#nachgefragt – das Podcastformat des Genderblogs
Episode 7 (engl.): Transcendance, Time, and Feminism - An Interview on Simone de Beauvoir with Kate Kirkpatrick and Martina Bengert

Transcript

Noise scenery: Ball of paper is crumbled and falls to the ground. Bass- and glitch sounds.
Voice from the Off:
#nachgefragt – das Podcastformat des Genderblogs. Ein Ort um im transdisziplinären Forschungsfeld der Gender Studies an der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin der ein oder anderen Randnotiz nachzuspüren, abseits von Stift und Papier. Hier reden wir mit Akteur*innen des Forschungsfeldes und verpacken Denkbewegungen in einer Pausenprise Gesprächsfetzen. Diesmal hat nachgefragt: Martina Bengert

Martina Bengert: Dear Kate Kirkpatrick, thank you so much for being here and taking the time to talk about your work on Simone de Beauvoir. In 2017, you published two books on Jean-Paul Sartre and in 2019, a biography on Simone de Beauvoir, *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life*. The German translation has been published in 2020 under the title, 'Simone de Beauvoir: Ein modernes Leben'. You are a scholar, a philosopher, and obviously a specialist for French existentialism. What made you write a biography on Beauvoir?

Kate Kirkpatrick: Well, first of all, thank you for inviting me to be part of this conversation. What made me decide to write a biography of Beauvoir was partly irritation and partly curiosity. Having begun my philosophical studies looking at Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, I noticed a trend in the philosophical literature on that text and others on existentialism—that they treated Simone de Beauvoir as a source for historical information about Sartre's intellectual development, but not as part of his intellectual development in the way that I think her writings clearly demonstrate that she is. And so what began as a sort of irritable suspicion grew into something more than that because when I looked at the way that their work had been received—in terms of thinking particularly of the Anglophone context, the speed at which their works were translated, the care with which their works were translated into English—Beauvoir's and Sartre's reception were very much skewed. I wanted to look at this more systematically and to write a biography of Beauvoir that showed the unfolding of her thought in time, where she was the major character and not playing this minor part.

Martina Bengert: In your biography on Beauvoir, a book that I really read with utmost intellectual joy, you describe how asymmetrical and also misogynist the public perception of Beauvoir was when it came to the comparison with Sartre, and that their collaboration was reduced more to his influence on Beauvoir, or sometimes to her copying her basic thoughts from his work. Where would you say is Beauvoir's influence on Sartre most apparent in his work? Where would you say 'that is Beauvoir!'?

Kate Kirkpatrick: So there are different answers I could give to this question. I think that there is a very interesting work being done in French, looking at the literary influences of Beauvoir and Sartre. Philosophically, I think they clearly had disagreements in the 1930s and the 1940s about the nature of what it means to be free and the power of our situations to constrain our freedom. I think that it is in those conversations that I think the influence is most apparent. But it's a matter of ongoing debate amongst academics working on these two precisely where their differences lie.

Martina Bengert: Connected to that, I would like to ask you about the relation between literature and philosophy in Beauvoir's oeuvre? Beauvoir wrote her first novel at the age of seven and thought of herself more as a writer than as a philosopher. Do you agree? What role might this kind of self-assessment play? Why philosophy after literature? Why this first and second? And did literature maybe offer more space or other spaces for women at that time?

Kate Kirkpatrick: Yes. So this is a really good question. I think the first thing to say about it is that whether or not we take seriously Beauvoir's claim that she was not a philosopher, which is a claim she made in one of her autobiographies, I think is a really interesting methodological question, because in other places when she's describing herself, she says that she's infused with philosophy and that she can't think any way but philosophically. So her own description of herself as a philosopher, or not a philosopher, is inconsistent. There is a question of method to be asked about which of those things we are going to accept. That question of method is related to her own conception of philosophy and her sort of metaphilosophical thinking, if you like. In an essay from the 1940s called 'Literature and Metaphysics', she distinguishes between two kinds of philosophers: systems philosophers (and in that category, she puts people like Leibniz and Spinoza - the great rationalists); and subjectivity philosophers who are more interested in the human life from within (and in that other category, she puts Kierkegaard and

interestingly, Dostoevsky). In other places, Beauvoir clearly rejects systems philosophies. She says that: to try to kind of develop a sort of philosophical system is a delirium. It is a form of madness. But subjectivity philosophy, she thinks, is not madness. It is a way of reflecting on the fact that we have these vivid inner lives as well as existences among others. Clearly, I think she does place herself in that latter category as a subjectivity philosopher. Now, to bring it back to the question of literature, it is interesting that she included Dostoevsky in that category. I think that Dostoevsky inspired many people of that generation in France, in particular, for the way that the novels were, as Bakhtin said, polyphonic. They brought multiple voices into dialogue with each other in a way that did not resolve things in a sort of lesson for the reader, but could kind of become a sort of living experiment when you read it, so that you saw a variety of points of view and came away from the experience of reading with an enriched experience of your own life. I think this question of whether or not she was a philosopher has been vexing for many of Beauvoir's first readers, especially those who were interested in sort of justifying her inclusion in the canon. But I think just to accept the idea that she thought she was not a philosopher is far too easy a conclusion to reach.

Martina Bengert: When she said that, she is she is more a writer than a philosopher, this includes that she also considered herself a philosopher as second place.

Kate Kirkpatrick: Yes. I mean, it also raises these questions about hierarchy. I think that especially in the Anglophone feminist reception of Beauvoir, there has been this desire to justify her as a philosopher because somehow that would make her higher in the hierarchy than being a writer. But not everyone shares that hierarchical vision of the world. You know, being a writer can include thinking in multiple modes.

Martina Bengert: Could we speak of a feminist existentialism in order to underline Beauvoir's contribution to French existentialism when we are in the field of philosophy?

Kate Kirkpatrick: I'm a little reluctant to say that that's her contribution, because I think that one of the kind of oft-repeated tropes that I found in the Sartrean secondary scholarship was the idea that Beauvoir applied the ideas of existentialism to the woman question. I think, actually, her contributions to existentialism in the 1940s began before *The Second Sex*, when she wrote her two essays of ethics, *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, which was published in 1944 and *The Ethics of*

Ambiguity, which was published in a couple of different forms in the middle of the 1940s. In those ethics, she is thinking very much about the question of what freedom is and whether or not there is a ground for morality. So she is interested in meta-ethical questions, and I think that that is an important aspect of *The Second Sex*, which feminist readers don't always attend to. When she says in the introduction to *The Second Sex* that the perspective that she adopts is that of existentialist morality. The only existentialist moral texts that had been published at that point in time were hers. They were not Sartre's. She distinguishes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* between the kind of freedom that everybody has by virtue of being human and what she calls a 'moral freedom'. Which is a freedom that recognizes the value of your freedom, but also the necessity of recognizing the constraints that are imposed on you because other people's freedom is also valuable. And so she has this ethical outlook, which I think informs the way she looks at the situation of women in *The Second Sex*. I would not want to say that it is just that she adds the feminist qualifier to existentialism; I think she adds an ethical qualifier which is not in Sartre's works at that time.

Martina Bengert: She differentiates between two forms of transcendence in order to underline that the situation of women is different or special. Could you maybe say something about that, about her concept of transcendence and freedom and work?

Kate Kirkpatrick: Yes. So the question of transcendence in *The Second Sex* is something that really divides commentators. People like Toril Moi, for example, think that Beauvoir uses a Sartrean conception of transcendence and that it is a masculinist conception. I don't take that view. I read her as having a conception of transcendence, which is about the nature of human consciousness, and it is much more Husserlian as I read her. So I think one of the tricky things about reading *The Second Sex* is that of course many philosophers before her had used this term, even if you just look at near-contemporaries such as Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, or Husserl. Identifying precisely which conception she has in mind is not easy because she doesn´t make it clear. I think that she sees each human being as a transcendence, a singular transcendence, that needs to realize itself in the world. We could also look at Marx if we wanted to, although his vocabulary is slightly different. She thinks that women's situation in 1949, under the present state of education and customs, is such that they are frustrated from realizing themselves because so many possibilities are foreclosed to them. And there's more to it than that. She also talks about the kinds of labor that women's life usually consisted in

being frustrations of transcendence. Because of not just what the labor was, but how it fit into the whole economic organization of society. I do not know if that answered your question or if you have different conceptions of transcendence in mind?

Martina Bengert: No, as a constant process of being eccentric in a way! Not leaving the inner space, but stretching it.

Kate Kirkpatrick: Yes, it is about *being in time*. Consciousness is, on Beauvoir's conception, projecting itself towards the future. And so that's part of what the transcendence is.

Martina Bengert: So Beauvoir and her thoughts on feminism care, but also her focus on abortion are again or better still, quite relevant nowadays. Despite her bisexuality in her texts, or at least the ones I have read there seems to be a quite heteronormative thinking. How could this be explained? Or did I maybe misunderstand something?

Kate Kirkpatrick: So do you mean heteronormative thinking in the in *The Second Sex* or in…?

Martina Bengert: Yes, *The Second Sex*.

Kate Kirkpatrick: Yes.

Martina Bengert: Especially there.

Kate Kirkpatrick: So. I think that this is a very difficult question, in part because it raises the question of what voice Beauvoir was writing in. I haven't read Beauvoir in German, so I don't know what her voice sounds like in German. But when I read her in French and in English, I hear her very differently. In French I hear her mocking the things that are said about women. Almost like a parrot, who is showing you how ridiculous they are by saying how many inconsistent things are said about women at the same time. Whereas in English, I think you lose some of the irony and you lose the black humor. So it sounds much more like she is saying these misogynist or masculinist things in her own voice, as opposed to repeating them to subject them to laughter. So I think in terms of the heteronormativity, one of the things that Meryl Altman's recent book *Beauvoir and Time* I think does very well, is to show that although what Beauvoir

says about lesbianism, now looks very retrograde. She did offer one of the first non-pathologizing accounts of what it means to be lesbian. She said that heterosexuality has to be learned; it is not innate. So I think that's not heteronormative.

Martina Bengert: Thank you for this answer because we talked a lot about this in the seminar and discussed it a lot. You are right. So when I think of her chapter on mysticism, or on love, there are voices that seem to be like fictional voices. When she speaks about women, it's like … it's a little bit too much, like, irony.

Kate Kirkpatrick: Well, it's a risky strategy because it leaves it ambiguous what she's endorsing and what she's not endorsing. But I think that that strategy was intentional on her part because if you hold that each person is a transcendence or a freedom—she is actually very explicit about this in the essay 'Literature and Metaphysics'— the responsibility of the writer is to appeal to the freedom, not to tell them directly what they should think. And so I think if you compare her as a writer to someone like Kierkegaard, who used not just multiple literary forms, but multiple pseudonyms as part of his project, I think that the differences of voice that you get in *The Second Sex*, might actually be quite an explicit attempt to kind of provoke the reader in the Socratic way of making them call their assumptions into question, and even call the author into question. What is she saying? What do I think?

Martina Bengert: A high risk and exposure in it, right? Yeah. So since 2021, you are working on a philosophical commentary on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. I would love to hear more about it. When can we expect to read it?

Kate Kirkpatrick: That last question does not yet have a definite answer, but yes. So this project is motivated by the experience of being confused by *The Second Sex* and by reading it with students who come away from it with very different impressions. And also by noticing that the secondary literature on *The Second Sex* can be categorized in different families. You have phenomenological readers of *The Second Sex*, who tend to read her in the tradition of Husserl or Hegel or Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty, and to say what Beauvoir is doing here is Husserlian or Heideggerian, etcetera. You also have the social constructivist reading of *The Second Sex*, which is unquestioned in some analytic feminism, where the slogan '*one is not born but rather becomes a woman'* is just taken to be a sort of slogan for the idea that gender is socially

constructed and Beauvoir to be the mother of that claim, even though she never uses the word *gender* in *The Second Sex*. I became very interested in the ways that these different families of reading tend to focus only on parts of the book. If you take Judith Butler's early work from the 80s on the *The Second Sex*, for example, she reads a lot from the biology chapter in Parhsley's translation and then from the beginning of the second volume. But Beauvoir obviously thought all of this book needed to be there. And so the reason that I wanted to write a commentary is to sort of work through the book in order to ask what's happening in each section of the text and how reading it this way might call into question some of those families of reading?

Martina Bengert: Sounds amazing. But it is a lot of work.

Kate Kirkpatrick: Yes, it is a lot of work!

Martina Bengert: So my final question: If Simone de Beauvoir was still alive, what would you ask her?

Kate Kirkpatrick: Oh, my goodness.

Martina Bengert: That is an awful question.

Kate Kirkpatrick: Okay. So I would ask her what the content of her late 1920s theses on Leibniz and ethics were because these theses have not yet been published. They may exist. There is a lot of stuff that has not yet been published. But there are passages in her memoirs where she describes these early works of philosophy and in fairly self-deprecating terms and it would be very interesting to me to know whether she already had in the 1920s some of the thoughts about ethics that she published in the 1940s. So that is what I would ask!

Martina Bengert: So thank you very much, Kate Kirkpatrick, for this interview.

Kate Kirkpatrick: Thank you.

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