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Interview with Professor Debra Bergoffen [1]

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Sapere Aude: Prior to anything else, we would like to thank you for your goodwill in granting us this interview for *Sapere Aude*, the Departmental Journal of Philosophy from the Brazilian university (PUC MINAS).

I take in consideration here two of your texts, the first one being "*Le mariage comme promesse*" and the second, "*Marriage, Autonomy and the Feminine Protest*". On both, with basis on *The Second Sex*, the question of marriage is presented as an alliance between its constitution by patriarchy and the exploitation of women. In Beauvoir, are we before the "erasure of the ethical significance of intimate relationships" or before a patriarchal *ethos* which determines itself as historically valid and necessary and which needs, therefore, to be continuously criticized?

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Debra Bergoffen: Beauvoir's discussion of marriage is deconstructive in an existential sense. It is a mode of thinking – a questioning – that examines a given state of affairs for its current realities and its unrealized possibilities. It is also a mode of situated thinking. The phenomenon in question, in this case marriage, must be questioned within the context of its situation. Thus Beauvoir's discussion of mariage is not abstract. She is interested the relationship between marriage and the situation within which it exists. She explores the ways that marriage is lived, the ways that women are groomed for marriage, the effects of marriage on the married woman's sense of herself, the ways marriage constructs a woman's relationship to others and the world. What makes Beauvoir's discussion of marriage ethical and political as well as phenomenological and philosophical is its place in *The Second Sex*.

The Second Sex opens with an Introduction that provides the principles of Beauvoir's critique of women's situation under patriarchy. It is then divided into two volumes. Volume One, titled Facts and Myths, traces the ideology of patriarchy as it has reinvented itself through history, legitimated itself through scientific, economic, social, cultural and religious doctrines, and embedded itself in the cultural imaginary through literary and mythical portrayals of women as both dangerous, disingenuous, embodiments of natural forces to be controlled but not trusted (or only trusted to birth the next generation) and fragile, passive and weak vessels requiring male supervision and protection. Volume Two, titled Women's Lived Experience describes the ways that this history, these doctrines and these images of women are enforced, reinforced and lived today. The chapter "Marriage" appears in this section. Its place in this section is telling. It is placed after the chapter "the Lesbian" (women who reject heterosexuality and patriarchal marriage) and before the chapter "Motherhood", (the so called destiny of the married woman). Situating the chapter on marriage after the chapter on the lesbian contests the idea that heterosexuality and marriage are either natural or inevitable destinies. The ideology of heteronormativity and of marriage as a duty is challenged before the first words of the marriage chapter are read. Following the chapter on marriage with the chapter on motherhood, where the injustice of criminalizing abortion is a central issue, Beauvoir exposes the collusion between the ideology of woman as womb and the injunction to marry. Bookended in this way, the place of marriage in *The Second Sex* is part of the argument against marriage in its current form.

Beauvoir's interest in marriage, however, is uniquely ethical. Early in the chapter she tells us that the two sexes are necessary for each other, but that this necessity has never fostered reciprocity. Given her preceding discussions of the ways that biological facts acquire their human meaning, she cannot be referring to the necessities of biological reproduction here. Searching for clues to the nature of this necessity we find them in Beauvoir's critique of the ways that marriage suppresses rather than dignifies a woman's erotic life, and to her reference to the *mitsein* of the heterosexual couple in the Introduction to *The Second Sex*.

Mitsein is Heidegger's term for "Being With". In taking up Heidegger's term, Beauvoir rejects his ontology of the *mitsein* per se. She does not identify "Being-With" as an ontological given but as an ethical relationship that must be achieved. Further calling the heterosexual couple an original *mitsein* she holds it up as a model of this ethical relationship. Why? I think her interest in the heterosexual couple speaks to her concern for the sexual difference, to her sense of its uniquely ethical possibilities. Paying attention to this little commented on passage in the Introduction alerts us to the fact that for Beauvoir one of the central injustices of patriarchy is that in exploiting the sexual difference and using it to justify the oppression of women it alienates women and men from the ethical call of the couple. Identifying the heterosexual couple an original *mitsein* in the Introduction, Beauvoir identifies marriage as the way this *mitsein* is being lived today in the chapter on marriage. Probing the ethical imperative embedded in the heterosexual *mitsein* she finds it uniquely revealed in the sexual erotic relationship. Coming to the chapter on marriage with this earlier reference to the *mitsein* in mind, we can make sense of the fact that much of Beauvoir's discussion of the erotic is found here.

Patriarchal marriage instrumentalizes the erotic. It uses it for political, economic, religious and cultural purposes. It corrupts it. More than a matter of the married woman's frigidity and unhappiness is at stake, though Beauvoir spends many pages documenting this, for in instrumentalizing the erotic, marriage alienates the couple form the ethical meaning of intimate sexual relationships. As erotic, the sexual relationship is a passionate expression of our desire for each other. It is a movement toward the other that rejects all attempts to control or use them. Key to the ethic of the erotic is that it embraces the fleshed strangeness of the other as a freedom that can be reached but not possessed. As I've

discussed in my book, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*, this uniquely ethical relationship takes the form of a gift.

You ask whether marriage as it is constituted today is an erasure of the ethical significance of intimate relationships or a patriarchal ethos that determines itself as historically valid and necessary. I do not see this as an either/or choice. It is as a patriarchal ethos that claims to be natural and necessary that marriage erases the ethical significance of intimate relationships. Beauvoir's descriptions of the erotic make it clear that the erotic event threatens modes of subjectivity that anchor the patriarchal status quo. An absolute subject can be a libertine. He cannot be a lover. An inessential other can be a sexual partner. She cannot become an erotic gift. Understanding that the erotic reveals women and men to each other in their fleshed and finite ambiguity such that it becomes impossible for either women or men to remain in their fixed patriarchal positions, we can understand that it is not by accident that marriage corrupts the ethos of the erotic.

Patriarchy protects itself from the erotic threat to the authority of its social order by dismissing it as irrational and marginal – not something to be taken seriously. In presenting itself as the only ethically legitimate way to express our sexual desire, marriage legitimates its perversion of the erotic by claiming that its institutionalization of men's and women's patriarchal subjectivities follow the immutable laws of God and nature. Given Beauvoir's existential ontology we see that her critique of marriage will begin by taking aim at these naturalist claims. This leads me to your second question.

Sapere Aude: You understand, even in a critical way, that marriage is presented as a stable institution in social, political and religious terms. But it marks rightly the permeable frontier between the erotic, the ethical ant the social-politic domain. What you problematize is precisely the fact that there are numerous couples who demands to legitimate, through the State, their erotic and intimate relations. Could you please comment this delicate question with basis on Simone de Beauvoir’s thinking?

Debra Bergoffen: The existentialist phrase existence precedes essence is short hand for the idea that human beings are historical beings. To be human is to be un-natural, if by natural

we mean being determined in any way – if by natural we mean having an essence that structures our lives. In arguing that human beings are fundamentally historical, Beauvoir is arguing that what makes us human is that we are free beings who can and do change. We are beings who are becoming. The opportunities for change, however, are historically conditioned. Our freedom is not absolute, it is situated. It also entails ethical responsibilities. We are ethically obliged to transform conditions that thwart freedom into conditions that foster it.

Once we situate the chapter on marriage within this existential ethical frame we understand that we need to pay close attention to the fact that Beauvoir opens this chapter by declaring that marriage is in a period of transition. In making this claim, she is not just alluding to the fact that as an institution created by historical and free beings marriage is necessarily an unstable institution that can always become something other than it is. She is saying that the concrete conditions of women in post World War II Europe have changed the situation of marriage. As more and more women become economically independent marriage is no longer necessary for their practical survival. These new economic conditions have the potential to transform marriage from a relationship that subordinates a wife to a husband who claims that his role as her provider and protector gives him absolute rights to her sexual body and its reproductive powers, into an institution where the sexual difference is lived in ways that embody the ethical nature of our sexual desires. It is this changed historical situation that allows us to speak of the promise of marriage and ethically obliges us to make this promise real. Unlike some other promises, however, where I commit to preserve the present in the future (e.g. when I promise to abide by the rules of a contract) the realization of this promise requires destroying the present for the sake of the future.

Revealing the future promise of marriage entails exposing the present perversion of marriage. Instead of being the site where the ambiguity of our embodied freedom is embraced, instead of being the place where our aspirations as free beings are supported and the material conditions of our lives and the lives of others are nurtured, marriage today reinforces the patriarchal sexed bifurcation of our ambiguity. Instead of recognizing that men and women, as embodied, free and desiring beings are responsible for nurturing the material conditions necessary for each other's human becoming, marriage reinforces the

patriarchal ideologies that designate women as the body the cares for bodily life and men as the mind that engages the world creatively.

What interests Beauvoir about marriage is that even in its perverted form it speaks to the fact that we are embodied, free and desiring beings. It speaks to the fact that though we are singular and in many respects autonomous beings, we are also beings who desire each other. The *mitsein* of the heterosexual couple is one expression of this desire. Noting Beauvoir's interest in this *mitsein* prepares us for her interest in the ethical possibilities of marriage.

Since it is clearly not the case that the erotic needs marriage to exist, or that the erotic exists only within marriage, why couples turn to the state to recognize their erotic relationships becomes a puzzle. Many heterosexual, gay and lesbian couples want nothing to do with marriage. They find it carries too much oppressive baggage. They want to secure their private lives from state intrusion. While some gay and lesbian couples reject the heteronormativity of marriage, others, however, are demanding that their erotic relationships be legitimated by marriage. Sometimes the desire for legitimation is couched in economic terms, sometimes, and especially in the United States it is presented as a civil right. All of these arguments are persuasive, but none of them speaks to the expressions of joy of those couples who have recently won the right to marry.

As I read Beauvoir, it is a mistake to sever the politics of marriage from the ethics of the erotic. Gay and lesbian couples who are protesting their exclusion from marriage in what is called the modern world recognize this. So do children who are demanding, and sometimes risking their lives, for the right to marry for love in those parts of the world where marriages are arranged by parents. They understand that ethical relationships are either fostered or thwarted by the politics of marriage. They understand that denying couples the right to marry threatens their erotic existence. Unmarried couples protect their erotic lives with legal instruments. In doing this they acknowledge that they need state protection. Sometimes they discover that as unmarried their protective legal instruments are inadequate.

The irony here is that the long and abusive history of marriage provides powerful legal protection to those who can avail themselves of this protection. A brief comment on the place of marriage in slave holding states in the United States before and after

emancipation makes this point quite dramatically. Before emancipation only white couples in slave holding states were allowed to marry. Slave erotic relationships were severed whenever it was to the slave owner's advantage. This is part of what it meant to be considered as property. After emancipation, former slaves rushed to marry. It was an expression of their newly won status as human beings. This history may go a long way to explaining the joy of those who have newly won the right to marry. It expresses the fact that their erotic desire has been recognized as fully human and that its ethical nature will be respected and protected by the state. This history also teaches us that so long as a married woman is considered/treated as her husband's property, marriage must be indicted as an institution that is an affront to a woman's humanity.

Once marriage is understood in terms of the duty of the state to protect intimate relationships it becomes the duty of the state to scrutinize those laws that violate this duty. Of course this will not happen automatically. Understanding *The Second Sex* as a political manifesto that calls for action leads me to your third question.

Sapere Aude: Still on the marriage aspect, in so far as this is truly a very interesting anthropological theme which you take up as a philosophical subject. You write on the first text, "*Le mariage comme promesse*", that marriage incorporates, in a way, characteristics of the scission of our being. Marriage represents both an erotic relation and the couple's ethics, something that extends to the public domain you denominate "*relation de promesse*", given that it seeks a manner to maintain itself particular. Do you believe that *The Second Sex* can still aid us in rereading and resignificating this relation on the 21st century?

Debra Bergoffen: When Beauvoir decided to call herself a feminist and began to lend her name to feminist causes, marriage was not on her agenda. She protested the criminalization of abortion. She fought for women's economic and political rights. She exposed the way rape was used to torture a young Muslim virgin woman accused of being an Algerian terrorist. Though she was explicit about the relationship between the need to change these laws and practices and the possibility of women's liberation, Beauvoir did not link the need to change these laws to the reconstitution of marriage. Yet it is clear that if abortion were

legal, motherhood would not be a married woman's destiny. That if marital rape were a crime, a husband could not claim to posses his wife's body. That if a woman were economically independent she would not be forced to choose between remaining in an abusive marriage or facing a marginal economic existence.

Many of the oppressive conditions of Beauvoir's times have changed. Within much of the western world marital rape is now recognized as a crime and abortion is legal. This means that a married woman is no longer considered her husband's sexual property and cannot be forced to become a mother. It is also now possible for women in this part of the world to live viable lives outside of marriage. Given that much of *The Second Sex* argues that women's transition from the second sexed inferior other to the differently sexed equal other requires that women become economically independent and politically active, it would seem that marriage, once a duty, is now a choice, and that as a choice its promise can be realized. When the last chapters of *The Second Sex* speak of the ways that women who are economically and politically liberated are still haunted by the myth of woman, however, they challenge this conclusion. So long as marriage is embedded in a situation where these myths thrive changing laws and economic conditions will not be enough to resignify it. To realize the promise of marriage we must remain alert to the ways that marriage continues to reinforce the myths of masculinity and femininity that co-opt the ethics of the erotic.

Pursuing Beauvoir's critique of marriage in this way, we also need to depart from it in others. Her silence on the need to make marriage available to marginalized and stigmatized erotic relationships is a case in point that points to the inadequacy of reserving the unique ethical status of the *mitsein* to heterosexual couples. Probing the gaps in Beauvoir's discussion of the ethical erotic of the *mitsein* and exposing the ways the myths of femininity and masculinity still flourish despite women's economic and political gains are two ways that *The Second Sex* remains relevant to the task of fulfilling the promise of marriage.

More than providing us with concrete critiques of marriage, *The Second Sex* remains relevant to contemporary marriage debates by providing us with a method of analysis and a set of principles for assessing the state of marriage. Adopting Beauvoir's phenomenological approach and remaining alert to her ethics of the erotic, we will be able to distinguish those changes to marriage that are merely cosmetic from those that are

meaningful. Given Beauvoir's definition of us as historical beings we know that marriage will change. Remembering that marriage "reforms" in the past have often changed little in women's lives we learn from Beauvoir that careful, concrete, and detailed phenomenological descriptions will alert us to the difference between those new styles of marriage that dismantle the patriarchal ethos and those which simply refashion it.

Sapere Aude: Do you think that Beauvoir's analyses on the subject are still current before the cultural diversity and its impacts on marriage in the contemporary world?

Debra Bergoffen: This last observation is immediately relevant to your question regarding the relevance of Beauvoir's analysis to the culturally diverse institutionalizations of marriage. In the Introduction to *The Second Sex* and her "Japan Lecture" Beauvoir acknowledges the limits of her analysis of patriarchy. Though she argues that her phenomenological method and her existential ethics are universally valid, she insists, in accordance with these principles, that our assessments of how human freedom is fostered or thwarted must be based on concrete understandings of specific situations. Thus when she lectured in Japan, she noted that the distinction between the economic, cultural and political conditions in Europe and Japan required different feminist strategies. What was not different, she noted, was that women were oppressed, subordinated to men, existed as the second sex. However differently it displayed itself, the ethos of patriarchy prevailed.

In assessing the ways that different cultures institute their particular mode of patriarchy through marriage, adopting Beauvoir's phenomenological method requires that we carefully assess our biases regarding these differences. As "modern" nations begin to legalize gay and lesbian marriages they continue to look askance at polygamous marriages. Is the idea that the ethic of the erotic can only be lived in the *mitsein* of the couple a western prejudice? Do other forms of marriages necessarily violate this ethic? Or is it the case that it is only as currently constituted that these marriages violate the ethic of intimate relationships? As historical institutions in transitions could they also become sites of this ethic?

From a cross cultural perspective, it may be that it is Beauvoir's methods and principles and the questions they teach us to raise, more than her prescriptions for liberation

that are crucial, for whether or not her prescriptions can be universalized her phenomenological method and existential principles are uniquely suited to the exigencies of intercultural dialogue on marriage and other pressing feminist issues (violence against women, for example). The method, in its injunction to scrutinize prejudices is a bulwark against arrogance. The principles require respect for the diverse ways that our freedom may be embodied and lived.

Sapere Aude: You enable Beauvoir and Rousseau, though temporally distant, to dialogue on the subject of marriage. Would you be able to comment something about the possibility of this intertextuality, even though the temporal bases are so distinct?

Debra Bergoffen: I envision philosophy as an ongoing conversation across the centuries. Philosophical texts speak to each other – sometimes cordially, sometimes not. Rousseau's *Emile* was a very influential treatise in its day. Presented as a program of education that would produce ideal democratic citizens, it devoted five books to the education of the boy Emile and one to the girl Sophie, Emile's future wife. Emile was tutored to be resourceful and independent. Sophie was schooled in domestic skills, confined to her home, taught to respect and obey authority (as a child the authority of her parents, as an adult the authority of her husband). She was taught to be concerned with the ways she was perceived by others so as to protect her virtue and the reputation of her husband and family. Both Emile and Sophie are destined for marriage but marriage meant different things for them as adults. For Emile it was a necessary step for his entry into public life. For Sophie it defined her adult life.

One of the interesting things about the portrait of this perfect married couple from the perspective of Beauvoir's critique of the way that marriage perverts the erotic is that Emile's tutor teaches Sophie that she is responsible for the couple's intimate life. He tells her that she must control Emile's access to her body and control her sexual desire in order to have influence over her husband. Thus the passion that might reveal Emile and Sophie to each other in their "uneducated" being is foreclosed. Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Women* is the first feminist response to *Emile*. What is of interest here is her counter image of marriage. She defends her program of equal and co-education for boys

and girls on the basis of the fact that such education would provide the grounds for fulfilling marriages. She argued that only equally educated women and men who saw each other as equals could become friends after the passions of sexual life waned.

Though neither Rousseau nor Wollstonecraft are mentioned by Beauvoir I hear their argument in Beauvoir's discussions of marriage. We could not find a clearer defense of patriarchal marriage than *Emile*. We could not ask for a more detailed account of the ways that patriarchal marriage is grounded in the idea that men are entitled to rule women and that as ruled by men women are entitled to use sex as a weapon. As Beauvoir showed how those who are born female become women and how in becoming women they are groomed for marriage, Wollstonecraft showed how the education system of her times prepared women for the servitude of marriage. Wollstonecraft offered an alternative system of education and an alternative ideal of friendship marriages. She argued for the equality of women and men and for the promise of friendship marriages on the basis of the mind/soul body distinction. She insisted that the sexual difference was not indicative of a human difference. The equality of women's and men's souls made them equally human. Beauvoir's ethic of the erotic may be seen as pursuing an alternative vision of marriages of equals – one that rejects the body soul divide to speak of our distinctively sexed embodiment as essential to our humanity.

Rousseau is a clear and unapologetic voice for the "virtues" of patriarchal marriages. These marriages, he argues meet the needs of women and men and create the stable families that are the bedrock of democratic politics. Making this link between the ethics of marriage and the politics of democracy, between one's married and citizenship status, he shows us the stakes of the marriage debates. To counter Rousseau and the marriage legacy he represents we need to do more than defend the ethics of the erotic. We need to make the case that the erotic's challenge to patriarchal subjectivities challenges all forms of authoritarian politics and challenges democracies to fulfill their promise of equality. In looking toward a different future for marriage we need to understand the ways that the ideology of marriage's past, as delineated in *Emile*, continue to thwart the coming of this future.

Sapere Aude: On the distinction between the public and the private, between the married woman and the State which regulates private relationships in terms of rights and also of duties: how do you see Beauvoir's position concerning marriage, whether according to *The Second Sex* or to what she chose for herself?

Debra Bergoffen: *The Second Sex* makes it clear that the personal is political. How we live our private lives is a political statement. In the France of the 1940s, the politics of bourgeois marriage subordinated women's and men's desire's to the desire's of the family. Marriage was a duty. Beauvoir viewed her friend Zaza's death as a sacrifice to this duty. She understood that it was only her father's precarious financial situation that freed her from Zaza's fate. When Sartre proposed that they marry so that they would not be separated when the state assigned them teaching positions, she refused. Though this would have been a marriage of choice, not duty, she could not imagine a marriage that did not compromise her independence. We might say that she found the sedimented meanings of marriage too powerful to challenge. Once freed from her family's power and Sartre's proposal, marriage becomes a non-issue in Beauvoir's life.

Though I have looked at the question of marriage in the two articles you have used as the basis of your questions, I would not want to leave the impression that the question of marriage was necessarily central to Beauvoir. It becomes an issue, once we attend to her ethic of the erotic. Beauvoir never suggests, however, that marriage is the only or most desirable place for the realization of this ethic. What is interesting about marriage is that as existing at the intersection of the ethical and the political it raises the question of the relationship between the ethical and the political. Beauvoir in her personal life, and many others today do not choose to materialize this relationship by choosing marriage. Beauvoir would not, however, impose her choice on others. People who choose to marry (as distinct from people who are required to marry) want to make a public statement about their ethical relationship and want the state to recognize and protect their ethical commitment to each other. They demand political recognition of their desire. Rather than rejecting their demand Beauvoir, by saying that marriage is an institution in transition offers the hope that this demand can be met.

I cannot imagine Beauvoir saying that slavery is an institution in transition. I cannot imagine her arguing that it would be possible to reconcile the demands of freedom and dignity with the institution of slavery. Though she often compares the situation of women to the situation of slaves, however, she insists that women can escape the oppressions of the second sex. This possibility lies in the fact that however much women have been objectified and treated as property, unlike slaves who in being defined as property are deemed sub-human, non-slave women's humanity has not been obliterated. The essence of slavery requires the dehumanization of the slave. The essence of marriage does not require the dehumanization of the wife. Ironically, the dignity of the wife is embedded in the institution of marriage. Where women exist as the second sex, this dignity is defined in terms of their modesty and their adherence to the standards of femininity. As the meaning of what it means to be a woman changes, however, the idea of a woman's dignity changes with it. Marriage as an institution in transition can accommodate these changes.

Beauvoir says that we do not know who men and women will be once those who are born female are not destined to become women. Not knowing this, we cannot know what the heterosexual couple will be like. What we can know, Beauvoir suggests, is that the ambiguities of their subjectivities revealed in the erotic relationships will be affirmed and that this affirmation will transform the ways that women and men enact the ways that these relationships are lived. Whether or not men and women choose to live these relationships within or without the institution of marriage is unknown. Whatever their choice, the history of the institution of marriage shows us that there is a relationship between the ethical and the political and that however this relationship is instantiated, the justice of the political will be judged, at least in part, by the ways that it recognizes and protects the ethic of the erotic.

Sapere Aude: We thank you very much for your availability.