system” that guards it from the monstrous outside. The primordial couple thrives on mutual inspiration and shared breath, and they must “allow nothing to grow inside themselves other than what was originally breathed into them [...]. I am the one closest to you and your inspirator; you shall have no other inspirator but me – the first commandment of dyadic communication.”⁴¹ Here in lies the great strength of trust and fidelity that bonds us with others, but also the fragility of all spheres. We are not impervious to other inspirations that lead to “the inevitable cor-

³⁴ B 38.

³⁵ B 36.

³⁶ B 41.

³⁷ B 40.

³⁸ B 43.

³⁹ B 42–43, 44.

⁴⁰ B 49.

⁴¹ B 49.

ruption of the original interior-forming bi-unity through the emergence of a third, a fourth and a fifth, which led to the advent of frolicking." For Sloterdijk the myth of the creation of Adam and expulsion from paradise is an example of our everyone's experience of the "primal catastrophe" of the "withdrawal of the first completer," which in psychological terms can be understood "as a general weaning trauma. Only an event of this kind [...] could give rise to what would later be termed the 'psyche.'"⁴² The primary intimacy with God bursts because "distractible Adam falls prey to a second inspiration through the secondary voices of the serpent and the women; as a result, he discovers what theologians called his freedom."⁴³ Adam and Eve lose "their place within the purely sounding bi-unity of the God-self space, devoid of all secondary voices."⁴⁴ And they soon find out that their primal bubble "like happiness and glass [...] bears the risks native to everything that shatters easily."⁴⁵

For Sloterdijk the catastrophic story of falling out of a primary voice is not a theological reading but an anthropological interpretation of the fundamental structure of life. We live a *staged* life that Sloterdijk likens to the creation and bursting of intimacy bubbles. "All amniotic sacs, organic models of autogenous vessels, live toward their bursting."⁴⁶ Spheres burst through the incoming of the new which "disturbs earlier symbioses."⁴⁷ Children are born, parents die, partners lost. Even though death comes to us all, shattering every relationship, sphere development brings stability to intimate pairs, and to the social structures derived from them. Sloterdijk's reading of the Genesis myth is a social-psycho-anthropological reading that constructs a "worldly sphereology" that "attempt[s] to free the pearl from the theological oyster."⁴⁸ The story of Adam and Eve is "a respectable mythological version" of the "concept of the primary couple,"⁴⁹ and speaks of the wonder of the most intimate inner openness to another in an enclosed sphere of love, and how easily love can fall apart, evaporating the air space between them.

Such is the drama of life. We grow up and fall in love and have children who fall in love and they have children. We pass through a series of dramatic events, or "scenes" as Sloterdijk calls them. Sphere theory gives us a developmental account of our relational connections with our self, mother, father, siblings, friends. From the womb we

⁴² B 51.

⁴³ B 49.

⁴⁴ B 51.

⁴⁵ B 48.

⁴⁶ B 64.

⁴⁷ B 52.

⁴⁸ B 54.

⁴⁹ N 154.

come-into-the-sphere of a parental love and care, which one day too will burst when a child “bids farewell to the maternal kitchens-cum-living rooms.”

The spherological drama of development – the emergence into history – begins at the moment when individuals step out into the multipolar worlds of adults as poles of a bi-unity field. They inevitably suffer a form of mental resettlement shock when the first bubble bursts, an existential uprooting: they come out of their infantile state by ceasing to live completely under the shadow of the united other and thus starting to become inhabitants of an expanded psycho-sociosphere. For them, this is where the birth of the outside takes place: upon emerging into the open [...] [we] are confronted with subjectless, external, excitingly uncontrollable phenomena. They would not be viable human individuals, however, if they did not bring a dowry of memories of the symbolic field and its enclosing power with them into the strange new land. It is this power to transfer the integral space that ultimately overcomes the intruder trauma, the law of the disruptive third, fourth and fifth parties, for it integrates the disrupter like a new sibling – as if, in fact, it were a necessary element in its own system.⁵⁰

The enclosing power of the first intimate sphere sets the stage for all subsequent dramas. “At its beginning, every life goes through a phase in which a mild two-person illusion defines the world. Caring ecstasies enclose mothers and children in an amorous bell whose resonances remain, under all circumstances, a precondition for a successful life.”⁵¹ *Bubbles* tells a story of how of the original blessing of the mother and child microsphere is transferred to the macrosphere of social and state institutions, where the two-person illusion bursts and we are drawn “into an illusion shared by millions.”⁵²

With-Space

While the story of Adam gives Sloterdijk a pure or normative concept of mutual co-relation, it is the intimate drama of mother and child that contributes to the configuration of future intimacies. Lost to memory and “adult intelligence, yet never fully eradicated,”⁵³ our original blessing of being-in-the-womb with our mother remains. This is the smallest microsphere and requires “that we traverse landscapes of pre-objective existence of prior relationships” to describe “pre-subjective primitive

⁵⁰ B 54.

⁵¹ B 61.

⁵² B 61.

⁵³ B 62.

self-awareness [...] the prehistory of all things pertaining to the soul."⁵⁴ In other words, Sloterdijk wants to describe an experience that everyone has forgotten. Towards this end he employs the analysis of Thomas Macho

who has conclusively revealed a fundamental construction error in psychoanalytical terminology with reference to archaic and prenatal mother-child relationships [...] [it] is fundamentally deformed by the object prejudice – and beyond this, that the fixation on thinking in object relationships is responsible for the almost grotesque misunderstanding of fetal and infantile modes of reality in early psychoanalytical orthodoxy.⁵⁵

The fetus is not an object that can be analyzed devoid of its subjectivity; and therefore, Sloterdijk proposes that we use medial formulations to describe pre-natal existence.

While Freud only considered staged child development after birth, Sloterdijk tells us that "one must assume at least three pre-oral stages and forms of condition": 1) fetal cohabitation within the mother, 2) psychoacoustic initiation, and 3) the respiratory phase.⁵⁶ It is these conditions that form the Eden of consciousness. We begin in the womb surrounded by something that contains us, attuned to the loving vibrations of the mother's voice, and perhaps the father's as well. Using Macho's term *nobjects*, Sloterdijk explains that there are

spherically surrounding mini-conditions envisaged by a non-facing self, namely the fetal pre-subject, in the mode of non-confrontational presence as original creatures of closeness in the literal sense. Their being-close-to-here (which is not yet a demonstrable being-there) communicates itself to the child most of all with its first gift, the placental blood [...]. The blood, which is not only the blood of one, but automatically also creates the first medial 'bond' between the dyadic partners interlocked in bipolar intimacy. Through the blood, the biunity is constituted as a trinitary unity from the start; the third element turns two into one.⁵⁷

This is the onto-biological structure of existence; we are trinitarian relational beings that develop in and through relational forms. "For me ontology begins at the number two [...] an ontology of minimal plurality" that always includes a third, the relation or spirit between two.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ B 63.

⁵⁵ B 292–293.

⁵⁶ B 293.

⁵⁷ B 294–295.

⁵⁸ N 150.

Hence, “[t]he trinitary structure of the primary dyad is given from the start.”⁵⁹

Sloterdijk unpacks this trinitarian structure in such a remarkable way that it serves as a structural form for all stages of development. In the first two stages of development, the fetus develops with its placental other and sound of the mother’s voice, neither of which should be taken as objects. “One must “avoid straying onto the misguided path of object relationship theory. We shall give the organ with which the pre-subject floats in communication in its cave a pre-objective name: we shall call it the *With*” rather than the placenta.⁶⁰ Sloterdijk goes on to explain that the fetus needs another name as well: the *Also*.

If we were to give this being a new name, it would be called the *Also*, as the fetal subject only comes about through returning from the *With* yonder to the *Here*, the “also here.” As far as the *With* is concerned, its quality of presence is neither that of a person nor that of a subject, but rather a living and life-giving *It* that remains yonder-close-by. Facing the *With* thus means returning from the *Yonder*, which marks a first location, to the *Here*, where the *also* grows. Hence the *With* acts as an intimate usher for the *Also-self*.⁶¹

The *With* mediates like an “intrauterine butler” life blood to the *Also*. Here we have the psycho-biological beginning of polar selfhood.

The *With* is the first thing that gives and lets things be. If I have what it takes to turn from an *Also* into an *ego*, it is not least because the *With* has let me sense the place which I have begun to find a rooting as an augmentable creature that feels across and is open in a polar fashion [...] the *With* introduces and inexhaustible difference into the homogeneous monochrome by imprinting ways to approach the back-and-forth into the reawaking *Here-Yonder* sphere. From it, energies flow to me that form me.⁶²

At birth, or the respiratory phase of development, the physical *With* is lost, “and it disappears from the world the moment you appear as the main person; then you cease to be an *Also*, because your external appearance is immediately accompanied by a proper name that prepares you for becoming and individual.”⁶³ The *With* is now a “lost surplus”⁶⁴ that

⁵⁹ B 320.

⁶⁰ B 356.

⁶¹ B 356, e. m.

⁶² B 357.

⁶³ B 358.

⁶⁴ B 358.

“gives me a first sense of my lasting Here.”⁶⁵ My sense of self is always a Here open to and in need of an intimate companion that gives life and lets things be.

At birth we lose the intimacy of the womb but gain a much richer more intimate bond with a new With, the Mother who now forms new medial bonds through voice, milk, and touch. Here their faces “beam at each other”⁶⁶ with overwhelming wonder, joy, and love. While the mother is the first to fill the with-space, the others that follow, (father, siblings, friends, lovers), all theses “changing faces always appear in the same ‘place.’” Our development is a multipolar process of living in intimate relationships. “If the psyche is a historical element, it is because its progressive recastings and enrichments of the primitive spheric dual lend it a disposition towards what one thoughtlessly terms ‘growing up.’”⁶⁷ Our psycho-social development repeats the fundamental trinitarian structure and resonance of motherly love with every new intimacy.

Coming-into-the-world is the philosophical formula for a biological event charged with an ontological character. Birth is certainly a necessary condition for it, but it is insufficient in itself. The rising of the world together with man’s arrival into the world: this is the theme that, under the influence of Heidegger, I set my sights on [...].⁶⁸ The typical experience of inferiority for humans is that of ‘being-in-the-world’ as ‘being born’ and ‘no-longer-being-in-the-mother’ [...]. Human beings are not only born; they come into the world [...] and because coming-into-the-world is the continuation of birth with the other, ontologically means, human being-in-the-world always involves a metamorphosis of the uterine position.⁶⁹

For Sloterdijk *with-space* structures our consciousness and internal dialogue. The with-space is internalized as our double that graces us with a voice that calls us out bed to work, live and love. This is the inner motivational voice that keeps us moving forward. Sloterdijk calls this constant companion our own personal “genius.” Going back to the Roman use of this term, genius has its etiological roots in the word “gen-eration.”⁷⁰ For the Romans the genius is “first of all the man’s specific life force.”⁷¹ The genius is a “guardian spirit”⁷² which later becomes ‘guardian angel’ in Christian thought.⁷³ Like a super-ego, outer soul,

⁶⁵ B 357.

⁶⁶ B 171.

⁶⁷ B 415–416.

⁶⁸ N 175.

⁶⁹ N 202.

⁷⁰ B 416.

⁷¹ B 421.

⁷² B 422.

⁷³ B 425.

or conscience, the genius is “a benevolent silent partner” that keeps us on course. Children are particularly adept at developing the closeness of the genius with their imaginary friends who attend to them with endless hours of play. “The ego and its alter ego, the individual and its genius, the child and its angel: they all form microcosmic bubbles [...].”⁷⁴ Every person has an “augmenter,” an inner voice that generates feelings of closeness with persons, social movements, and inspiring ideas.

The genius, the twin, the guardian angel and the outer soul form a group of elemental and enduring concepts for the second pole in the psychospheric dual. All these figures result from recastings of the first There, which left a vacant space for supportive, close accompanying elements. But while the original fetal There and With is essentially anonymous and unconscious, the later companions must be presented under public names and observable concepts.⁷⁵

Perhaps the best way to understand what Sloterdijk means by a psychic companion is through his explanation of “spheric mourning” or depression, where all motivation is lost.

Falling prey to melancholia means nothing other than devoting oneself with undivided intensity of belief to the conscious or unconscious statement that I have been abandoned by my intimate patron, accomplice and motivator. Melancholia constitutes the pathology of exile in its pure form – the impoverishment of the inner world through the withdrawal of the life-giving field of closeness.⁷⁶

Exile and abandonment are precisely what depression feels like: existence without meaning or closeness, endlessly reaching out to fill the with-space with someone or something, but nothing and no one arrives. Depression is an open wound, where nothing can sooth the emptiness of soul. In this regard one can think of Sloterdijk’s genius as a call to life that is fulfilled with an accompanying motivation and affirmation with loving voices and warm embrace.⁷⁷

Acoustic Space

Fetal cohabitation within the mother is also a psychoacoustic initiation to the voice of the mother. In the womb the fetus experiences “sympathetic

⁷⁴ B 438.

⁷⁵ B 437.

⁷⁶ B 461.

⁷⁷ Cf. Sloterdijk’s description of depression as the lost With: 384–386, 461, 467–468

vibrations" of being-in-sound. Here one learns how to distinguish soothing welcoming vibrations from all others.⁷⁸ The mother's pounding heart-beat and intestinal gurgling are actively screened out by the little one in favor of welcoming sounds. Once born, the affirmation of welcome is repeated over and over in the "warmest most open, and normally the most jovial points [...]" where faces "beam at each other."⁷⁹ Here mother and child "exchange vocal messages in a direct play of affection, their interdependency is the perfect self-realization of the intimate-acoustic bipolar sphere."⁸⁰

Early ego formation takes place through the call and response of voice. The hungry child's voice calls for milk and the mother responds. Parents gush with gibberish imitating their child's babbling, and become master hermeneuts, listening for that first word that initiates the infant into the communion of formal language. Being outside the womb "means being able to call; I call, therefore I am; from this moment on existence means existing within the success space of one's own voice. Thus, symbolic genesis, like ego formation, begins with voice formation [...]. In listening closely, the ears carry out the primal act of the self; all later instances of 'I can,' 'I want,' or 'I come' by necessity follow on from this first manifestation of spontaneous liveliness."⁸¹ We learn to trust the linguistic structure of call and response, of speaking and listening in devotion to each other.

By adopting a posture of listening, the happy and active ear devotes itself to words of welcome. In this sense, devotion is the subject-forming act *par excellence*, for devoting oneself means rousing oneself into the necessary state of alertness to open up to the sound that concerns you. This going-outside-oneself is the first gesture of the subject [...]. It results in the birth of intentionality from the spirit of listening for sounds of greeting and enlivenment.⁸²

This loving sonic alliance between mother and child helps to ground future relationships. We grow up and out of a rich fund of loving power to repeat and develop it with each new relationship. In fact, the goodness of maternal love keeps us safe from the monstrous outside through

⁷⁸ "With his Platonic acoustics, Alfred Tomatis constructed a memory apparatus that allows the soul to follow on from its state in the hyper-heavenly place [the womb] – more reliably and effectively, at first sight, than any philosophical anamnesis. In acoustic deep regression, it grants the ears of the hardened, the fixed and the unhappy an audience with the original voice. This shows that humans emerge without exception from a vocal matriarchy." B 508.

⁷⁹ B 169,171.

⁸⁰ B 297.

⁸¹ B 503–505.

⁸² B 504–505.

memorial repetition of a bliss that calls us to respond to others with love. To be-with, then, is to share the ontological space that gives us the “originally space-forming polarization energy of the With-Also sphere,” calling us to give and receive love.⁸³ Parental love helps us to “attain a faculty of navigation” through global currents,⁸⁴ by filtering out the monstrous and letting in the welcoming sounds of affirmation and love from others.

What Sloterdijk gives us is a model of development that transfers the goodness of being loved and cared for by parents to future intimate connections.

In its earliest exercises, then, intimacy is a transmission relationship. Its model is not taken from the symmetrical alliance between twins or like-minded parties [contra Husserl], where each mirrors the other [contra Lacan], but from the irresolvably asymmetrical communion between the maternal [and paternal] voice and the fetal ear [...]. This relationship has no trace of narcissism [contra Freud] [...]. What characterizes this unusual relationship is an almost boundless surrender of the one to the other, and an almost seamless interlocking of the two sources of feeling.⁸⁵

Mother is the “original voice”⁸⁶ that we carry with us and remains as a form of “evangelical intimacy: it creates good news that can be by its nature only be heard by one or two parties.” Her love gives a recognizable pattern for future connection and surrender. Hence, Sloterdijk’s psychoanalytic approach is Platonic in that it continually reaches back in memory to the ideal of pure motherly love to guide us with every new love. But one could also say that his approach requires repetition forward and recontextualized with each person we love. Without early parental love our future relationships will be difficult. “Only if the subject has constituted itself in a structure of protective-permeable twinship from the start – and the prefiguration of the dual begins [...] in the pre-natal space – can the enrichment of the subjective field through additional poles develop into a fitness for community.”⁸⁷ In other words, the with-space and its companion voice form a normative psycho-acoustic morphology that resonates with the goodness of maternal love.

⁸³ B 362.

⁸⁴ N 28.

⁸⁵ B 511–512.

⁸⁶ B 508.

⁸⁷ B 422.

Perichoresis

Sloterdijk's "slowed-down circumspection amid the most obvious,"⁸⁸ provides the biological basis for his bio-ontology; and medieval theology, through a reduction to pure form, provides him with a way to develop the "ontological Constitution of inhood itself."⁸⁹ Sloterdijk explains that all the different ways we find ourselves in strong relationships need to be

brought together in an overarching pattern. The aim is thus a theory of existential spaciousness – or, differently put: a theory of inter-intelligence or the stay in animation spheres. This principle of the intimate relationship space should make it clear why a life is always a life-in-the-midst-of-lives. Being-in, then, should be conceived as the togetherness of something with something in something.⁹⁰

Sloterdijk finds such a pattern "prefigured" in Christian reflection on being-in and with God found in the writings of Augustine, Nicolas of Cusa, and John of Damascus

Citing Augustine's *Confessions*, Sloterdijk explains that the "intimacy-logical drama" is always a matter of being-in-truth. "The reward for confession is that whoever speaks the truth comes 'into the truth,' [...] truth should form the *In* in which all speaking and life seeks to be immersed."⁹¹ In confession and openness to God, God offers his revelation and love in return; hence the foundation for mutual exchange requires truthful confession. "That an individual *wants* to declare the truth about its turn toward the truth gives a first indication of its being-in the truth." Lying to God always fails because, "To You then, O Lord, I am laid bare for what I am."⁹²

Augustine's confession turns inward, in-truth, and finds God. "For where I found truth, there I found my God, who is Truth itself." Here "egoistic externality has been overcome through a spheric wonder" of being contained in God who has been with him from the very beginning, although kept secret prior to conversion.⁹³ To be in God is to be *a priori* together with God; we are meant to walk in the garden and commune with God. Sloterdijk takes Augustine's conversion into divine with-space as an affirmation of an ontology of "primal acquaintance,"⁹⁴ where "one is faced with an unfathomable openness to relationships

⁸⁸ B 78.

⁸⁹ B 539.

⁹⁰ B 542.

⁹¹ B 549.

⁹² B 552.

⁹³ B 554, B 55.

⁹⁴ B 556.

deeper than any other inclinations of kinship or sympathy that can normally be assumed between people or beings."⁹⁵ Through confession Augustine fills his with-space with the language of prayer and dialogue. "Being-in here denotes a situation in the stream of the true language: whoever speaks in it includes their own speech in the divine main text in such a way that (as far as possible) no external remainder is left."⁹⁶

Contra to the neo-platonic desire to merge into the One, thereby annihilating soul for the "great other,"⁹⁷ Sloterdijk affirms Augustine's difference between God and the soul. Augustine "made a wide berth around the mystery of the soul's pregnancy in God, and he barely ever spoke affirmatively of a *unio*, [t]he only certainty for him is that the soul's differentiation from God was a process of creation in which identity and difference both receive their due; the biblical catchword for the balance is the Image of God."⁹⁸ However close one wishes to be with God, without the respect for difference there is no mutual love or bi-polarity, just monopole dominance where the strong relationship collapses into a "complete dissolution of boundaries" resulting in one absorbing the other. Even though Augustine has "the tendency to give up itself [the finite] in favor of the infinite,"⁹⁹ the infinite is with the finite in bi-polar intimacy that respects the ontological difference between them.

Sloterdijk finds a radicalization of Augustine's "already fully crystallized structures"¹⁰⁰ in the writings of Nicholas of Cusa who he admires for "the artful daring with which Nicholas bridges the chasm between the universalist and individualist theological motifs." Instead of the eye of God kept at a respectful Augustinian distance, Cusa places the universal sight of God into the finite human soul

Nicholas is only concerned with placing God's eye into the individual, in a twofold sense: as my internalized constant observation by the great other and as the fluctuating inner waking of my intelligence. The eye of God, equipped with absolute vision, is implanted in my own eye – in such a way, admittedly, that I am not blinded by its all-seeing nature, but can continue to see in my local and corporeal perspective in the way I am able.¹⁰¹

God the Maximum, "contracts Himself into me, a minimum; now He is, and in this specific sense acts *in me*... [and] my being-in itself takes

⁹⁵ B 545.

⁹⁶ B 551.

⁹⁷ B 551.

⁹⁸ B 556.

⁹⁹ B 553.

¹⁰⁰ B 557–558.

¹⁰¹ B 574.

on official character and my subjectivity is conceived and approved as a post in God's household."¹⁰² But more importantly, "if I am a branch-eye of God in contracted vision, then in contracted loves I am a relay of divine love."¹⁰³ Living in divine space according to Cusa is a "continuously imparting of your sweetest love" where "drinking [in God] infuses a fountain of life within me, and by infusing causes to increase and endure."¹⁰⁴ God and the soul participate "in a circulation of superfluity [...]. Being-in now amounts to allowing oneself to be embraced, flowed through, nourished, and cheered by the divine medium of blood."¹⁰⁵ So now "one could, by way of transposition, say that consciousness-in includes perceiving that I am surrounded, carried and reached through by a force that anticipates me and flows toward me in every sense."¹⁰⁶ God's creative power is an interwoven "contraction" with our own power that equips us for acts of love and service. God acts with us in co-creative liquid communion.

The fluidity of bi-polar space is further explained by Sloterdijk with the trinitarian theologies of the church fathers. These thinkers were able to "express a repression-free, non-hierarchical interweaving of substance in the same section of space."¹⁰⁷ Their "task then, [was] to conceive of a difference that does not lead to separation."¹⁰⁸ This "communal sphere" grants "that their intertwinement permits an equality of extension without spatial rivalry [...] without competition for primacy [...] a living orb [...] of unbroken sharing."¹⁰⁹ These men "arrived at a completely de-physicalized concept of person space. With this, the meaning of *In* was freed from all forms of container-oriented thought once and for all. If Father, Son and Spirit could still be localized, it was only in the housing they provide to one another."¹¹⁰ The relationship itself creates a space of pure immanence for interpersonal communion.

According to Sloterdijk, *perichoresis* is the best formulation of the wonder of interpersonal communion. Taken from John of Damascus, as "one of the most brilliant terminological creations in the Western history of ideas,"¹¹¹ Sloterdijk explains that perichoresis means 'dancing around something' or 'being whirled around in a circle [...]. Denoting coherence, intertwinement, interpretation' [...]. This strange term represents

¹⁰² B 576.

¹⁰³ B 577.

¹⁰⁴ B 577.

¹⁰⁵ B 578.

¹⁰⁶ B 578–579.

¹⁰⁷ B 591.

¹⁰⁸ B 592.

¹⁰⁹ B 594.

¹¹⁰ B 601–603.

¹¹¹ B 603.

no less than the challenging idea that the persons cannot be localized in external spaces borrowed from physics, but that the place in which they are located is itself created through their interrelationship."¹¹² This God dances with delight in the space created between and with trinitarian partners. "God's privilege then, is to be in a place for which room is only made through relationships between the inhabitants within itself,"¹¹³ and this dynamic entanglement is the image we reflect when we live in communion with others.

John of Damascus gives Sloterdijk the conceptual means to root perichoresis in the everyday scenes of life.

Thus, the place where God is said to be is that which experiences His operation and grace to a greater extent. For this reason, heaven is His Throne [...]. The Church, too, is called the place of God, because we have set it apart for His glorification [...]. In the same way those places in which His operation is plainly visible to us, whether it is realized in the flesh or out of the flesh, are called places of God.¹¹⁴

Here Sloterdijk takes John of Damascus at his word. He places *perichoresis* at the center of interpersonal divine relations, and then he too transfers this model to all strong relationships; therefore, to be in a strong relationship is formally equivalent to Sloterdijk's interpretation of the Image of God in the Genesis myth, as well as to his analysis of fetal life, mother and child, and all the modes of being-in shared space. He argues that

places of God – in non-theological terms, places of co-subjectivity or co-existence or solidarity – are not things that simply exist in external space. They only come about as sites of activity of person living together *a priori* or *in a strong relationship*. Hence the answer to the question "Where?" in this case is: in one another. Perichoresis means that the milieu of the persons is entirely the relationship itself [...] they illuminate and pervade and surround one another, without being harmed by the clarity of their difference [...] each breaks forth from Himself into others – the perfect protuberance.¹¹⁵

Here is the central claim of Sloterdijk's anthropology and why it serves as the ontological foundation for his cultural theory. Because perichoresis expresses "the characteristic of living together or in one

¹¹² B 603.

¹¹³ B 603.

¹¹⁴ B 607. This quotation is taken from Saint John of Damascus, "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," in: Saint John of Damascus, *Writings*, transl. Fredric H. Chase (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1958), 197.

¹¹⁵ B 607.

another in the strong sense or *a priori* does not only belong to the intragodly persons, but also manifests itself, in a sense, in human associations of persons. [...] all human cohabitation in spaces of closeness is perichoretic, for the *basic law* of soul space and the micro-social space is the overlapping of individual into individuals."¹¹⁶ This theological reflection Sloterdijk claims "led [...] to the discovery of a language for the strong relationship,"¹¹⁷ giving him the conceptual tools to frame a coherent understanding of selfhood as being-with, and to extend it to his cultural theory developed in volume three *Foams*. Perichoresis serves not only as unifying morphological structure of personal experience, it also functions as a normative cultural goal of social structures: "if one wanted to design societies on the model of the icon of the Trinity, the result would be vigorously perichoretic social forms along the spectrum of communes, communitarisms, communisms [...]."¹¹⁸

Evaluation and Critique with Luce Irigaray

Perichoresis is the *ideal form* of interpersonal connection ontologically rooted in the biological structure of our *being-in-shared-space*. This is a wonderful affirmation of truthful honest openness without reducing the mystery of one to another, yet bound together as one, a circulation of vitality and understanding, love and care that touches the depth of our humanity. For Sloterdijk perichoresis is the normative structure of every bio-psycho-social sphere. This for Sloterdijk is an attestation of a grand trinitarian morphology that he believes is so all-encompassing that it can bring together all modes of being-in, including the enduring opposition between the material and ideal, nature and society. He writes: "it has become apparent how the opposition of being-in-God and the being-in-nature disappears in favor of a general logic of being-in-the-shared-space [...] the particular perspectives of theological idealism and psychological materialism are recognized in their propaedeutic achievements, then succeeded and sublated in their results,"¹¹⁹ and thereby surpassed by his own sphere theory.

¹¹⁶ B 61, B 624 e. m.

¹¹⁷ B 614.

¹¹⁸ B 625.

¹¹⁹ B 583. "Through its independence from both theological declarations and psychological discourse, the theory of spheres does theoretical justice in a new way to the self-experiences of the living being in its current tension between inside and outside positions." B 584–585. "Theologians may continue under the illusion that their God is deeper than the God of the philosophers; but the God of the morphologists is deeper than the God of the theologians." 64–65.

Sloterdijk's grand assessment of own achievement of all things spherical is indeed hyperbolic and overstated; nevertheless, he describes the goodness of our psycho-social space remarkable well. However, no one, save God, can live in relational perfection. There is no ideal world, or social space. Not everyone gets a good start in the womb with loving parents. Not everyone has received enough good love to resonate in and through present and future relationships. Some of us never had an "archetypally powerful afterglow of an older state in the current one."¹²⁰ And those that do, still share the universal risk of falling into a false or bad triangulation that deforms our life-giving bonds.¹²¹ Even though Sloterdijk claims that his brand of "Platonism and psychoanalysis [...] both teach that the primary, pre-concrete and super-concrete eros has its source in an obscured, never entirely forgettable and still ever-igniting biune past,"¹²² returning to past is no guarantee of anything and could simply ignite disaster rather than bliss.

Perichoresis describes the success space for human flourishing, one we fall out of at our own peril. Even though the *a priori* goodness of being-in strong relationships remains, we get caught up so easily in "mimetic plagues"¹²³ stoked by the "fire of envy."¹²⁴ We fall into "derelict forms of existential perichoresis." In criticism of Heidegger's notion of Dasein, Sloterdijk writes: "The Trinitarian sphere has fallen to earth, and there discovers itself as factual existence in the world. Everyone is the other, and no one is himself: this could almost be applicable to the persons of the Trinity, and yet it is only valid for the mutually entangled and individually lost socialized humans." Heidegger analysis of falling into the "they" is a

gray perichoresis [that] [...] reveals the other true icon of intimate interweaving, it bring into view the imprecise interwoven life of the many and the general commitment to averageness. And yet, even in this derelict, confused, talked-to-death Dasein, there is still an inextinguishable sacred remainder. For even in the most banal existence, there is a togetherness with others that is an antecedent and immemorial as only the seamless coherence of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Someone is somehow close to someone else at some time [...] Thus the miracle of the strong relationship continues inconspicuously in "they"; fallen from all high heavens, the "they" is still grounded in a place specific only to itself [...]. The light

¹²⁰ B 222.

¹²¹ René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co., 1996). The editor's introduction gives one of the best summaries of Girard's formulation and utilization of the triangulation of desire and its epic failures.

¹²² B 212.

¹²³ B 222.

¹²⁴ B 22.

of the In shines even for the self lost in busyness. Everyday existence, because it is in the world, is always blessed with an ecstatic intimacy, even if it is too sluggish to have any notion thereof. Whoever is in the world inhabits a place in which, by virtue of the In's structure, the strong relationship has always already asserted its claim.¹²⁵

Whereas theological perichoresis is the celebration of the Gospel of John's brilliant confession of authentic intimacy with God and others, "Heidegger's analysis describes an existence [*Existenz*] that has disintegrated into the vulgar medial public realm."¹²⁶

While Sloterdijk recognizes that we all live in shared space regardless of the poverty intimate connection, and that persons live in spheres are in "breathed, divided, torn-open and restored space," and thereby in need of "constant renewal,"¹²⁷ he doesn't tell us how such broken or fragment gray perichoresis can be restored. Therefore, Sloterdijk's description of the perichoresis of God transferred to our bio-psycho-social life gives us an *Image* of God as the structure of being-in shared space but doesn't tell us how to live in the *Likeness* of God other than repeating previous sedimentations and images of shared space. His psychoanalytic theory of maternal love is not enough to ground the goodness of our shared loving spaces of existence. Being-in-and-with-others is also a practice, an innovative way of being with others that risks creating loving connections and makes love real through action, *without* a foundation or steadfast image of goodness.

A constructed image such as perichoresis is in constant need of deconstruction by love still unformed. Luce Irigaray in *The Way of Love*¹²⁸ tells us that "what could or ought to exist as loving between us" needs to look forward rather than backwards.¹²⁹ More than that, she too argues, as Sloterdijk does, that this is an ontological or "original position" of humanity; however, it has to be "cultivated in order for humanity to exist as such [...]. It is a question of making something exist, in the present and even more in the future."¹³⁰ Therefore, one could argue that she is describing something other than a preexisting ground for human intimacy as much as it involves the *natality* of love in the present. She "proposes ways to approach the other, to prepare a place of proximity: with the

¹²⁵ B 626–628.

¹²⁶ B 629.

¹²⁷ B 46.

¹²⁸ Luce Irigaray, *The Way of Love* (New York: Continuum, 2002). Hereafter referred to as W.

¹²⁹ W vii.

¹³⁰ W vii.

other in ourselves and between us"¹³¹ that creates the goodness of being through acts of love.

With a similar critique as Sloterdijk of the Western philosophical preoccupation with death, as opposed to birth and life, and the objectification of the real, Irigaray seeks an "apprenticeship to a knowing how to live,"¹³² where the human real is found in relationships and not in isolated masculine subjects over and against others. "[...] the masculine subject has also left behind him nature, woman, and even children. His culture amounts to a sort of monologue more and more extrapolated from the real, unfolding itself parallel to this real in order to carve it up and thus dominate it."¹³³ Western thought has practiced speech about others through an ever-ascending logic of universal sameness that has forgotten or is no longer interested in speaking with others face to face. According to Irigaray, such vertical transcendence of form into sameness and finality needs to be replaced with a

horizontal transcendence of the other which calls for a different logic [...] [and] elaboration of a shared universe. From a solipsistic love, from a certain reason dominated by logical formalism, philosophy passes to a wisdom of love. A task in which humanity discovers a still to come and fuller accomplishment. Never definitive, always under construction. Its decisive instrument is difference itself: this unthinkable of thought, this unthought which traverses human identity.¹³⁴

For Irigaray the difference between self and other is ontologically irreducible, and shares with Sloterdijk the conviction that ontology and anthropology always begins with Two and not a Cartesian One. "Thus never a completeness of the One, but constitution of two worlds open and in relation with one another, and which give birth to a third world as a work in common and space-time to be shared [...] [that] no longer belongs to a traditional ontology."¹³⁵ In this way, the two can become a pair through the project of proximity without the reduction to a metaphysically determined "One."

¹³¹ W ix.

¹³² W 3.

¹³³ W 6.

¹³⁴ W 9–10. This is a claim that Ricoeur also makes when he argues that universal sameness of identity fails to connect with others, resulting in a negative "appropriating the other". For a critique of "appropriation" see Henry Isaac Venema, *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the thought of Paul Ricoeur* (New York, SUNY Press, 2000), and Henry Isaac Venema, "Who am I to Others?", in: *International Institute for Hermeneutics, Hermeneutical Series, Vol 3, Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium*, ed. Andrzej Wierciński (Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press, 2003).

¹³⁵ W 10–11.

The natural is at least two: male and female. All the speculation about overcoming the natural in the universal forgets that nature is not *one*. In order to go beyond – *assuming* this is necessary – we should make reality the point of departure: it is *two* (a *two* containing in turn secondary differences: smaller/larger, younger/older, for instance). The universal has been thought as *one*, thought on the basis of *one*. But this *one* does not exist.¹³⁶

The way of love is the way of grace that moves and calls the *two* towards “a deeper or more blossomed form of being.”¹³⁷

According to Irigaray, this new way of thinking requires the constant revision of speech that is “still and always virgin with respect to meaning [...]. To speak starting from the already known also paralyzes the becoming of the one and of the other”;¹³⁸ hence, each approach to the other must be able to genuinely “touch” the other anew each and every time. “For there to be an exchange, it is essential that the other touch us, particularly through words.”¹³⁹ We cannot fall back on universal assumptions that exchange the other for the “same” under the banner of ‘this is how we have done it before’. To approach the other is to step toward an indeterminate mystery where “meaning is then sensed but never conceived in only one word. A silence, and impossible to say, moves each one toward an unapproachable signification [...] between the two something exists that belongs neither to the one nor the other, nor moreover to any word. And this something must, in part, remain indeterminate.”¹⁴⁰

This “between” requires creative poetic speech that can open “a sharing of desire, of love,” a “being in communication,”¹⁴¹ where “saying, from then on, no longer belongs to only one [...] it belongs to the two [...]. [Here] meaning quivers and always remains unstable, incomplete, unsettled, irreducible to the word.”¹⁴² Following Heidegger’s lead, Irigaray insists that such language is “not appropriating the thing but letting it be as thing. What is sought here is beyond: how to let be the other as other while speaking, speaking to them.”¹⁴³ Here proximity doesn’t mean closeness to the logos of speech, but to root speech in “carnal

¹³⁶ W 35.

¹³⁷ W 17.

¹³⁸ W 17.

¹³⁹ W 18.

¹⁴⁰ W 22–23.

¹⁴¹ W 27.

¹⁴² W 28.

¹⁴³ W 29.

touching"¹⁴⁴ to become increasingly close to the incarnation of the other as other. We need a poetic creative speech for this kind of "an exchange in difference. For such a situation, there is no already existing speech [...]."¹⁴⁵

The western philosophical tradition, according to Irigaray, has blocked the way toward others by its love for repeatable speech sheltered by a solitary logos disconnected from "what is most irreducible in humanity."¹⁴⁶ Like Sloterdijk who thinks modernity has turned us into "the idiot of the cosmos: he has sent himself into exile and expatriated himself from his immemorial security [...]"¹⁴⁷ the *real* of humanity for Irigaray is found in the continuing movement of the deep desire for intimacy that constitutes our humanity. We become human by creating and receiving love from and for others, and this takes a lifetime. Our humanity still needs "to be unveiled and cultivated," and find a "universal in its diversity" that can come alive in the flesh. Thus, relations between the sexes carries profound ontological weight. The *real* of our humanity is rooted in a being-with/in-oneself-and-others; therefore, like Sloterdijk, our being is always plural right from the start.

Even though this new language of intimacy only provides provisional shelters that stagnate without constant work, they open creative and playful spaces that attend to the joys and sorrows of each other, creating love poems in the flesh. Here in this the most fragile of all spaces, we find the *real* "shelter where one can indeed withdraw and even invite the other but not a definitive house for a subject. It is a refuge while waiting to build a more human dwelling, and a common dwelling,"¹⁴⁸ Yet, when we aim for this "dwelling place" solid ground opens up beneath our feet and we find ourselves walking on a "groundless ground"¹⁴⁹ that constantly needs to remake itself along the fragile way of love.

This is the invisible real of relationships, the secret of a couple's alliance, the most real yet most difficult to say. Hence Irigaray utilizes a variety of metaphors to describe this bond: an "interval,"¹⁵⁰ a "dwelling place,"¹⁵¹ a "coexistence in difference,"¹⁵² a "place hospitality,"¹⁵³ and creative faithfulness to oneself and the other. Here our aim is never fusion with the other but a union that maintains the difference between

¹⁴⁴ W 33.

¹⁴⁵ W 35.

¹⁴⁶ W 46.

¹⁴⁷ B 23.

¹⁴⁸ W 50.

¹⁴⁹ W 72.

¹⁵⁰ W 18.

¹⁵¹ W 51.

¹⁵² W 134.

¹⁵³ W 154.

two. "The interval between the other and me can never be overcome."¹⁵⁴ The distance between the self and other is infinite and can never be crossed. We can be brought close to another, and we can create an "interior available to welcome" the other, and the self is indeed enlarged within the shared space of others, but the self as such retains its individuality and uniqueness. So on the one hand, the self is not found without the other and the relation to the other is constitutive of normative selfhood; but on the other hand, as we all know, we can be responsible for the destruction of our selfhood by shutting down relations to others and confining ourselves to the interior ego. To be an individual autonomous agent is essential to be a person, but personhood as such is only found in and through the other's relation to the self, through a surrender to each other. Irigaray wants to affirm both the individuality of self and the plurality of selfhood in our relations with others, best exemplified by, but not limited to, a loving couple. One could say that Irigaray is trying to put flesh on an abstract notion of the ego and alter ego without reducing the other to a double of the self. Without difference the relation to the other collapses the other into the same, thereby missing the chance for true discovery of the *real* identity of our humanity found in the relation of proximity and transcendence between two.

Such proximity and difference "requires an interval, [but] it engenders it also,"¹⁵⁵ or as Sloterdijk puts it, an "autogenesis" of relation. This is more than the simple placement of "side by side [because that] does not suffice for reaching nearness."¹⁵⁶ Our self is not a matter of pure sameness; "it needs mediations in order to be constituted. It is constructed and not simply received as a whole without flaw."¹⁵⁷ Our selfhood is founded through the construction of a "properly human co-belonging with the other."¹⁵⁸ Irigaray is correct when she states that "[m]y own identity is questioned by this same and other in front of whom I find myself,"¹⁵⁹ and she is also correct in her critique of Heidegger's claim that "Being as the whole of being as ground does not take account of the ground that the relation between human being represents."¹⁶⁰ Irigaray is looking for a way of grounding the *real* as opening to the other, and as the individual who is open (or not) to the *other*. She is not claiming that only romantic couples are real, and those not in relation lack reality, rather what she is aiming at is the real as an ongoing task of becoming

¹⁵⁴ W 66.

¹⁵⁵ W 66.

¹⁵⁶ W 68.

¹⁵⁷ W 69.

¹⁵⁸ W 71.

¹⁵⁹ W 71.

¹⁶⁰ W 72.

human. This is not an exchange of one type of fixed ground for another type of fixation, rather “the relation between those who are the same and different weaves a groundless ground. It corresponds neither to the abyss nor to nothingness but results from an act of grounding [of loving] which does not end in any ground. The ground is not equivalent then to a multiplicity of interweaving where man already stays and where he dwells – where he is both safeguarded and enclosed,”¹⁶¹ nor is not an Aristotelian ground that can be spoken in many ways within the confines of some hidden or secret “*hypokeimenon* [behind] the subject.”¹⁶² The groundless ground is the task “in front of oneself” in the “relational world where the other takes a decisive place.”¹⁶³ The groundless ground is a co-belonging open to the opening of self and other. Or one could say that the real of humanity is the *event*¹⁶⁴ of opening to and connection with oneself and other.

Both Sloterdijk and Irigaray give us a poetics of strong relationships; for Sloterdijk “a medial poetics of existence,”¹⁶⁵ for Irigaray a poetics of creative new speech in the act of love.¹⁶⁶ Two very similar ways of understanding the goodness of intimate connection, one memorial the other anticipatory. Yet both are needed for understanding existence. Our history shapes and molds our experience and understanding of strong relationships, our history pushes us towards others out of the place we have been formed, but the pull of ever new and deeper love can never be found simply by repeating the past. New love is always possible without images of bad love holding us hostage. New love, in anticipation of love to come, is an eschatological hope and desire for love yet to be revealed, a hope open to the other in the unformed “wild spaces of love.”

Bibliography

- Bauman Zygmunt. 2000. *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
 Derrida Jacques, Maurizio Ferraris. 2001. *I have a taste of the secret*, transl. Giacomo Donis, ed. Giacomo Donis and David Web. Cambridge: Polity Press.

¹⁶¹ W 72.

¹⁶² W 73.

¹⁶³ W 74.

¹⁶⁴ Žižek tells us that an event is “something shocking, out of joint, that appears to happen all of a sudden and interrupts the usual flow of things; something that emerges seemingly out of nowhere, without discernible causes, an appearance without solid being as its foundation.” Slavoj Žižek, *Event, Philosophy in Transit* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), 2.

¹⁶⁵ B 80.

¹⁶⁶ W 35.

- Dooyeweerd Herman. 1999. *In the Twilight of Western Thought: Studies in the Pretended Autonomy of Philosophical Thought*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press.
- Fox Mathew. 2000. *Original Blessing*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.
- Girard René. 1996. *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams. New York: The Crossroads Publishing Co.
- Girard René. 2010. *Battling to the End: Conversations with Benoit Chantre*, transl. Mary Baker. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Irigaray Luce. 2002. *The Way of Love*. New York: Continuum.
- Kearney Richard. 2001. *The God Who May Be: A Hermeneutics of Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Latour Bruno. 2009. "Spheres and Networks: Two ways to Reinterpret Globalization". *Harvard Design Magazine* 30, Spring/Summer.
- Olthuis James H. 2001. *The Beautiful Risk: A New Psychology of Loving and Being Loved*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Ricoeur Paul. 1998. *Critique and Conviction: Conversations with Francois Azouvi and Marc de Launay*, transl. Kathleen Blamey. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Saint John of Damascus. 1958. "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith." In: Saint John of Damascus. *Writings*, transl. Fredric H. Chase. New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc.
- Sloterdijk Peter, Hans-Jurgen Heinrichs. 2011. *Neither Sun nor Death*, transl. Steve Corcoran. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Sloterdijk Peter. 2011. *Spheres Volume 1: Bubbles, Microsphereology*, transl. Wieland Hoban. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Sloterdijk Peter. 2014. *Spheres Volume 2: Globes, Marcospherology*, transl. Wieland Hoban. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Sloterdijk Peter. 2016. *Spheres Volume 3: Foam, Plural Spherology*, transl. Wieland Hoban. Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e).
- Venema Henry Isaac. 2000. *Identifying Selfhood: Imagination, Narrative, and Hermeneutics in the Thought of Paul Ricoeur*. New York: SUNY Press.
- Venema Henry Isaac. 2003. "Who am I to Others?". In: *International Institute for Hermeneutics, Hermeneutical Series, Vol 3, Between Suspicion and Sympathy: Paul Ricoeur's Unstable Equilibrium*, ed. Andrzej Wierciński. Toronto: The Hermeneutic Press.
- Žižek Slavoj. 2014. *Event, Philosophy in Transit*. London: Penguin Books.

Summary

The Cartesian ghosts of modernism are incapable of understanding selfhood. By taking the individual as the ontological foundation for philosophical inquiry, selfhood is abstracted from the fullness of flesh and blood reality and fails to see selfhood as a plurality of interconnections with others that are essential to any attempt at self-understanding. As Paul Ricoeur points out, the self is disciplined into

selfhood by way of others who are there prior to any notion we may have about our own identity. We pass through a hermeneutical “detour” by way of the other to come back to self. Here we discover *what* we take as self is in fact given to us by persons, texts and our historical situation. Selfhood is a self in relation with others, and therefore self-knowledge must consider our relational openness to otherness as foundational for who? what? where? and why? we are constituted in this way. It is this relation, or relational space between self and other that I want to explore in this paper.

Keywords: Sloterdijk, Irigaray, Selfhood