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Review of Differences : Rereading Beauvoir and Irigaray

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Emily Anne Parker and Anne van Leeuwen (editors)

Differences: Rereading Beauvoir and Irigaray. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018 (ISBN: 9780190275600)

Reviewed by Maria Svanström, 2019

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Quote:

"Olkowski writes that how any contemporary philosopher approaches the differences between Beauvoir and Irigaray tells as much about her own position and interests as it does about those of Beauvoir and Irigaray."

Simone de Beauvoir and Luce Irigaray have often been discussed in oppositional terms: Beauvoir as a feminist of equality, Irigaray as a feminist of difference. Beauvoir has been criticized for basing her thinking on binary oppositions such as mind/body and cyclical/linear, Irigaray celebrated for developing alternative patterns of thinking that can replace them. And whereas Irigaray draws from psychoanalysis, Beauvoir has been critical of this tradition. These are all differences that Irigaray herself has also brought to the fore when commenting on her relation to Beauvoir.

In this anthology, *Differences: Rereading Beauvoir and Irigaray*, these debates are noted, but only as a starting point for taking thinking in new directions. The anthology contains well-written essays by leading scholars of Beauvoir, Irigaray, and feminist philosophy more generally. *Differences* not only provides fresh perspectives on Beauvoir and Irigaray, but it also manages to tell us about some of the recent trends in feminist philosophy today in many of the carefully framed essays: broad interest in the phenomenological tradition of thought, as well as in questions of materiality and difference.

In the essays that deal with both Beauvoir and Irigaray, one theme gets more attention than others: discussion of the subject through a phenomenological framework. Essays that deal with this theme are especially interesting since they provide views into a wider field in feminist philosophy where

new contributions related to the phenomenological subject are developing at the moment: for example, by Adriana Cavarero and Fanny Söderbäck in the field of political thought. Thus, in what follows I will focus on the parts of the essays that deal with or are related specifically to the phenomenological tradition.

The embodied, historically situated subject of feminist phenomenology has often been contrasted to a conceptualization of the subject in autonomous and disembodied terms. In *Differences*, however, this comparison is not made. Instead, the phenomenological aspects of Beauvoir's and Irigaray's work are contrasted with how the subject is approached in feminist new materialisms.

Phenomenological themes in the anthology are discussed from the point of view of the question of sexual difference and in terms of differences more broadly. Difference beyond the question of sexual difference is a theme that the editors of the volume highlight.

Ethics: Present and Future Perspectives

The anthology is divided into two parts: "Rereading Beauvoir" and "Rereading Beauvoir and Irigaray." This division purports to tell the reader that Beauvoir's work gets more space than Irigaray's. However, I'm not sure how successful this division is, since Parker and van Leeuwen, whose essays are placed in the first part of the book, discuss both Beauvoir and Irigaray.

Three essays in the second part of the anthology--by Sara Heinämaa, Gail Weiss, and Dorothea E. Olkowski--deal with questions of ethics; I will start by discussing these essays. Sara Heinämaa has published extensively on both Beauvoir and Irigaray. Her contribution to this anthology focuses specifically on how Irigaray's ethics is indebted to Beauvoir's idea of an irreducible difference between men and women, and an emphasis on the ethical significance of the present. "[T]he most intimate points of contact between Beauvoir's existentialism and Irigaray's philosophy of difference are to be found in their respective analysis of embodiment and its conditions," Heinämaa writes (139). She continues: "Both operate with the phenomenological concepts of the lived body as distinct from the material thing and the natural organism; both resort to the phenomenological theory of the human person as an expressive bodily unity; and both work systematically to articulate the specific form of erotic intentionality that diverts from all forms of theoretical and practical-communal intentionality" (139). Heinämaa focuses above all on the concrete encounter between singular men and women. What makes her essay especially interesting is that she discusses Beauvoir and Irigaray in the wider context of a history of ideas. Beauvoir and Irigaray represent, according to Heinämaa, "a feminist paradigm" that has "deep Cartesian roots." She also writes that

in her reading, "Beauvoir's existentialism" and "Irigaray's deconstructivism" differ in their methodological starting points from recent "'new materialist' movements" that build on principles rooted in Spinoza's immanentism and monism (139).

Gail Weiss discusses in her essay the tension between "the will to be" and "the will to disclose the world" presented by Beauvoir in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Weiss understands this as a tension between competing desires. She clarifies with reference to Beauvoir "the desire to be" as "the desire to stay intimately connected to the people, relationships and things we desire permanently even when we know this is impossible" (192-93) and "the desire to disclose the world" as "making a free choice to affirm the openness of both ourselves and the world to novel insights, unexpected discoveries, and unique transformations" (182). With her writings on ambiguity, Beauvoir makes a distinctive contribution to existentialist frameworks, according to Weiss. Weiss finds--despite significant differences--an equal commitment to affirm "a relational ontology, animated by desire, as the proper ground of ethics and politics" (178) in both Beauvoir and Irigaray. At the end of her essay, Weiss discusses the ambiguity of human existence in the context of lesbian relationships. In this context, Weiss brings Beauvoir into dialogue with Irigaray, and she argues that Irigaray's descriptions of the "excesses" of female sexual desire and pleasure build upon as well as complicate Beauvoir's view of the essential ambiguity of desire.

Dorothea E. Olkowski's essay is interesting to bring into dialogue with those by Heinämaa and Weiss, since she discusses themes such as the present and future taken up by Heinämaa, and Beauvoir's idea of the ethics of ambiguity discussed by Weiss. According to Olkowski, Beauvoir's critique of thinking based on binary oppositions--"the Principle of the Excluded Middle"--makes possible the logic and the ethics of ambiguity. Beauvoir's conception of ambiguity correlates with certain aspects of the logic called Intuitionism, according to Olkowski, which among other things is an expression of an open future and unpredictable free choices. This is an important discussion since, if we give a privileged position to the present in the context of ethics--which I do think is justifiable in many contexts but not without exception--we fail to account for those among us who make sacrifices in order to open up new possibilities for others in the future. If we want to take Beauvoir's and Irigaray's thinking in directions that open up new insights related to questions of difference beyond questions of sexual difference, then we need to pay more attention to the question of futurity than has so far been the case. As Olkowski shows, we can already find recourse for such an undertaking in Beauvoir.

Structural Inequalities

In the essays by Debra Bergoffen, Anne van Leeuwen, and Emily Anne Parker, questions of structural inequalities are central. The arguments in these essays are developed in a phenomenological framework or in dialogue with it. Bergoffen wants to bring to the fore the differences between Beauvoir and Irigaray, but not by situating Beauvoir among the feminists of equality and Irigaray among the feminists of difference, as has so often been done, but instead by contrasting the way they discuss different forms of violence that women face. "Can putting Beauvoir and Irigaray in conversation with each other tell us something about the who, the what, and the how of being/becoming a woman that helps us understand the meaning of the fact that across the ages and across the globe women are seen as legitimate targets of violence--that being the second sex means being the rapeable sex, that the sexual difference is treated as an invitation to abuse" (197). According to Bergoffen, Irigaray has had more to say about the meaning of violence than has Beauvoir. This is related to the fact that they also have different visions for democratic politics: whereas Beauvoir aims toward a future where women embody the ontological dignity of a subject, Irigaray aims toward the emergence of a symbolic order that would grant women access to speech and an economy of their own desire, and in which "the death drives will not be fed by women's blood" (214).

Anne van Leeuwen traces in her essay the place of materialist politics in the work of Beauvoir and Irigaray. She discusses their work by referencing Karl Marx's view that the subject of politics is the subject of exchange value. Van Leeuwen writes that in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's writings, moments can be found where the subject of phenomenology becomes the materialist subject of politics--the phenomenological subject referring in this context to a subject that is "constituted within and by a set of concrete socio-symbolic relations" as distinct from an abstract consciousness (118). According to van Leeuwen, this part of Merleau-Ponty's writings has affected Beauvoir's thinking. Van Leeuwen argues, namely, that there occurred a transformation of Beauvoir's thought between 1943 and 1949 in which she "attempts to think the existential negativity of the subject beyond the limits of a philosophy of consciousness" (119)--a transformation that took place with her encounter with Merleau-Ponty's writings. Van Leeuwen also discusses the materialist-feminist theory of the subject that Irigaray develops in her earlier writings. She focuses on analyzing how Irigaray's critical engagement with Jacques Lacan is part of a broader analysis of the economy of the subject of value that Irigaray takes up in dialogue not only with Lacan but also with Marx. These aspects of Beauvoir's and Irigaray's writings are especially valuable, according to van Leeuwen, when examining global, structural critiques of class, race, and other forms of

exploitation. She is concerned that feminist new materialisms--a perspective from which Beauvoir and Irigaray are also read--reduce the universalistic orientation of feminism that connects it to these critiques. According to van Leeuwen, "new" materialisms also lack Marx's analysis of the subject of politics.

Parker brings her essay into dialogue with Audre Lorde, Beauvoir, and Irigaray. With Lorde, Parker criticizes thinking that gives a privileged position to the question of sexual difference in a world of variation and alteration. With reference to Lorde, Parker reminds us how academic feminists were, as late as thirty years after the *Second Sex* was published in 1949, focused on questions that were relevant mainly for white, heterosexual, and middle-class women. Parker, however, wants to discuss not only the historical and political situation, but at the same time the body, which in her view is never universal but always a particular body. Parker finds possibilities for developing thinking in a direction where difference is taken to be elemental in Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity, which "takes sexual difference to be one moment of nonreciprocity in a world of singular bodies" (94-95). Irigaray's philosophy of morphology, according to Parker, can also contribute to a project where the morphological possibilities of multiplicitous bodies are appreciated. In this context, Parker finds interesting Irigaray's thinking related to the concept of elemental difference--but not her thinking related to sexual difference in a binary framework.

Feminist New Materialisms and Camp

The two remaining articles are in different ways related to feminist new materialisms. How these differ from phenomenology is taken up by Alia Al-Saji in her essay on Bergsonian tendencies in Beauvoir's philosophy: according to her, the relation between material feminism and feminist phenomenology remains to be worked out. Feminist phenomenology and "feminist new materialism(s)" share two central features, she argues: they see both life and materiality as meaning-making themselves, and they both question the nature/culture, matter/representation, and biological/social divides. However, Al-Saji writes that in new materialist thinking, life is thought as dynamic and active, but this activity cannot "immediately be taken to belong to a lived body, as a unified conscious and intentional subject" (22). It is this third aspect--to understand the lived body as a not necessarily unified, conscious, and intentional subject--that is often referred to as the "whoness" of the subject in the phenomenological tradition--with which feminist phenomenology might have problems, according to Al-Saji. "Phenomenology and material feminism seem to meet on the terrain of embodiment, but material feminism takes bodies to be individuated and situated

within a movement of life, whereas phenomenology ostensibly treats the body as expression of individual existence or as the situation of consciousness" (22).

Al-Saji's and Penelope Deutscher's are the two essays in this anthology that discuss Beauvoir without Irigaray. Deutscher deals with a question that is interesting across traditions: she gives new attention to ways in which Beauvoir sees biology and embodiment as expressive. What is telling is her topic: "Dead Camp." "Dead" refers in this context to the way Beauvoir describes femininity as opposed to the vibrant and renewing, "camp" to feminist camp as a style. By bringing Beauvoir into dialogue with Janet Halley, Wendy Brown, and Elizabeth Wilson, Deutscher asks what Beauvoir's style--not often colored with excessive adverbs, for instance when telling about women who want to please men "ardently" (70)--can tell us about the expressivity of bodies in the middle of frustration and how this is related to making change.

Olkowski writes that how any contemporary philosopher approaches the differences between Beauvoir and Irigaray tells as much about her own position and interests as it does about those of Beauvoir and Irigaray. This argument can also be applied to the commentary on them. *Differences* can be approached from numerous perspectives, and from dimensions other than the phenomenological one that can be found in this work, for instance, feminist new materialisms and psychoanalysis.

I recommend this anthology warmly; in my experience it works well in teaching.