



Interview with Professor Sara Heinämaa¹

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Sapere Aude: Professor Sara Heinämaa, it's a great honor that you have agreed to give an interview for *Sapere Aude*, PUC MINAS, Brazil.

You have been researching and writing on *feminine embodiment* under the perspective of phenomenology. Do you consider that the philosophical context in which Beauvoir acts is the one inaugurated by Husserl and developed by Merleau-Ponty or does she have a strictly existential phenomenological concern?

Sara Heinämaa: It seems quite clear to me, in the light of textual evidence, that Beauvoir accepts and adapts the phenomenological concept of the *lived body* (*Leib; corps vivant, corps vécu*) as developed by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, as well as the related distinction between the givenness of one's own body (*corps propre*) and the givenness of other bodies. This is crucial to her analysis of the difference between female and male experiences,

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especially in the case of practical objects (goals and means), axiological objects (values) and erotic objects. But of course existential philosophy is also important to her, starting from Kierkegaard's discourse on despair and Nietzsche's critique of idols and idolatry and extending to Heidegger's account of human finitude. I do not mean to argue that Beauvoir would be Husserlian or Merleau-Pontian; rather I have worked to show that the classical phenomenological concept of the *lived body* is crucial to her feminist-philosophical arguments.

Sapere Aude: Would it be possible to think *The Second Sex* holds a phenomenological description in which femininity is being problematized? In what would consist, to you, the concept of femininity on Simone de Beauvoir's work? Do you see *femininity* and *feminine* as having the same acceptation? And when I say *feminine*, I'm referring also, or especially, to the works of Kristeva and Irigaray.

Sara Heinämaa: As I argue in *Toward a Phenomenology of Sexual Difference* (2003), Beauvoir uses two distinct concepts in *The Second Sex* (*Le deuxième sexe*): the concept of *feminine existence*, on the one hand, and the concept of *Femininity*, on the other hand. The former is a form of experiencing shared by women, a way or style of existing and relating to the world and its multiple subjects and objects. This is the foundation from which each singular feminine existence springs. It is the support or the platform for individual feminine products and unique feminine expressions – the feminine “homeworld” (*Heimwelt*), to use Husserlian terms. The latter is an imaginary and ideological construct produced by an androcentric culture. It has two functions: it keeps women “at their place”, that is, at the margins of political, economic and intellectual orders, and it allows men to project their own dreaded finitude onto women.

With these double concepts Beauvoir is able to argue in *The Second Sex* that women must break away from *Femininity* but at the same time must work to cultivate their feminine existence. I see both Irigaray and Kristeva as accepting this basic argument and also working in line with it. If you look at Kristeva's threefold volume on feminine geniuses, *Female Genius: Hannah Arendt, Melanie Klein, Colette* (*Le génie féminin* 1999–2002), its final sections, you can see her indebtedness to Beauvoir quite clearly. In

Irigaray's case the line of influence is more complex but in my mind equally clear. I have argued for this in one of my papers ("Cixous, Kristeva and Le Dœuff – Three 'French Feminist'" 2010).

Sapere Aude: You come from a Finnish university in which the social and political reality greatly differs from that of the South American countries, for instance. This difference, in a way, wind up permeating the academic horizons. How do you see, on the perspective of a Finnish professor, therefore from Northern Europe, the academic-philosophical concern for the *female embodiment* theme? I ask you this because, in some academic contexts, I believe Beauvoir isn't easily recognized as a philosopher precisely for daring to insert in the philosophical discussion the problem of the female body. What are your thoughts on this?

Sara Heinämaa: The topics of femininity and embodiment are still downgraded at the philosophy departments of Finnish universities. There is a great resistance to these philosophical problems and one has to work hard to get them accepted in the curricula or approved as the topics of doctoral theses or research projects. I have been very lucky to have several Nordic colleagues working on similar and related questions near in Scandinavian countries: phenomenologists, e.g. Dan Zahavi in Copenhagen, Hans Ruin at Södertörn University in Stockholm and Lisa Käll at Uppsala University; and feminist philosophers, e.g. Robin Schott in Copenhagen, Vigdis Songe-Møller in Bergen Norway and Sigridur Thorgirsdottir in Reykjavik. Without their support and encouragement, my work on phenomenology of femininity and embodiment would have been much more difficult, if not impossible. Of course, I also have excellent Finnish colleagues, male and female, especially in the field of history of philosophy, but for a long time I was the only one who used phenomenological tools to analyze embodiment, femininity and sexual difference. Now the situation has changed: I have several younger colleagues writing on these topics in Helsinki.

The problem is also practical: there are still very strong irrational prejudices against women philosophers, especially among the older generations, in my own country. Women are accepted as assistants and as helpmates in male dominated projects but if they have their own philosophical agendas or express their own philosophical interests, then they are

quickly excluded or marginalized. In my experience, only international contacts and relations of co-operation can help to challenge such prejudices.

Sapere Aude: In your text “Les source phénoménologiques: Le corps vécu et ses expression”, you understand that Beauvoir problematize Hegel and Sartre’s philosophical doctrines in a perspective of intertextuality with their lived experiences and I add, if I may, narrated experiences; this because it’s before the narrative that memories gain sense to Beauvoir. Therefore, I ask you if you think she transits between a hegelian system and a sartrean system only as a dialogical possibility of avoiding confining herself in an intimate, interior and lonely monologue.

Sara Heinämaa: In her autobiographies and letters, Beauvoir describes in detail her struggle with Hegel. These sources help to interpret the philosophical claims that she makes in her ethical essays, *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity (Pour une morale de l’ambiguïté)*, and in *The Second Sex*. I do not think that she merely negotiated between Sartre and Hegel. Rather I see her as a thinker that had a great hunger for philosophical nourishment and that read everything she could in order to keep her mind open and flexible enough to encounter the problems that she found pressing. She studied the classics and she knew quite well her contemporary philosophy, but she also studied social sciences, history, anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis. For example, she wrote to Nelson Algren and asked him to send her Gunnar Myrdal’s work *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (1944) because she felt that this work would help her in tackling the problems of sexism and racism in *The Second Sex*. I really think that she was not at all a solitary thinker but someone who was able to incorporate several different viewpoints and conceptual systems and was striven by problems rather by doctrines or concepts.

Sapere Aude: About your last researches and studies on Beauvoir. On one hand, it seems that there is a concern to situate Beauvoir in the performativity of the Western Philosophy, between Plato and Judith Butler. On the other hand, between Plato and Butler there is a very large conceptual distance. In Plato (*Cratylus*), we have “the body as sign of the soul”

and in Butler (*Gender Trouble*) we have the body as that which doesn't obey completely the norms which impose its materialization, resisting both the subject's intentions and the social rules, refusing to give way to the normative ideal. How could Beauvoir, in her complex *Ethics of Ambiguity*, help us propose a dialogue between Plato and Butler?

Sara Heinämaa: I do not think that Beauvoir can, or should, be used to establish a dialogue between Ancient philosophy and contemporary gender theory. Butler has her own references to Ancient sources, and these provide the best clue for connecting performative gender theory with the philosophical past. Foucault is of course important here, his reflections on the Ancient tradition of "the care of the self", as well as Nietzsche.

Moreover, I think that there are important differences between the phenomenological approach to sexual difference and the radical social constructivist approach elaborated by Butler. The most important of these concerns the constitution or construction of differences: Whereas the phenomenologist argues that sexual difference is established at the level of pre-discursive embodiment, movement and sensibility, the radical social constructivist, for example Butler, tends to theorize all gender/sex identities and differences as discursive constructs, discursive through and through. I have clarified these differences in two recent articles, "A phenomenology of sexual difference: Types, styles, and persons" (2010) and "Sex, gender and embodiment" (2012).

The historical links between Beauvoir and Butler go through Hegel, on the one hand, and phenomenology of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty and Sartre), on the other hand. You can see this quite clearly in Butler's early essays from the 1980s. But she is also influenced by the American pragmatist tradition (Rorty, Searle, etc.), and you see this influence in her single-minded critique of Cartesianism. For the French – Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, Levinas and Irigaray – Cartesianism is never a single philosophy; it is a complex network of competing approaches. This issue I addressed in two earlier articles, "The soul-body union and its sexuality: From Descartes to Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir" (2004) and "Verwunderung und sexuelle Differenz: Luce Irigarays phänomenologischer Cartesianismus" (2005).

Sapere Aude: Do you still see *The Second Sex* as phenomenological in its approach since its major interest lies on its firm attempt to question all definitions and all theories? And, within this perspective, why do you think it's still valid, now in 2012, to write about Simone de Beauvoir?

Sara Heinämaa: As said, I think that the phenomenological core of *The Second Sex* is in its account of human embodiment (*Leiblichkeit*). The radical demand of rejecting all theories and all prior definitions is more generally philosophical and goes back to Descartes' *Meditations*. But Descartes is a common source shared by Beauvoir and her phenomenological contemporaries, both Merleau-Ponty and Husserl. So I believe that Beauvoir made a groundbreaking contribution while introducing the question of sexual difference to modern philosophy. She raised this question at the very heart of modern philosophy by claiming that the androcentric preconceptions that we have inherited from the past must be radically questioned if philosophy is to keep its promise of radical presuppositionless reflection or thinking.

Her framing of the problems of sexual difference and sexual hierarchy included the claim that women and men experience and live their bodies in different ways. Further she argued that the male body has been used, and still is used, as the model for all human embodiment, both in philosophy and in empirical sciences (e.g. psychology, theology, medical sciences). These claims have far-reaching implications, most of which remain to be studied. I think that there is much to be done here, philosophically, and the best way to do it, for women philosophers, is to establish international contacts. So I thank you very much for this interview, and I hope that it helps to promote exchange between women philosophers in the Nordic countries and in Brazil, Portugal and South America as well as philosophers interested in the topics of embodiment and sexual difference.

Sapere Aude: Thank you very much for your participation! We are honoured to count you as an interviewee for this dossier.