

# *Diotima's Laughter: Towards a Philosophical Approach Which Centres Ethics*

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## **Abstract**

Plato, a seminal figure in Western philosophy, employed the dialogical method in his writing to underscore the significance of dialectical reasoning and open discourse. In Plato's *Symposium*, there is an exchange between Socrates and Diotima whereby the latter teaches the former the art of love. The majority of philosophical discussions concerning the exchange typically interpret Diotima's teachings as representative of Platonism and acknowledge the presence of Plato's Theory of Forms within it. However, in Luce Irigaray's analysis of this dialogue, she emphasises Diotima's unique position within the *Symposium*. Irigaray, in directing her attention to Diotima herself, is able to provide a reading which pays attention to the nuanced moments where Diotima's views transcend the bounds of Platonism. With this reading as my starting point, I argue that Diotima's laughter in her speech promotes an ethical approach to philosophy as a way of life. Paired with her pedagogical approach, Diotima fosters an ethical exchange with Socrates which challenges conventional hierarchical and oppositional thought within philosophy. By highlighting Diotima's laughter, pauses, and questioning, Irigaray's interpretation illustrates a philosophical approach which is

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open to otherness and embodies plurality. In sum, this paper showcases how laughter in Irigaray's reading of Diotima's speech advocates for an ethical foundation in philosophy, emphasising the transformative power of dialogue and the importance of embracing diverse perspectives. It underscores the enduring relevance of Plato's dialogues in inspiring ethical engagement in philosophical inquiry.

## **1. Introduction**

Hailed as one of the founders of Western philosophy, Plato bears immense significance due to his foundational contributions which continue to shape the field today. Notably, Plato's use of the dialogical method in his philosophical works emphasises the importance of dialectical reasoning and open discourse in philosophy. In this paper, I will examine the dynamic exchange that takes place between Socrates and Diotima in Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>2</sup> More specifically, I will focus on the role of laughter in Luce Irigaray's reading of Diotima's speech in her chapter titled 'Sorcerer Love: A Reading of Plato, *Symposium*, 'Diotima's Speech', from her book, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*.<sup>3</sup> Firstly, I will outline the importance of Irigaray's reading of Plato and the unique position of Diotima's speech among the male speeches in the *Symposium*. Subsequently, I will present my argument that Irigaray's analysis reveals how laughter within Diotima's speech instils an approach to philosophy as a way of life rooted in ethics. To reach this conclusion, I will first explore Irigaray's emphasis of Diotima's pedagogical approach, which effectively establishes an ethical exchange between her and Socrates, challenging conventional hierarchical and oppositional thought. Subsequently, I will argue that Irigaray's interpretation illustrates how Diotima's laughter creates a momentary pause. This interval in the conversation disrupts Socrates' established truths, fosters an openness to others, and reflects the essence of plurality. Ultimately, the role of laughter in Irigaray's reading of Diotima's speech advocates for an approach to philosophy which is founded in ethics.

## **2. Contextualising Diotima's Speech: Plato's *Symposium*, Irigaray's Reading, and the Philosophical Landscape**

Before I discuss the role of laughter in Irigaray's reading of Diotima's speech, I will briefly explain Plato's *Symposium* and the significance of Diotima's speech within it. Plato's *Symposium*, like numerous other works of his, was written in the form of a

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<sup>2</sup> Plato (1967) *The Symposium*, Walter Hamilton, trans, Penguin.

<sup>3</sup> Irigaray, Luce (1993) *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Carolyn Burke and Gillian C Gill, trans, Cornell University Press.

dialogue, whereby the characters partake in a give-and-take interchange.<sup>4</sup> This work depicts a gathering of men at a banquet in ancient Greece, who are prompted by Eryximachus to present, one by one, an encomium—a speech that praises Love (Eros).<sup>5</sup> In this way it is unlike many of Plato's other works as it is made up of a series of speeches from different characters who either comply with the challenge, or take different approaches to the topic. This diversity allows readers to consider various philosophical perspectives on several key philosophical ideas, such as Plato's theory of forms and the ladder of love. It also delves into the connection between love and beauty, as well as the pursuit of higher knowledge. The *Symposium* is considered by many as the source of many Western interpretations and analyses of love. Diotima's speech within the *Symposium* is unique as she is the only female character to be given a voice amid the male speeches. Nevertheless, there is considerable scholarly debate as to whether Diotima's voice can genuinely be considered hers, given that it is conveyed through Socrates, who describes Diotima as the prophetess who taught him the art of love.<sup>6</sup> In contrast to these analyses, which often scrutinise Diotima's gender and question the fidelity of Plato's representation, Irigaray takes a different approach. She deliberately avoids attributing the speech to either Plato or Socrates and instead interprets it as the authentic expression of Diotima. Tina Chanter, in her work *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*, interprets this approach as a means of returning Diotima's agency and emphasising 'the uncertainty that surrounds not only Diotima's words, but her very existence.'<sup>7</sup> By presenting Diotima's words as her own, Irigaray not only challenges traditional interpretations but also underscores the broader issue of the exclusion of women in philosophical discourse. This aligns with the overarching goal of Irigaray's work, emphasising the ongoing uncertainty and the need to secure a place for women's voices within the philosophical canon.

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<sup>4</sup> While there is open debate on why Plato chose to write the *Symposium* in a dialogical form rather than a single speech, I take it as a given that through this dialogue form, Plato's evident interest in pedagogical questions is demonstrated.

<sup>5</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 40–41.

<sup>6</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 79. This debate mirrors historical gender dynamics within the philosophy profession, which has been predominantly male until relatively recently.

<sup>7</sup> Chanter, Tina (2016) *Ethics of Eros: Irigaray's Rewriting of the Philosophers*, Routledge, 162.

For most interpretations of Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*, the focus is usually on Diotima's delineation of the so-called ladder of love, where knowledge is the final destination of the ascent toward Beauty.<sup>8</sup> However, because of the central task of her book, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray's reading of Diotima's speech is deliberately subversive. Her project involves revisiting texts from the philosophical canon to re-evaluate how they have been interpreted in order so 'we might begin to rethink human being in terms of' relations rather than oppositions. For Irigaray, this rethinking serves as the foundation for her theories of sexual difference, and as Rachel Jones argues, 'would necessarily transform philosophy, re-orienting our approach to fundamental philosophical questions about the origin of being, and the relation of form and matter.'<sup>9</sup> Because of Irigaray's method of rereading which involves looking for nuance and ambiguity within these texts, Irigaray locates Diotima's contribution to the overarching theme of love's diverse manifestations and philosophical significance in an earlier forgotten passage. Irigaray reads Diotima as arguing for the intermediary nature of love. This reading goes against the metaphysical trajectory of which the *Symposium* seems to support, as Irigaray's Diotima teaches of a logic of relation rather than one of opposition.<sup>10</sup> This aligns with the overarching project of Irigaray's book which argues that the two different sexes are not two copies or versions of the same, but relational beings who exist as two.

Importantly, Irigaray's reading of Plato is a subtle one. She does not claim that it is absolutely true or correct for that would go against her project which denies the idea that there is a single truth that is one and the same for all. In her book *Slow Philosophy*, Michelle Boulous Walker discusses the significance of Irigaray's reading

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<sup>8</sup> Jones, Rachel (2011) *Irigaray*, Polity Press, ProQuest Ebook Central, 80. In the Stanford Encyclopedia article titled 'Plato on Friendship and Eros,' C. D. C. Reeve states that 'what [Diotima] teaches [Socrates], in a nutshell, is Platonism.' This reflects the prevailing view that Diotima is perceived as a conduit through which Plato articulates and presents his theory of Platonic Forms: Reeve, C D C (2023) 'Plato on Friendship and Eros' in Edward N Zalta and Uri Nodelman, eds, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.

<sup>9</sup> Jones, *Irigaray*, 83.

<sup>10</sup> See Rachel Jones' discussion in her book *Irigaray* for a more in-depth discussion of love's role as intermediary as interpreted by Irigaray.

in her chapter titled 'Rereading: Irigaray on Love and Wonder.' Boulos Walker claims that Irigaray skilfully avoids homogenising Diotima's message, instead highlighting the ambiguities and tensions that constitute its complex otherness.<sup>11</sup> Boulos Walker astutely recognises Irigaray's approach to philosophy as an ever-evolving, dynamic process, one that eschews rigidity and completeness in favour of perpetual transformation.<sup>12</sup> I think this is exemplified by Irigaray's deliberate avoidance of a position of critique. While she acknowledges shortcomings in Diotima's method at various points,<sup>13</sup> Irigaray does not judge this as a sign of fault. Instead, she interprets these shortcomings as indicative of the ambiguous and plural nature of Diotima's voice and message. Although I do not have the scope to explore the broader implications of Irigaray's theory, this contextual background is essential for comprehending the role of laughter in her interpretation of Diotima's speech.

### **3. Laughter in Philosophy**

So, how does Irigaray interpret the laughter in Diotima's speech? While her discussion of it is brief, it is crucial to understand that Irigaray views Diotima's laughter directed at Socrates as an interaction devoid of hostility or anger.<sup>14</sup> According to Irigaray, Diotima's laughter is not a reprimand but rather a gentle chiding aimed at Socrates for his misunderstanding of the intermediary nature of love.<sup>15</sup> She laughs at his mistaken assumption that because 'everybody admits that he is a great God,'<sup>16</sup> love cannot be ugly or bad. This reading of Diotima's laughter is significant because it stands in contrast to conventional readings of laughter in Plato's work. In her article titled 'The Laughter of Hannah Arendt,' Boulos Walker argues that many scholars believe ancient Greeks took laughter seriously, often

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<sup>11</sup> Boulos Walker, Michelle (2016) *Slow Philosophy: Reading against the Institution*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 78.

<sup>12</sup> Boulos Walker, *Slow Philosophy*, 79.

<sup>13</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 27, 29.

<sup>14</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 80.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 80.

associating it with ridicule and a humiliating lack of respect.<sup>17</sup> Plato consistently expressed his disapproval of laughter and humour, considering it an emotion that overrode rational restraint and was tinged with malice. In his work *Philebus*, he scrutinises comedy as a form of mockery: 'In laughing at them, we take delight in something evil—their self-ignorance—and that malice is morally objectionable.'<sup>18</sup> This assessment of laughter aligns with John Morreall's claim that all laughter in Plato's work is aimed at self-ignorance.<sup>19</sup> This corresponds to the superiority theory of laughter, which posits that laughter expresses a sense of superiority either over others or over our previous selves.<sup>20</sup>

Nonetheless, Broussard Walker challenges the idea that the laugh of ridicule is the only form of laughter found in Plato's works.<sup>21</sup> Drawing from Arendt's interpretation of Plato, she views the laughter of the Thracian maid as an example of innocent laughter, a manifestation of common sense.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in her analysis of Irigaray's reading, Broussard Walker characterises Diotima's laughter as playful mockery, a mode of interaction that, in her view, distinguishes itself from the more confrontational exchanges among the male participants at Plato's *Symposium*.<sup>23</sup> This characterisation of Diotima's laughter as a light-hearted teasing is justified by Diotima's use of various other pedagogical methods. These include questioning and taking pauses to attentively listen to Socrates' responses, aspects I will explore in detail later on. Therefore, Diotima's playful teasing stands in stark contrast to the laughter of superiority, which may be hostile and ridiculing. By emphasising the other pedagogical methods Diotima employs in her discussion with Socrates, Irigaray is able to put forward an interpretation of Diotima's laughter which departs from the norm, which is the other more aggressive types of laughter often found in

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<sup>17</sup> Broussard Walker, Michelle (2021) 'The Laughter of Hannah Arendt,' *ABC Religion and Ethics*, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/the-laughter-of-hannah-arendt/13401584>.

<sup>18</sup> Plato (1978) *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans, Princeton University Press, 48–50.

<sup>19</sup> Morreall, John (1982) 'A New Theory of Laughter,' *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition* **42**, 243, doi:10.1007/bf00374037.

<sup>20</sup> Morreall, 'A New Theory of Laughter,' 244.

<sup>21</sup> This exemplifies a common misconception where people conflate Plato and Platonism, mistakenly considering them synonymous. In reality, Platonism is a reading and interpretation of Plato's work. Irigaray's reading highlights that with careful attention, we can discern the distinctions between them.

<sup>22</sup> Broussard Walker, 'The Laughter of Hannah Arendt.'

<sup>23</sup> Broussard Walker, *Slow Philosophy*, 80.

Plato's works. This underscores the unique significance of laughter in Diotima's speech. Comprehending this contrast allows for a more profound exploration of the subtleties in Irigaray's reading in relation to established philosophical traditions.

#### **4. Challenging Conventional Hierarchical and Oppositional Thought**

Using Irigaray's interpretation, I will now illustrate how Diotima's laughter lays the foundation for an ethical framework, nurturing an approach to philosophy rooted in ethics. I see the ethical dimension of Diotima and Socrates' exchange as primarily established through Irigaray's emphasis on Diotima's pedagogical approach, which centres around questioning. Irigaray's Diotima signifies this pedagogical method by pairing her gentle laughter with an open disposition, which involves raising questions for Socrates to answer rather than dictating what he should know. On Irigaray's account, Diotima's laughter should not be seen as undermining an open discourse, for it is not angry, but rather, she laughs to dismantle Socrates' assurance of opposing terms.<sup>24</sup> This is exemplified when Diotima asks Socrates what he thinks the nature of love is. By affording Socrates the chance to respond and actively listening to what he has to say, Diotima grants him a voice in the discussion.<sup>25</sup> Irigaray describes this dynamic as a 'dialogical volleying between Diotima and Socrates.'<sup>26</sup> This process of inquiry prompts Socrates to reconsider his earlier conviction that love is a god, ultimately setting the stage for Diotima to introduce her argument for the demonic nature of love.<sup>27</sup> For Irigaray, it is not because love lacks the beautiful and the good things that he loses his status as a God, but because love

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<sup>24</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 22. This marks the fundamental divergence between Diotima's approach to questioning and that of Socrates. While both engage in questioning for philosophical exploration, their approaches differ in terms of context, subject matter, educational focus, and style. Here, Diotima's unique use of laughter, as described by Irigaray, suggests a method of deconstruction, challenging the binary thinking inherent in Socratic dialogues. This stands in contrast to Socrates, who predominantly employs questioning as a means of uncovering truth and fostering understanding. Here, the intriguing reversal occurs, as Socrates, once the educator, becomes the subject of education through Diotima's insightful questioning.

<sup>25</sup> I acknowledge that there is potential for Socrates to have misinterpreted Diotima's intent in laughing at him. However, I would argue that Diotima prevents this from happening by continually prompting Socrates to respond to her questions, making it clear that her laughter is not at all angry but a tool for dismantling his assurances.

<sup>26</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 25.

<sup>27</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 81.



is an intermediary, 'neither mortal nor immoral,' but a state between them both.<sup>28</sup> By guiding Socrates to this conclusion through questioning rather than assertion, Diotima avoids assuming a position of mastery and establishes herself as an equal participant in collaborative inquiry. While Diotima does steer the conversation, her use of laughter underscores her amiable demeanour, mitigating any sense of superiority over Socrates. This pedagogical approach, which Irigaray calls attention to, promotes an open dialogue between Diotima and Socrates, fostering a mutually respectful exchange of ideas where neither holds power over the other.

To elaborate on how Diotima's pedagogical approach dismantles hierarchies, I find resonance in Hannah Arendt's perspective in *The Life of the Mind*. Arendt views laughter as a force that disrupts the overly rigid distinctions between the 'common man' and the 'speculative thinker,' blurring the boundaries between the many and the few.<sup>29</sup> In Boulos Walker's analysis of Arendt's work, she interprets Arendt's use of laughter as a manifestation of common sense's response to philosophical thought, acting as a reminder and remedy of the limits of excessive rationality.<sup>30</sup> This is evident when Arendt writes: 'Laughter rather than hostility is the natural reaction of the many to the philosopher's preoccupation and the apparent uselessness of his concerns.'<sup>31</sup> Similarly, Irigaray views Diotima's laughter as a response to Socrates' lack of common sense: 'She continues to laugh at his going to look for his truths beyond the most obvious everyday reality, at his not seeing or even perceiving this reality.'<sup>32</sup>

Whilst I recognise the importance of highlighting common-sense experiences when doing philosophy, I find the role of laughter in deconstructing the division between the 'philosopher' and the 'common man' to be particularly relevant. This, I believe, directly challenges the prevailing Western philosophical tendency to favour one side of an apparent duality. This inclination underscores the hierarchical distinction

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<sup>28</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Arendt, Hannah (1978) *The Life of the Mind*, Secker & Warburg, 81.

<sup>30</sup> Boulos Walker, 'The Laughter of Hannah Arendt.'

<sup>31</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 82.

<sup>32</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 26.

within dualisms such as philosophers and commoners, logic and rhetoric, and teacher and student. While Arendt does not explicitly endorse the notion of philosophers standing on equal footing with the many, her depiction of the 'intramural warfare' between thought and common-sense hints at the possibility of challenging these hierarchies. She argues that the historical practice of philosophy often involves philosophers problematically detaching themselves from the common world for extended periods.<sup>33</sup> In her discussion of why this detachment is problematic, I discern a suggestion that the preference for withdrawal is a manifestation of the tendency to establish hierarchies within philosophy. If Diotima were to conform to this hierarchical tradition, she would inherently possess power and authority over Socrates due to her roles as a teacher and philosopher. Being a symbol of elevated thinking, conventional hierarchical norms would position her as superior to Socrates, who embodies the archetype of the 'common man.' This understanding of Diotima's speech often emerges in traditional readings of Plato, wherein her lesson is construed as detailing the hierarchical ascent of love.

In contrast, Irigaray, through an emphasis on the relational facets of Diotima's pedagogical method—encompassing questioning and laughter—illustrates how these approaches effectively dismantle such hierarchical distinctions. This subversive interpretation by Irigaray suggests that Diotima is instructing Socrates on how love navigates between opposing elements, intertwining them rather than establishing one above the other.<sup>34</sup> Irigaray's emphasis on Diotima positioning herself as Socrates' equal aligns with what I see as Arendt's underlying aim to challenge conventional hierarchical approaches to philosophy. The significance of establishing this form of exchange within philosophy is that it is ethical in a relational way.<sup>35</sup> In the works of

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<sup>33</sup> Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> Jones, *Irigaray*, 82.

<sup>35</sup> The main reason underscoring why dismantling hierarchies is important is because it challenges the traditional notion that there is a single truth and knowledge that is one and the same for all. This reflects Irigaray's project to re-orient our approach to philosophy and knowledge. While I understand that in certain pedagogical settings, maintaining a clear hierarchy may be advantageous, it is essential to recognise that my claim about laughter dismantling hierarchies within pedagogical settings does not necessarily imply a blanket disregard for hierarchies. My argument primarily focuses on situations where laughter can contribute to a more inclusive and collaborative learning environment. In cases where a clear hierarchy is necessary, such as when addressing academic disparities or managing disruptive behaviour, the application of laughter as a pedagogical tool can be adapted to suit the specific needs of the classroom and foster a conducive atmosphere for learning.

both Irigaray and Arendt, laughter emerges as a valuable tool for fostering a reciprocal (or even loving) relationship between two individuals engaged in philosophical dialogue. This non-hierarchical exchange treats participants as equals, fostering a more enriched and inclusive discourse, as well as a mutually beneficial learning process that embodies ethical virtues such as equality and inclusivity. The importance of these virtues lies in their potential to cultivate a positive and ethical learning environment, and reflect an approach to philosophy firmly centred on relational ethics.

Diotima's laughter, as interpreted by Irigaray, not only challenges hierarchical thinking and the tendency to favour one side of a duality but also transcends the duality itself. Her pedagogical approach, which blends questioning and laughter, fosters a collaborative relationship between herself and Socrates which defies the adversarial mode of interaction and thinking commonly found in the dominant philosophical tradition.<sup>36</sup> In this tradition, interactions often involve opposition and tension, with one side of the dialogue assumed to be authoritative and correct, and the other considered incorrect. What, in my view, sustains such oppositional thinking is the dominating view of philosophy as primarily a desire for knowledge, rather than a love of wisdom.<sup>37</sup> While I do not have the scope to explain in depth the issue of these different approaches to thought, it is essential to grasp, albeit in broad strokes, how they shape our philosophical methods. Boulos Walker characterises the former approach as 'a philosophical tendency ... that stifles ambiguity and uncertainty (otherness) beneath layers of knowledge.'<sup>38</sup> This approach, with the dominating principles of system and certainty, prioritises the end result—the conclusion—rather than the process which leads to that conclusion. By doing so, it tends to reduce philosophy to 'a forensic practice of searching out flaws in

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<sup>36</sup> The relational nature of Diotima's laughter fosters a sense of equality and encourages open dialogue as a means of doing philosophy, and is reflected in her focus on 'love' as an intermediary that entwines rather than establishes hierarchies.

<sup>37</sup> The problem with this approach to thought is the central topic of Boulos Walker's book, *Slow Philosophy: Reading against the Institution*.

<sup>38</sup> Boulos Walker, *Slow Philosophy*, 92.

arguments.<sup>39</sup> As previously discussed, this confrontational style of discourse is exemplified by the male participants in Plato's *Symposium*. This is exemplified soon after Socrates concludes his speech, as Aristophanes endeavours to argue that Socrates had referenced his theory at a certain juncture.<sup>40</sup> In this instance, we observe a distinct 'desire to know' approach to philosophy, characterised by the competitive assertion of one's perspective and the endeavour to establish intellectual dominance through argumentation. Additionally, in such instances where a desire to know is prioritised, laughter may function as a formidable weapon used to outrightly discredit opposing perspectives.

In contrast, when a love of wisdom is prioritised within philosophical work it defines philosophy as 'a way of life that binds philosophers to philosophy.'<sup>41</sup> Irigaray's reading demonstrates this approach to thought as she finds within Diotima's message models of engaged and ethical encounters rather than an exhaustive and systematic theory of Platonic Forms. According to Irigaray, Diotima's laughter works to dissolve the tension that typically arises from conflicting viewpoints. Instead of engaging in confrontational argumentation with Socrates and getting entangled in his metaphysical grappling, Diotima establishes a collaborative rather than combative dialogue. This approach reflects a love of wisdom not only in the content of the philosophical message but also in the method of engaging with others—fostering a connection between the philosopher and philosophy that goes beyond oppositional debates. In Irigaray's *Diotima* I see a commitment to the shared pursuit of knowledge and understanding rather than a focus solely on individual perspectives.

Irigaray introduces this perspective at the beginning of her interpretation, stating: 'Diotima's teaching will be very dialectical, but different from what we usually call dialectical. In effect, it doesn't use opposition to make the first term pass into the

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<sup>39</sup> Boulos Walker, *Slow Philosophy*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 96.

<sup>41</sup> Boulos Walker, *Slow Philosophy*, 2.

second in order to achieve a synthesis of the two.<sup>42</sup> In other words, Diotima's teaching is unique in that it does not follow the traditional dialectical pattern of setting up two opposing ideas and then reconciling them to reach a conclusion. Her method does not rely on opposition as the driving force for synthesis; instead, it 'unveils the insistence of a third term that is already there and that permits progression.'<sup>43</sup> For Diotima, this intermediary is love. She employs laughter as a tool to disrupt the conventional, oppositional modes of philosophical discourse, creating a more collaborative and open atmosphere. Laughter is not employed to refute or ridicule; rather, it serves as a means for both Diotima and Socrates to gather their thoughts and engage in a more harmonious and mutual exploration of the concept of love. Because her laughter embodies a playful form of mockery, Irigaray views Diotima's teaching method as turning questioning into a joyful and positive experience, rather than something to be feared.<sup>44</sup> This establishes an ethical exchange between her and Socrates because it constitutes a dialectical approach that promotes the sharing of ideas and the cultivation of understanding without the need for rigid opposition. Consequently, in accordance with Irigaray's interpretation, Diotima's laughter serves to depart from the traditional confrontational dialectical approach in philosophy, thereby nurturing an ethical exchange that characterises philosophy as a way of life rooted in ethics.

## **5. Ethical Inquiry, Unlearning, and Plurality in Diotima's Pedagogy**

Diotima's laughter, as read by Irigaray, also embodies a philosophical approach with ethics at its core, as it prompts Socrates to reconsider his deeply entrenched beliefs. Irigaray claims that Diotima 'ceaselessly examines Socrates on his positions but without positing authoritative, already constituted truths.'<sup>45</sup> The function of laughter within this pedagogical method lies in its ability to evoke a sense of bewilderment and confusion in Socrates, which I perceive as an intermediary state facilitating his transition from one conviction to another. This transitional phase enables him to

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<sup>42</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 20.

<sup>43</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 20.

<sup>44</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 22.

<sup>45</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 22.

relinquish his 'already established truths,'<sup>46</sup> by eliciting a pause in the conversation. In her book *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, Marie Luise Knott analyses Arendt's use of laughter. Knott emphasises that laughter can manifest in two distinct forms: One characterised by aggression and confined within conventional thinking and pre-existing knowledge, while the other creates a momentary pause that unravels the certainty of conclusions.<sup>47</sup> To illustrate how laughter is 'physically dependent on the ability to let go,' Knott draws upon Kant's description of laughter as the 'salubrious movement of the diaphragm.'<sup>48</sup> This physical and emotional release inherent in laughter momentarily disrupts the customary flow of conversation, interrupting established patterns of thought, meaning, and intelligence. By introducing a pause into conversation, laughter challenges the ordinary and paves the way for fresh perspectives and new ways of understanding to emerge.

Through Irigaray's interpretation, I perceive Diotima's laughter as a brief intermission, affording both her and Socrates the opportunity to gather their intellectual composure.<sup>49</sup> It nurtures an environment in which Socrates can comfortably scrutinise his convictions, facilitated by the ethical exchange she establishes. This setting places Socrates in an intermediate state, hovering between truth and falsity, as it induces him to pause and withhold judgement. This mirrors Knott's examination of Arendt's laughter, which she regards as a strategy of 'unlearning' which prompts an intellectual awakening.<sup>50</sup> In Irigaray's interpretation, Diotima's laughter serves as a response to Socrates' inability to grasp 'the existence or the in-stance of that which stands *between*.'<sup>51</sup> It cleverly rebuts what she perceives as Socrates' nonsensical assertions, leaving him unsettled and humbled in response. This reaction triggers a pause or interval, prompting Socrates to reconsider the statement that had triggered Diotima's laughter. Consequently, her laughter acts as a

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<sup>46</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 22. Again I must acknowledge how Socrates has now become the recipient of the pedagogical approach he has taken with others. However in Diotima's case, she has modified the approach to suit her relational focus with an educative function.

<sup>47</sup> Knott, Marie L (2013) *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, David Dollenmayer, trans, Other Press, 18, 21.

<sup>48</sup> Knott, *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, 21.

<sup>49</sup> Knott, *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, 19.

<sup>50</sup> Knott, *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, xi.

<sup>51</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 21.

catalyst for Socrates 'to unlearn [his] dominant philosophical and cultural prejudices.'<sup>52</sup> In this instance, it enabled him to unlearn his previously held belief that love is a god.<sup>53</sup> Therefore, by establishing an ethical exchange between the parties, the laughter in Diotima's speech nurtures an intermediary space which disrupts established truths.

By cultivating this transitional state which dismantles certainty, laughter encourages a present connection with others and the world. This connection is achieved not through opposition, but rather through an open approach. As previously mentioned, Diotima's laughter, characterised by its teasing rather than humiliating tone, enables her to refrain from assuming a position of mastery over Socrates. Instead of cutting him off to advance her own conclusion, she grants him the space to continue his train of thought, facilitating an interaction that allows them to genuinely encounter each other. In her analysis of Arendt's use of laughter, Knott discusses how laughter can serve as a unifying force. She writes:

When the partners in a debate concentrate only on their differences, identifying and insisting on them, they are emphasising what divides them, thereby letting the divide grow wider, gain significance, and become more palpable. By contrast, *laughter builds bridges* [...] difference and the experience of it are allowed to float free and feel secure in that hovering state [emphasis added].<sup>54</sup>

Here, Knott characterises laughter as having a unifying effect because it temporarily eases tensions and divisions. It momentarily suspends one's fixation on differences, creating a sense of connection and shared experience. This effect is reflected in Irigaray's reading as well. When Diotima laughs at Socrates, inducing a momentary pause and hesitation in their conversation, it prompts him to acknowledge the existence of perspectives which differ from his own. This pause prevents Socrates from continuing his metaphysical grappling within the confines of his own

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<sup>52</sup> Boulos Walker, 'The Laughter of Hannah Arendt.'

<sup>53</sup> Plato, *The Symposium*, 80.

<sup>54</sup> Knott, *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, 14.

perspective and potentially missing the alternate viewpoint Diotima is trying to convey. Diotima's laughter serves as an interval during which Socrates can recognise the other and become more open to otherness.<sup>55</sup>

Importantly, her laughter is not merely a tool for encountering the other; it serves as a means to establish an *ethical* point of contact with the other. In addition to exposing Socrates to the uniqueness and difference of the other, Diotima encourages ethical engagement by nurturing an environment in which Socrates is receptive and open to being 'transformed by the encounter with the other.'<sup>56</sup> Her laughter effectively counters any attempt by Socrates to reduce or assimilate her perspective into his own. Instead, it opens Socrates to the possibility of reconsidering what he once deemed certain, driven by his receptiveness to the other as unknown. This encourages a more inclusive and diverse understanding of reality. This proves advantageous for Socrates as the educative effects of Diotima's laughter aids him in his engagement of philosophy in his quest for wisdom. Thus, in Irigaray's reading, Diotima's laughter is a tool for an ethical opening toward the other, thereby providing an ethical orientation for engaging in philosophy.

Building on this, laughter's significance extends beyond its role in establishing an ethical point of contact with the other. The momentary pause triggered by laughter illuminates a philosophical approach that encapsulates the essence of plurality. As Bouldous Walker aptly observes, 'laughter provides the pause or interval necessary for us to move forward.'<sup>57</sup> In my view, 'moving forward' entails breaking free from the constraints of excessive seriousness deeply entrenched in dogmatism. Knott articulates this idea when she writes: 'Laughter makes available ... confidence in the human power of resistance— against ideology and terror, against obscurantism,

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<sup>55</sup> I recognise that reflective pauses can be achieved through various means, including simple pauses in conversation. However, Diotima's incorporation of laughter adds a joyful dimension, making the experience more welcoming and engaging for Socrates.

<sup>56</sup> Bouldous Walker, *Slow Philosophy*, 92.

<sup>57</sup> Bouldous Walker, 'The Laughter of Hannah Arendt.'



repression, dogmatism, and despotism.<sup>58</sup> This underscores the subversive nature of laughter, as it challenges rigid structures by highlighting their absurdity or inconsistency. Consequently, it encourages individuals to engage in questioning and critical thinking rather than passively accepting dogmas. By highlighting Diotima's pedagogy of questioning and laughter, Irigaray's reading emphasises the importance of questioning our own 'established truths' so that we do not become intellectually stagnant and resistant to change. Diotima fosters intellectual curiosity and exploration by calling everything into question. This relentless questioning challenges established norms and hierarchies concerning the concept of love. This approach suggests that there is more to discover than a single, absolute truth. It not only deepens Socrates' understanding of the subject matter but also highlights plurality as a central aspect of philosophical inquiry. Diotima's laughter serves as a bridge to others and their diverse perspectives, embodying the essence of plurality by welcoming a variety of voices and viewpoints. It encourages Socrates to consider alternative perspectives, prompting critical examination of any biases or prejudices he may hold. This promotes a shift away from binary thinking towards embracing nuance and ambiguity. Embracing such complexity is what constitutes ethics,<sup>59</sup> as it teaches us to respect and engage with the beliefs and perspectives of others. Diotima's laughter advocates for a philosophical approach rooted in plurality by prioritising openness to alternative ideas and solutions rather than rigid adherence to a singular, fixed worldview.

Lastly, the value of open-mindedness and the willingness to challenge established truths is reflected in Irigaray's own open-ended reading of Diotima's speech. As previously mentioned, Irigaray refrains from critiquing the logical inconsistencies in Diotima's argument. Instead, she views these ambiguities and tensions as representations of the multiple voices which emerge from the text.<sup>60</sup> In line with Bouldous Walker's perspective, 'there is, simply, no singular Diotima for Irigaray.'<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Knott, *Unlearning with Hannah Arendt*, 10.

<sup>59</sup> Bouldous Walker, *Slow Philosophy*, 31.

<sup>60</sup> Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 27–29.

<sup>61</sup> Bouldous Walker, *Slow Philosophy*, 89.

Consequently, Irigaray concludes her reading in an open-ended manner, resisting the urge to align with one or the other of the opposing poles within Diotima's speech. She avoids attributing a singular conclusion to Diotima and, instead, invites readers to revisit Diotima's speech from the perspective of beauty rather than eros. Irigaray suggests that perhaps we have not adequately explored the category of beauty, leaving it relatively uncharted, and she prompts us to contemplate the untapped potential it might unveil. While a thorough exploration of this aspect might reveal the importance of rereading, as examined by Boulous Walker in her analysis in *Slow Philosophy*, within the context of the role of laughter, it serves as an illustrative example of what Irigaray identifies Diotima as doing: advocating for openness and the reconsideration of established truths. Just as Diotima's laughter does, Irigaray's ethical reading of Diotima's speech nurtures an approach to philosophy as a way of life with relational ethics at its core.

## **6. Conclusion**

In Irigaray's reading of Diotima's speech, laughter offers an alternative way of thinking about what philosophy is and how to do it. Firstly, by interpreting Diotima's laughter as good-natured and aligning it with her pedagogical method of questioning, Irigaray illustrates how Diotima's laughter provides an escape route from the limitations of traditional hierarchical and oppositional approaches to philosophy. In doing so, Diotima establishes an ethical exchange where both participants are regarded as equals, fostering a more enriched and inclusive discourse, and cultivating a mutually beneficial learning process that denotes an openness to the other. Furthermore, Irigaray's reading showcases how laughter sketches a pathway of thought which disrupts established truths, remains open to otherness, and reflects the essence of plurality. By introducing a momentary pause in conversation, Diotima's laughter creates an intermediary state where new ways of understanding can emerge, free from the constraints of dogmatism. Coupled with Irigaray's own method of reading, which avoids a position of critique and acknowledges the nuances and open-endedness in Diotima's views, it becomes

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evident that laughter is a potent tool for instilling a philosophical approach with ethics at its core.

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