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# An Ethical Suspension of the Political: Untranslatability with Beauvoir and Cassin[1]

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How we name each other sets in motion how we treat each other, each act of naming both opens up a certain mode of engagement and closes off others. When we tell each other our nationality or our political affiliation, our religion or our ethnicity, our gender or our class, and so on; we reveal an aspect of who we are. Sometimes we do this explicitly, at other times we do so implicitly or unintentionally. We each have many aspects and often these sides of who we are affirm our membership of a group – Republicans or Democrats; Catholics or Hindus; male or trans and so on. This group membership may be an integral part of how we understand ourselves and relate to others, or it may be experienced as merely incidental. As Iris Marrion Young has argued, group membership is part of the contemporary human condition that in itself is relatively neutral but is also not simple or exclusive. Rather, group membership is "multiple, cross-cutting, fluid, and shifting […]. In complex, highly differentiated societies like our own, all persons have multiple group identifications." (Young, 48)

Organising structures in society will often necessarily treat individuals according to their group membership. Those who can vote, for example, must belong to the group of registered voters of the right age with the right citizenship requirements. Group membership based on age or income are often ways of categorizing individuals such that they can gain access to education or social welfare or health care and so on. At times, treating people according to specific group memberships they hold, is relatively innocuous. However, as we know, group membership can also be mobilized as a force of oppression by those operating on the far-right of the political divide in the hinterlands of fascism. In this terrain, individuals are reduced to their membership of one group only, they become 'woman', 'black', 'Hispanic', 'Muslim'[2] and so on. There is a claim here of total accessibility; people are not taken as complex multifaceted individuals existing as a nexus of many identities together – father, doctor, son, immigrant, friend – but instead are treated as single category. These clear and distinct categories of people can be translated into values according to a sliding scale. There is nothing about the human condition, according to this model, that cannot be reduced to a simple meaning – people are in or they are out, one of us or one of them, an untapped market or an expedient target; a source of capital or an enemy to be vilified. In such discourse there is nothing ambiguous, there is nothing untranslatable.

Our current political climate is, to say the very least, worrying. At the time of writing the United States – the country with the greatest military force in the world – is undergoing the least peaceful transfer of presidential power in centuries. Neo-fascist supporters of lame duck president Trump attacked the seat of democratic power in Washington on the 6th of January 2021, seeking to overturn valid election results. A riot that echoed a similar attempt on Germany's Reichstag in August 2020. In November of that year, France's Emmanuel Macron announced the need for Muslim integration and followed this with an 'anti-separatist' bill in December. Europe is once again embracing the far right and its policies of othering and exclusion that do not simply echo the discourse of the 1930s but seem to repeat it with only minor revisions. This rise of the far right is, it seems, a global phenomenon found in the United States with Donald Trump, in France with Marine le

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Pen, in the Netherlands with Geert Wilders, in the Philippines with Rodrigo Duterte, in Brazil with Jair Bolsanaro, in India with Narendra Modi, in Russia with Vladimir Putin and so on and on it goes.

The contemporary far right is afflicted with a taste for conspiracy that prevents rational coherence, so that there is apparently no contradiction between claiming to be for 'law and order' while violently protesting the law. There is no issue with recognising the election of those one supports, while simultaneously viewing the election of those one opposes in the same system as rigged. The opinion of experts, such as scientists and doctors, can be disregarded in favour of the opinion of outliers with expertise in unrelated fields. These contradictory positions are presented as 'opinions' – as though reality were a matter of taste rather than fact. In the midst of a global pandemic, when the world faces both economic and ecological disaster, the politics of late capitalism is responding with hyper-individualism, segregation and, most terrifying of all, an almost total abdication of responsibility.

In this paper I argue that the untranslatable allows us a way of countering this dangerously simplified approach to political organisation by giving us the means to think that complex nexus of multifaceted identity which each of us is. This universal structure – the untranslatable – manifests in the unique and particular existence of each of us. Against a discourse that reduces the other to nothing but their membership of one group, I argue that it is only through engaging with the ambiguity of the human condition that we can introduce an ethical counter to the most extreme expression of the political.

I firstly outline the manner in which Simone de Beauvoir navigates that ever difficult relation between the particular and the universal. I then go on to describe Barbara Cassin's account of languages as energies that manifest the world through rays of difference. In this vein, the untranslatable is not that which we can never understand but rather that which provokes a better and ever-changing understanding. Finally, I bring these strands together, to claim that the untranslatable offers us a way to think what I would like to call an ethical suspension of the political, that nonetheless can make a new understanding of the political possible.[3]

## I

In her 1947 work *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir responds to critics of existentialism who claim that it leads to a solipsistic egotism. Jean-Paul Sartre had attempted the same task in his 1945 *Existentialism is a Humanism,* but arguably Beauvoir's account provides a more rigorous, or at least more convincing line of reasoning. In it she discusses what she terms an 'existentialist conversion' (a term, along with others only slightly modified, that Sartre would also adopt, without acknowledgment, in his own later work)[4]. This 'existentialist conversion' entails wholeheartedly accepting the tragic ambiguity of the human condition – that we are not what we are, and that we are what we are not. What it means to be human is to constantly transcend one's facticity towards a freely chosen meaning. Existence precedes essence – converting to this creed entails rejecting all ethics which seek to reduce humanity to some kind of definition based on a hierarchical structure along those all too familiar philosophical lines of body/soul, mind/matter, death/immortality, sensible/rational and so on. Rejecting a definition of humanity that cloaks a closed system of ethics, in favour of an open, complex and paradoxical description of its condition, is not simply to convert to a more accurate ethical standpoint, but is in fact, according to Beauvoir; the only possibility for a genuine ethics at all.[5] In other words, being human entails a constant and unsettled negotiation of multiple identities that intersect in complex ways and only an ethics that recognises this ambiguity is worthy of the name.

Beauvoir takes up Sartre's description of the human being as "'a being who *makes himself* a lack of being *in order that there might be* being'"(Sartre in Beauvoir 10 *ff*). However,

Sartre's claim that the consequence of this lack of being is only failure or, in his own words that 'man's passion is useless', is implicitly rejected by Beauvoir. The 'passion' described by Sartre is our ever-unrealisable desire to coincide with being, we are always more than just what we are – a waiter, a sister, a writer, a mother, a teacher – no matter how much we wish to take refuge in the shelter of these definitions. Only God can be one with being and our trying 'be' one with our facticity, trying to deny our transcendence, is for Sartre a failure to assume the atheism necessary for existentialism by replacing god with humanity. Yet to describe the desire to be what one will always exceed as 'useless' or a failure is for Beauvoir to firstly miss the point that terms such as 'useless' or 'failure' acquire their meaning only in a human world – outside of humanity there is no objective value against which to gauge one's actions or to assess the worth of one's project. "The lack of existence cannot be evaluated since it is the fact on the basis of which all evaluation is defined" (14). In other words, the transcendence borne of the lack of being at the heart of the human condition, is the very thing that gives rise to that condition from which all language and meaning emerges. Assuming this lack as a positive possibility, rather than a useless inevitability, finds a certain validity as a manifestation of existence itself. In trying to be God, we might make ourselves exist as human. The danger is only in thinking that we have overcome the failure, in thinking that we have reached some god-like co-incidence with ourselves. It is this affirmation of negativity that Beauvoir terms a conversion. As she says:

> "The failure is not surpassed, but assumed. [...] To attain his truth, man must not attempt to dispel the ambiguity of his being but, on the contrary, accept the task of realizing it. He rejoins himself only to the extent that he agrees to remain at a distance from himself." (12)

What then of ethics? If we accept that we are an ambiguous play of transcendence and facticity, how does this impact on our relations to others and what are the possible consequences for our political situation? "An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny a priori that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all" (17). In other words, an ethics of ambiguity is one which will recognise the individual as occurring within a network of others. This balancing of the particular and universal is echoed in Cassin's account of words and concepts operating not in universal, abstract isolation, but in particular and connected semantic webs. To which I will return shortly.

At the heart of the existentialist project is the understanding of this ambiguity as the condition for freedom. We must freely choose our existence; yet doing so is arduous and as a result we tend to flee freedom – to deny it or to limit it in order not to have to deal with freely choosing who we are. As children we occupy a 'metaphysically privileged' sphere insofar as we inhabit a realm where values are ready-made and available like so many objects in the world. We are, in Martin Heidegger's terms, 'thrown' into a pre-disclosed world where we do not have to decide what is 'good' or 'bad' we simply take these meanings as they are provided to us by the adults around us. This idyllic state is shattered in adolescence when we realise that the values we had once blindly accepted from our adult guardians are invented, chosen and decided upon. The realisation that we must make the world anew for ourselves and freely choose our own values produces a state of anxiety in which we might well try to escape our freedom and responsibility by taking shelter in the kind of existences that Beauvoir vividly describes through various characters or personas. These characters share not only an inability to fully assume their freedom but also, more detrimentally, they fail to realise the relation between their freedom and that of others.

The first of these characters Beauvoir introduces, and by far the one to receive her harshest criticism, is that of the 'sub-man'. Afraid to will the lack of being that nonetheless

cannot be denied, the sub-man turns away from freedom and takes refuge in the ready-made values of others:

> "He will proclaim certain opinions; he will take shelter behind a label; and to hide his indifference he will readily abandon himself to verbal outbursts or even physical violence. One day a monarchist, the next day an anarchist, he is more readily anti-Semitic, anti-clerical, or anti-republican [...] He realizes himself in the world as a blind uncontrolled force which anybody can get control of. In lynchings, in pogroms, in all the great bloody movements organized by the fanaticism of seriousness and passion, movements where there is no risk, those that do the actual dirty work are recruited from among the sub-men" (47).

Such malleable characters, who think what they are told to think, say what they are told to say, are what they are told to be by someone else regardless of logic, evidence, or ethics are as abundantly available today as they were at the time of Beauvoir's writing. Other characters she describes tend to realise the fact that values are freely chosen but instead of choosing them themselves, subsume their freedom in the pursuit of either a 'cause' or their own glory. The 'serious man', for example, calms their anxiety in the face of freedom by denying their transcendence, they seek to become one thing: a professor, a model, a parent, outside of the object into which their freedom is subsumed – the professor outside their speciality, the model beyond the world of fashion, the parent away from her children – they lapse readily into the sub-man's penchant for grabbing the ready-made values of others.

The point with all of these characters is that they fail to assume both the ambiguity of their existence and the freedom of others. For Beauvoir genuine freedom does not simply will individual freedom but rather the expansion of all freedom in order to grow the possibilities of all humans: "The freedom of other men must be respected and they must be helped to free themselves. Such a law imposes limits upon action and at the same time immediately gives it a content" (65).

Genuine freedom, for Beauvoir, is one which destines itself towards the existence of others without wishing to trap them in the in-itself. That is without reducing them to a label, definition, or membership of a group while recognising that all existences are formed by myriad relations including those that emerge through group membership. In other words, genuine freedom wills an ever-expanding freedom for all – this universal aim recognises the particular ways in which freedom realises itself in the freely chosen and multiple identities of others.[6]

Of course, freedom is an often-misused word. In 1947 Beauvoir could write: "When a party promises the directing classes that it will defend their freedom, it means quite plainly that it will demand they have the freedom of exploiting the working class" (97). Similarly, when political leaders 'worry' about following EU directives that protect workers' rights yet 'hinder' free entrepreneurship, they 'worry' about the freedom of some to use and deny the freedom of others.

Freedom, genuinely understood, is the human condition of ambiguity between transcendence and facticity. It is the only value through which all values gain their significance. Each time we deny freedom to one we deny freedom, that is, existence, itself. In doing so, we narrow the possibilities of humanity. How then does this account map onto an account of language or translation?

## II

In her 2004 work *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* Barbara Cassin celebrates differences between various European languages as philosophical opportunities. The untranslatable here is understood as that which 'one keeps on (not)

translating' – that is, the untranslatable is what complicates the universal and sets conceptual invention in motion. Taking inspiration from Émile Benveniste's *Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-Européen* (1969), the project takes words as points of entry to semantic networks and then maps these networks onto similar semantic networks in other languages. The idea is not to give a simple translation or definition of, say, Hegel's *aufheben*; but rather to show how this word functions within Hegel's philosophy in relation to other words and how the shift into, for example French, entails a corresponding network of related terms.

At the heart of the project is the aim to show that a philosophical concept cannot be entirely cut off from the language of its word. There is an overall celebration of the multiplicity inherent and necessary to language; a multiplicity that takes three forms: Firstly, that there are many languages. Following both Wilhelm von Humboldt and Jacques Derrida, Cassin argues that there is no such a thing as 'language' but only languages (*Dictionary* ix, "Translation as Politics" 6). Each language acts like a net overlapping with other nets that capture the world, providing different perspectives on the same thing while simultaneously constituting that thing. We may speak of universal concepts only through particular languages, which invariably bring their own colour or shade to the concept in question – this colour of the particular on the universal is not inconsequential.

Secondly, there is multiplicity within a single language. Meanings change over history and across contexts; the *Dictionary of Untranslatables* deals with meanings in particular texts at particular times providing both a diachronic history of concepts as they change in their various linguistic crossings, while also providing a synchronic account of the current philosophical landscape. As such, the *Dictionary* is not a finished work but an ongoing and interminable project.

Thirdly and finally, there is multiplicity within a single word – double and triple meanings, homonyms and homophones, polysemic play and historical traces. As such concepts – necessarily entangled in a particular tongue – emerge as clusters of thoughts.

The *Dictionary* is viewed by Cassin as entailing a political ambition, namely "to ensure the languages of Europe are taken into account". This desire to protect the multilingual condition of Europe comes into relief against two contrary, yet equally opposing, positions. The first position Cassin describes as a "logical universalism indifferent to languages" (*Dictionary* 19). This position takes the form of translating everything into English – not the English of William Shakespeare or Carol Ann Duffy, Hilary Mantel or James Joyce – but 'official English', 'globish' as Cassin terms it, following a former IBM manager. She does not dispute the bureaucratic need for a common medium but, ironically noting that at international meetings "'real' English speakers are those that [non-native speakers have] the most difficulty under-standing!" (*Dictionary* xviii). Cassin argues that this is not a real language but rather the language of the technocrat and the market; English as a second language, an instru-mental language like Latin and French once were.

Yet there is particular philosophical danger in translating everything into this 'auxiliary international language' as Umberto Eco describes English. In philosophy English has a particular and paradoxical heritage that is not inseparable from the phenomenon of English as the language of Empire, both the historical British empire and the contemporary global market empire of predominantly Anglo-American corporations such as Google, Microsoft, Amazon and so on ("Translation as Politics" 4). Here English is understood along the lines of two universalist aspirations. On the one hand, as Cassin argues, there remains a certain strand of analytic philosophy (with all the problems of this term) that thinks "philosophy relates only to a universal logic, identical in all times and all places – for Aristotle, for my colleague at Oxford" (*Dictionary* xviiii). In this vein, the language of the concept – here English – matters little. Yet, along with this goes another strangely contradictory assumption: that English in its particularity is the language of "common sense and shared experience" hence the requisite language for thinking clearly:

> "The whole Anglo-Saxon tradition has devoted itself to the exclusion of jargon, of esoteric language, to the puncturing of the windbags of metaphysics. […] The presumption of a rationality that belongs to angels rather than humans and a militant insistence on ordinary language combine to support a prevalence of English that becomes in the worst of cases, a refusal of the status of philosophy to Continental philosophy, which is mired in the contingencies of history and individual languages" (*Dictionary* xviii)

According to this way of thinking untranslatability is a non-issue – everything is accessible and what is not has no value ("Translation as Politics" 4).[7]

The second position against which Cassin defines the project of a dictionary of untranslatables is that of an "ontological nationalism essentializing the spirit of languages" (*Dictionary* xviii). Such a position finds its roots in Herder's account of German as the language of translation or rather of translation as the national character of the German language – its capacity to imitate and bend towards and with what is other. This German exceptionalism reaches, perhaps, its climax in Martin Heidegger's account of Greek as philosophical in its core and comparable in this regard only to German:

> "The same applies to every genuine language, in a different degree to be sure. The extent to which this is so depends on the depth and power of the people and race who speak the language and exist within it. Only the German language has a depth and a creative philosophical character to compare with the Greek" (36 cited in Cassin "Translation as Politics" 5).

This ontological nationalism, argues Cassin following Lefebvre, makes untranslatability the very criterion of truth – there is a sacralisation of the untranslatable.

Both of these positions – logical universalism and ontological nationalism – are at odds with Cassin's aim to view the untranslatable as a philosophically productive moment that reminds us to take a step back to check our understanding; to realise that ambiguity leads to questions which lead to creativity, dialogue and exchange.

## III

Our current political climate is characterised by the oppression of reducing people to their facticity – to their nationality, skin colour, religion, gender, and so on – and thereby denying their freedom by denying their ambiguity. Neither Cassin nor Beauvoir deny the universal – either as a concept or as an ethical law – rather they do not shrink human experience to merely the universal but take it as that which emerges through the play of multiple particularities. Bringing Cassin and Beauvoir together we might think of people as languages who emerge only in their relations to others. Their meaning is defined not only by themselves but by the network through which they discover themselves and project a shared future. The untranslatable understood here in Beauvoir's terms as the ambiguity of human existence which nonetheless makes that existence possible, forces us to consider the particular of any universal. Taking Cassin's idea that the untranslatable is what we 'keep on (not) translating' we can view the untranslatable as the particularity of any individual person which necessarily exceeds our capacity to fully understand them. By introducing this idea of the untranslatable other to political discourse, we can pause its tendency towards a reductive universalism just long enough to remind ourselves of our particular ethical obligations to each other.

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## Notes

[1] An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Society for Women in Philosophy – Ireland Conference in May 2018.

[2] In doing this the far-right often removes the names of individuals reducing them to their group membership only. Judith Butler argues that removing the name of the other, and in particular removing the right to publicly name the other results in removing the right to mourn the other. Her example notes the 'ungrevability' of Palestinian and Afghan victims of the Israeli and United States' armies respectively. See Judith Butler, *Antigone's Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) and Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004).

[3] The idea would be structurally similar to Saren Kierkegaard's 'teleological suspension of the ethical' insofar as this ethical suspension of the political would suspend the political order to make possible an ethical event. However, the understanding here of ethical is closer to that described by Emmanuel Levinas than that of Kierkegaard for whom 'ethical' is closer to a kind of moral code. In fact, the ethical in Levinas would perhaps be better understood as what is called 'religious' in Kierkegaard. Unfortunately, there is not the space here to describe in detail these different understandings of 'ethical', 'religious' and 'political'.

[4] Lecture notes from the 1960s (not all delivered) provide a 'better' account of Sartrean ethics concerning the 'integral man' and the 'subhuman' although the connection between these and Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* does not appear to have been made clear. This builds on the dialectical history of Sartre's 'second' period. See *Notebook for an Ethics* (1992) [1983]. Trans. by David Pellauer. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[5] "One does not offer an ethics to a God" (Beauvoir, 9). That is, it is by non-coincidence with herself that the human has the possibility of failure – ' no failure, no ethics' – the paradox of Hegel's system being that it is through the gap between the moral and the natural law that the moral law can emerge, if it eventually won out there would be no need for morality: "there can be a having-to-be only for a being who […] questions himself in his being, a being who is at a distance from himself and who has to be his being."

[6] "Thus we see that no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others" (Beauvoir 72), also: "with each step forward the horizon recedes a step; for man it is a matter of pursuing the expansion of his existence and of retrieving this very effort as an absolute" (85)

[7] Elsewhere Cassin notes that philosophy sees the ethical entering language through meaning understood as consensus which necessarily entails exclusion (but an exclusion that remains unacknowledged): "the same type of undesirable others to be excluded, to be forced to exclude themselves from humanity. Thus, meaning, understood as a transcendental necessity, that is as a condition of possibility of human language, is supported by, and only by, an exclusion no less transcendental than the necessity itself. Or simply: common sense, being both sense and common, produces nonsense and senseless agents, noncommonality and inhumanity" (*Sophistical Practice* 44-5).

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