What is feminist philosophy?

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Nancy Bauer talks about what attracted her to the field of philosophy and what made her remain there. Sjöstedt and Bauer also discuss Simone de Beauvoir, the role of scepticism in modern feminism and the thin line between world-changing philosophy and dogmatism.

Johanna Sjöstedt: In her essay “Can the ‘Other’ of philosophy speak?”, Judith Butler speaks of feminist philosophers, including the Australian feminist Elizabeth Grosz, who have studied under some of America’s most prominent philosophers. [1] In the end they have found that their work is not wanted within the institution of philosophy, only to move on into the humanities in a broader sense where they have been highly acclaimed. You are a philosopher, doing feminist work and you have chosen to stay within the field of philosophy. What attracted you to philosophy in the first place and why have you stayed?

Nancy Bauer: Answering the second part of that question is easier than answering the first part. I never thought I’d be an academic, let alone a philosopher. What I found, though, was that specific people that I ended up studying with kept me in the game. Having graduated from Harvard University, I worked many years as a journalist. Together with some other people, I also wrote a book about children with unusual diseases and that made me interested in medical ethics. That way I decided to go to Harvard Divinity School although I was completely uninterested. But when you were there you could take courses everywhere, so I started to take classes in the philosophy department immediately. Stanley Cavell became my teacher very quickly and also Hilary Putnam was very important to me. The examples that the two of them set for how to be authentic in your thinking and philosophizing were hugely important to me. It would take me a while to understand that they weren’t typical, neither of analytic nor continental philosophers. They were also interesting because they were both at that stage straddling analytic and continental philosophy. I’ve always seen myself in that same sort of space.

As I was beginning my dissertation, which at that time was on J. L. Austin and ordinary language philosophy, I had a baby who didn’t sleep at all. Somebody had given me a copy of Michèle le Dœuff’s Hipparchia’s Choice right before I had her and that made me want to go back to read Simone de Beauvoir. [2] So while my daughter did not sleep and was up all night and needed to be walked around, I had her in a sort of package in front of me and The Second Sex in one hand and the flashlight in the other. [3] It was like a complete revelation to me, it changed everything. For me it dovetailed completely with what I was
doing with Cavell and Putnam and I was still heavily influenced by Le Dœuff, too. So I just changed my dissertation topic. At Harvard no one had done any feminism, no feminism had ever been taught and there was nobody working on existentialism or continental philosophy at all. But Putnam and Cavell really helped me.

To get to the second part of your question, I kind of just stayed. I liked the teaching and I liked the life. It was an easy life to have with children, or easier than another kind of life might have been. I was also very lucky and got a good job right away. However, I have been offered full time jobs that were partly in philosophy and partly in women’s studies. The university that is ranked in the top three of PhD programs in philosophy in the United States was very interested in hiring my husband and offered me a job too, which was split between philosophy and women’s studies. I turned them down. I think it’s really important for women to stay in philosophy. The percentage of women in philosophy is appallingly small; in the US the percentage of women with secure tenure stable jobs is about 15-18 percent. I think the field suffers from a lack of the brainpower, the interest, and the particular experiences that women bring to it. I would never join the diaspora, even though I’m very sympathetic to what Butler and Grosz did. It’s almost impossible to do it.

JS: In your dissertation, you discuss objections raised against feminist philosophy, objections that could also be extended to include any project that aims for political change. One argument is that a feminist ought not to waste time on theoretical debate, but rather work to change the world in a more direct fashion. At first glance this might seem to be a rather reasonable claim. Do you think it’s a legitimate critique of feminist philosophy?

NB: A critical thing to do in order to change the world, in my opinion, is to attract people to the enterprise of thinking about their views on the subject that is in the question. Although it’s important to make legal changes, to enact various kinds of social changes, or physically change the environment, none of those gains are going to be enough if you don’t have people who are prepared – mentally, emotionally, intellectually – to take advantage of those things that are being offered, or to make sure that they stay there or fight for more. Therefore, it seems to me that the job of feminist philosophy is to attract people who are not feminist philosophers to the enterprise of reflecting on their own experiences as gendered beings. My experience, in the classroom at least, is that when people do that, they are overwhelmed by what they have taken for granted and their lives are changed. So I think both things are important.

At the same time, I think a lot of feminist philosophy, like most philosophy – in this way I’m a Wittgensteinian, I think it’s the nature of the game - has drifted away from the concerns that motivated it, namely the realities of actual women’s lives. Sometimes we end up talking about things that are so far away from the real world that what we do is in fact irrelevant. In that sense, I think that the criticism that is sometimes directed against feminist theory and feminist philosophy for being useless and worthless is warranted in many cases. I think it’s natural for thinking to get more and more abstract, but I think it’s extremely important – and I think it’s true for all philosophy, but certainly for feminist philosophy – that we constantly measure the distance, as it were, between where our balloon has floated away to and where it came from.
**JS:** You also write about the uneasy relationship between philosophy and feminism, describing how philosophy from a feminist perspective might look like a masculine discourse that there are many reasons to reject. From a philosophical point of view, feminism might seem to be weighed down by political tenets that are similar to dogmatic thinking. Given that we reject this picture and acknowledge that the project of feminist philosophy is worthwhile, you still speak of the difficulties of developing thought that is both feminist and philosophical at the same time. What are these difficulties?

**NB:** Feminism is a political movement that doesn’t feel that it has to justify its ground level goals and assumptions, which for any feminist is that the world is a sexist place and that it has to change. Philosophy sees itself as having no prior commitments, as being grounded in nothing other than – I mean, at least in its fantastical understanding of itself – pure reason, pursuit of truth. Thus there seems to be a political bottom line in feminism that’s incompatible with the kind of openness and lack of commitment that we find in philosophy. So you could see why philosophy finds feminism, feminist philosophy perhaps, not philosophically apt. At the same time, in so far as philosophy doesn’t have any commitments, it’s not clear why feminism should have any interest in it. I argue that we need to take this tension seriously. Even if every single philosophy department on earth says: “Oh yes, let’s have feminists” this issue is not going to simply go away, it’s a very serious issue. It doesn’t come up only in feminism of course, it also comes up in other kinds of identity marked pursuits in philosophy, but I think the reason these things aren’t taken seriously as enterprises is partly because we don’t take that apparent contradiction seriously. I think we should, on both sides. It’s a productive tension.

**JS:** I should like to dwell on the question of the borders of philosophy, but in order to do that I’d like to ask you to explain the notion of arrogation of voice that you have appropriated from Stanley Cavell. What is the arrogation of voice and why is it important in relation to philosophy?

**NB:** Stanley Cavell thinks that when we do philosophy we inevitably speak generally, we speak for others. It is part of the nature of doing philosophy, he actually thinks it’s part of the nature of speaking at all. When I say something as simple as: “Could you please move the chair into the corner of the room”, I am claiming implicitly that that’s a chair, and there’s a corner of a room and there’s a reason to move the chair and that I have a right to ask you that. In other words, I claim that these words are appropriate under these circumstances. That’s a kind of arrogation of authority. But to speak philosophically is to arrogate authority with ten exclamation points after it, because what I do is simply say: “Here we have some very fundamental issues, problems, questions, facts of the matter, and I’m going to say how they are.” According to Cavell, philosophy is by definition endlessly at risk, or the philosopher is endlessly courting arrogance. Therefore, doing philosophy requires a kind of humility. On the other hand, the humility can’t happen too soon. It can’t be the kind of humility that says: “I’m not even going to speak, because I’m so worried about being arrogant.” I simply have to have my say, but the having of the say has to be understood as an invitation to conversation. However, unlike some philosophers who think that what philosophy does is make an attempt at expressing what rationality says, or is, or endorses, the attempt at conversation doesn’t just say: “Here’s what’s rational, now I’m done, take it or leave it.” The kind of arrogation of voice that Cavell is talking about says: “Here’s how things are”, but what I do is invite someone else to disagree, talk, or keep going. It’s the beginning of a conversation, not the end of a
conversation. But the whole enterprise is very dicey. Now you add gender into the mix here. Women are not used to making the opening moves, we’ve usually been placed in the position of being responsive. Therefore, it seems to me that the project of arrogating voice for women is especially challenging, not least because you can make a claim as a philosopher and have the claim shot down not because of its content, but simply because you’re a woman. That complicates everything.

JS: You also claim that philosophical texts that bear the mark of arrogation in a particularly conspicuous way are bound to be controversial when it comes to whether they ought to be counted as philosophy. You mention for example the later Wittgenstein, Marx, Nietzsche and Beauvoir. Could you explain what you mean by that?

NB: Let’s say you want to do philosophy by invoking a set of rules, for example logical rules, that you share in common with a community of people and that are explicit and public, then everything you do is transparent and the worst thing you can do is make a mistake. You can make a mistake of reasoning, or you can apply the rules incorrectly. Another option is to start with a premise, or a set of premises, that are suspicious and everything is completely inspectable and open to view. This is one of the things about analytic philosophy that’s attractive. However, if you start out by saying something like: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman”, you are throwing down a gauntlet. [4] There are no formalizable rules; there is no obvious next step and it’s not clear where the conversation is going to go. In The Second Sex Beauvoir makes all of these claims about what it is to be a woman. It’s not as though she doesn’t have any stories or reasons, but mostly she is simply describing the world the way that she sees it. Of course some people think this is not philosophical! To me, what makes the whole thing philosophical is that she starts out with a philosophical question: “What is a woman?” The whole book is designed to answer that question. One thing we know is that a woman is a creature that is socially inferior to a man. What’s that about? Her story is incredibly controversial and she opens herself to being destroyed by criticism. Her capacity to withstand that and to hold her ground and to be educated by other people, I find endlessly admirable. But then again, of course I find it admirable in Marx and I find it admirable in Wittgenstein as well.

JS: In this instance, controversy as to whether one’s work is to count as philosophy is a productive thing. On the other hand you also talk about the importance of remaining within philosophy in order to transform it, also discussing the risk of ending up outside of philosophy. Describing Beauvoir, you write that her thought “manifests the belief that to do philosophy well, one must be braced for the possibility that one’s very attempt to appropriate the tradition may ultimately land one outside it.” [5] What is this place where one might end up if one fails to do philosophy well?

NB: It’s more that one will be told that one is not a philosopher. Or suppose one could end up straying so far away… For example, if I were to start to do something I would call feminist theory; if I would start to propose a theory of what it is to be a woman, or a theory of the sex/gender distinction, then I would see myself as having landed outside of philosophy, although Interestingly a lot of people would say: “Oh she’s finally doing some philosophy, she’s finally giving us a theory.” That’s a kind of landing outside of philosophy. But I think what I was talking about there is that The Second Sex shows us that you can write a book that is unlike any book that came before it, that certainly doesn’t look like a normal philosophy book, even a normal philosophy book of it’s time. If
Beauvoir had been asking herself all along: “Is this philosophy?” she might well have been unable to write the book. But she didn’t care this was a question she was asking. So it seems to me, in order to really think seriously and let your thought take you where it’s going to go, one has to risk the possibility of ending up some place very different from where one thought one was going to be, both methodologically and with respect to content. That’s very hard to do. It’s very hard to do feminist philosophy well.

JS: I’d like to ask how we ought to situate Beauvoir within the philosophical tradition of critique. If we consider Kant to be the originator of critique in the modern sense, there are some striking parallels and yet decisive differences between his and Beauvoir’s philosophical project. Here I’m thinking of Kant’s idea that critique ought to consist of reason questioning itself, also appealing to reason as an instance of impartiality. In the introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason* he uses metaphors taken from the realm of the law. [6] If we move on to Simone de Beauvoir she alludes to this notion in the very epigraph of *The Second Sex* where she quotes Poullain de la Barre, who says that men’s views of women are not to be trusted, since men are judge and party to the case. In the introduction she adds that women are, too. So in the end Beauvoir rejects the idea that an impartial judge would be of any use when it comes to the question of gender. Yet, as you have shown in your book, she does not shy away from a claim to objectivity. It seems to me that this would be an example of the idea of working from within a tradition, appealing to, yet in the very act of appropriation transforming, our understanding of what critique ought to be. What do you think of her work in relation to the tradition of critique?

NB: I think there’s a very long story to be told of the companiability, if I could put it that way, of Kant and Beauvoir. Kantian critical philosophy is a sort of mindful and constant interest in the conditions of one’s capacity to think at all. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* it’s about what has to be in place in order to do any kind of judgment of pure theoretical reason and in the second critique, he investigates the conditions under which we can have the very idea of ethics or morality at all. That critical move, the Copernican turn even, is very much part of what’s going on in Beauvoir. Nobody had really asked this question before: What is a woman? Nominalism has to be wrong, she writes, and it’s not a platonic essence brought down to earth by a petticoat. But in Russia, they are asking: “Do women even exist?” This is all within the first two or three pages of *The Second Sex*. Yet, she says, we walk around on the street, just all the time, there they are, well I’m one! “So even though we might end up saying there are no women, let’s provisionally agree, if only temporarily, that there are women on earth. Then we have to ask: What is a woman?” [7] And her answer is that if anything is a woman, then I am. Not the best example, not the only example, but I am a woman. In my opinion, the whole *Second Sex* is a reflection on that fact. For Beauvoir this was an astonishing fact, because she had always thought of herself as somebody who in some ways had escaped all the conditions of womanhood. Yet the way that *The Second Sex* came about is that she decides to write her autobiography and the first sentence she writes is: “I am a woman.” She’s stunned, what does this mean? It raises a philosophical question for her. In that sense, there’s something very fundamental about her that has the light of criticism shown on it.

Then I want to answer this question in a very different way. I see a very strong affinity between Kant’s third critique and *The Second Sex*. Kant’s view in the third critique, very crudely put, is that when one makes an aesthetic judgment, from a phenomenological point of view, it is as if the object is calling on you to make that judgment. I see a
stunning painting and I say that’s a work of genius. Yet at the same time, not only is the judgment content subjective, but it feels to me subjective. I understand that this is my reaction to the thing and yet at the same time my conviction in the judgment seems to be a function of the object itself. In that sense it’s a subjective that seems to have an objective touch to it. I think most of the claims that Beauvoir makes in The Second Sex have that kind of status. Where she says: “Here’s how stuff is, here’s how it goes”, she is exercising at every turn what she miraculously understands to be her right to have a say about what things are, what they’re worth, how they affect us that feels to me like this kind of Kantian aesthetic judgment. In that sense, I think her work is deeply traditional, philosophically.

JS: I have another reflection on Beauvoir and the tradition of critique. If we move forward to Hegel in the history of German philosophy, we arrive at the notion of perspectivism, in the sense that his thought incorporates the idea of a plurality of subjects with separate perspectives that are in conflict. Yet, through the notion of the end of history, there’s a prospect of sublation, or dissolution of conflict between competing views. Nietzsche, on the other hand, perfects perspectivism and he turns it into a condition of critique. But when Nietzsche speaks and arrogates his voice, it is usually in critique of movements for social justice, feminism, socialism et cetera. He’s not interested in investigating the conditions for his speaking as a man. It thus seems to me that Beauvoir is the first, or one of the first, to juggle the notion of oppression within the tradition of critique, as a member of an oppressed group. Would you agree?

NB: I think I agree with what you say about Beauvoir. I would want to think for a minute whether Marx was also someone who could be seen to come out of the critical tradition, not completely rejecting it and being very interested in oppression. I think Marx’s notion of a standpoint is absolutely crucial to feminism, not just feminist standpoint theory, but the idea that if you are oppressed the world looks different. Even if at the same time, I can’t tell you, this is going to sound so stupid… Every time I read Marx, I’m afresh impressed. The idea that you can absorb what we now call the ideology of the ruling classes and yet at the same time have some little voice – sometimes I think of it as an Emersonian voice and later on it would be a Nietzschean voice – telling you something is wrong. [8] The ruling class says everything’s fair, the ruling class says the whole system works for everybody’s benefit and something inside you is saying “no”. There’s something about that whole mechanism that Marx sets up that makes me think you could tell a complicated story about Kantian critique to Marx.

That said, yes! Beauvoir’s story is phenomenological in a way that Marx is not, that is the critical difference. What we’ve got in Beauvoir is a kind of serious intense interest in the details and a confidence in her description of the details from this standpoint of someone who’s been completely struck, stunned, stopped in her tracks by this question about what a woman is. There’s nobody who did that before Beauvoir. Nobody does it better than her and there’s nobody who’s done it well since, in my opinion. If you read the chapter that she writes on narcissism in The Second Sex, in which she talks about what it’s like for women to try to climb the mountain of becoming permanently beautiful and how hopeless this is – of course she is talking for the most part about bourgeois women in France in the 1940’s, but it doesn’t matter, one can generalize it – then you begin to see something that you wouldn’t see were she simply to say: “The standard of beauty is too high, and more and more girls are having eating disorders and starving themselves.” [9] All of those
things are true and they’re important, but they don’t strike you and stun you and make
you have to rethink everything in the way that the sheer volume of detail in Beauvoir’s
descriptions does. That’s what she adds to the Kantian notion of immanent critique, in the
sense that the descriptions all depend on her having the capacity to write it all down.
Again, it’s like an aesthetic judgment. To just feel that it’s being pulled out of her by the
world. I think it’s quite astonishing and genuinely unique.

JS: I should like to move on to the topic of scepticism. Scepticism in the thought of
Descartes and Hume is experienced in metaphysical isolation where the outside world is
put into question. Yet these philosophers make a very sharp distinction between
scepticism and everyday life and thereby the ordinary is exempted from the realm of
philosophical doubt. What I take you to show in your reading of Beauvoir is that
scepticism can arise in a situation where one is certain of the existence of others, certain
of the truth of the name one has – in this case, Beauvoir realizes that the fact that she’s a
woman is rock bottom of all claims that she makes – and nonetheless experience the
vertigo of scepticism. I think it’s the best part of your book. What are the implications of
that kind of scepticism?

NB: For Descartes, the worry is that he doesn’t exist. He starts the Meditations on First
philosophy by saying that it’s been a long time since he’s thought he should reflect on
whether his knowledge is error free and coherent. Therefore, he had to secure this
time when he was alone and without any distraction and now he’s going to knock the
foundation of his knowledge out. Finally, he convinces himself that it’s possible that
there’s an evil daemon who lives in his head and every time he has a thought that he
thinks is true, it’s only the evil daemon giving him the feeling that it’s true, when actually
it’s false. Descartes writes very beautifully and very dramatically about how this makes
him feel insane. In fact, it’s so upsetting that it’s very easy for him to slip back into his
regular mode of being. Then he reaches the famous cogito ergo sum. It’s actually very
interesting because it’s a phenomenological moment. He tries to doubt that he exists and
he finds that he cannot do it. It’s not a logical problem; it’s that when he tries to doubt
that he exists, he feels himself to be existing. It’s a phenomenological discovery. The
doubting is a kind of thinking, so that’s where he gets the frame of cogito ergo sum.

The legacy of Descartes is the figure of a disembodied person or mind alone in the world.
Right after the cogito he realizes that he lacks knowledge about this I that exists, which
leads him back to his former conception of himself. “I thought I was a man”, he says.
“What is a man?” And the first thing he says is that a man isn’t his body. He knows
this to be true because he can doubt that he has arms, or legs, or any body at all. The one
thing he can’t doubt is that he’s thinking, which shows him that a man is a thinking thing.
What Beauvoir does in The Second Sex is ask: “What is a woman?” instead of: “What is a
man?” I’ve argued that the opening rhetorical moves of The Second Sex are uncannily
similar to those of The Meditations. I don’t claim that Beauvoir was consciously or
purposely doing that, but I think it’s very obvious if you look at it. She ends up asking the
question: “What is a woman?” and her response is: “I am.” To be a woman for her is to
have a woman’s body. Let me be careful about this, it doesn’t necessarily mean the
having of breasts and a vagina and xx-chromosomes, it means to experience oneself, to be
experienced as a woman. Thus, to have the body matters and the body cannot be
dismissed as it is at the beginning of Descartes’ Meditations. But to have that kind of a
body turns out to be precisely the problem, because the woman cannot escape what will
in many centuries after Descartes come to be called the *gaze*. Rather than being in Descartes very alone position as this disembodied mind, very cut off from everything, the woman’s womanhood is defined by the way that her body is taken and the assumptions that are imposed on her. So womanhood has this ineluctably social dimension.

**JS:** I think it would be interesting to relate this idea to the notion of the lone male genius. You have the idea of metaphysical isolation and scepticism in Descartes and Hume; if we turn to somebody like Nietzsche, loneliness and the problem of scepticism are recurring themes in his work. A more contemporary example is British pop artist Morrissey, for whom loneliness is an essential part of his songs, not to mention his persona. [13] As a culture, we adore these male figures. On the other hand, you have Virginia Woolf demanding for women a “room of their own.” Obviously, she wants women to have the material means to create works of literature and philosophy, but there also seems to be a more profound sense to her words. What would you say of the idea of women being differently related to scepticism than men?

**NB:** Absolutely, I think that’s right. Interestingly, *A Room of One’s Own* starts off with Virginia Woolf taking a walk by herself. [14] You have a very strong sense of her being in the world among other people, being quite alone. We remember that book as just being about having a room of your own and the material means. That’s all there and it’s very important. But the reason we need to have it, according to Woolf, is so that we can write without having to think for every single second about the fact that we’re women. In *A Room of One’s Own*, there are long passages where she quotes Charlotte Brontë and Jane Austen, saying that you don’t know what these brilliant women could have written if they hadn’t been smothered all the time by the sense that they were women. Descartes problem is that he’s panic stricken because he’s alone; whereas the problem for women, and I think Beauvoir recognizes this, is that we’re all always smothered by the other, or by the world. Our self-consciousness as women is the product of never being able to be alone. There are also some material ways in which this is true, so women are often caregivers, or having to deal with men or children, or if they’re in a philosophy department, having to get the coffee; the ones who are noticing that the students are unhappy, or whatever. Women are so much in the world; women’s problem is the opposite of Descartes’, we can never get away from the world. This is what Woolf was lamenting and this is what Beauvoir suggests as well.

**JS:** But what’s interesting to me is that it still seems to yield the question of scepticism, even though Beauvoir is certain that other people exist and they call her a woman to the point where she has to acknowledge: “I *am* a woman.” Still it’s an experience of … isolation in one sense, but also scepticism, because the meaning of the fact that she is a woman is unclear.

**NB:** Absolutely, and it’s also not clear that one has any self-knowledge, because one’s identity as a woman so strongly predominates and so strongly controls who one is. The scepticism is whether I exist as an individual; whether there’s anything left over after my social identity is exhausted. There is a very serious kind of scepticism about that.

**JS:** I should like to broaden the question of scepticism from Beauvoir to feminism in general. One of the first things that spring to mind is that Judith Butler’s work is also deeply marked by scepticism, in a very different way. Her scepticism consists in a kind of
phenomenological reflection where she suspends any judgment as to whether an individual is a man or woman and in the end this leads her to the conclusion that femininity is a quality or an appearance that potentially applies to men as well as to women. Beauvoir, on the other hand, works from the realization that the fact that she’s a woman is rock bottom of every claim that she makes. What do you make of the different kinds of scepticism that are at play here?

NB: I agree with you utterly. I think that Butler’s scepticism is straight down the middle Cartesian scepticism. I don’t see any difference between the scepticism in Butler and the scepticism in Descartes. I shouldn’t say this, but I think the scepticism in Descartes is more interesting, in a way. What Butler does is give us a story on which it is impossible to understand anything resembling what I would call human agency. In so far as there’s a Foucault influenced moment in Butler, she has a view on which there’s all this power circulating and in some moments, under certain circumstances, we can deploy the power to make changes in the world for the better.

JS: Against the backdrop of the fact that she’s inspired by the same tradition as Simone de Beauvoir, you might argue that Butler would find herself in a similar yet different place than Beauvoir, since her experience of being a lesbian is that her own femininity is put into question. In that sense, her scepticism would be rooted in a different experience. She probably counts herself as a woman in some sense of the word but it will not be rock bottom of her claims, but rather she ends up in a place where femininity, or being a female, could be critically examined from another perspective.

NB: I see what you’re getting at, although I suspect that we read Butler a little differently from one another. Beauvoir doesn’t think that, if you want to put it this way, liberation of women has to mean an abandonment of femininity. There’s no doubt about that. It’s not that Butler has a view on that subject one way or the other, but I think it’s true that Beauvoir’s almost mindlessly benign interest in femininity is very different from what’s going on in Butler.

In the end, I think Butler is driven totally by a theory. Let’s put it this way: I think Butler as a person is driven by life experience and empathy with people who have a raw deal in life. In no way at all do I want to impugn Butler’s politics. But I do think that the theory, what people think of when they think of Judith Butler’s gender theory, is thoroughly driven by a kind of theoretical force that is simply absent in what Beauvoir is doing. Beauvoir is willing to allow her reflection to take here wherever it takes her; I think that is also true of Nietzsche, for example. You might say that Butler is very similar to Nietzsche and that she’s very indebted to him. But Nietzsche is somebody else who is not theory driven, just like Wittgenstein. I’m very attracted to philosophers who are not theory driven. I think theory in many ways is at odds with philosophy.

JS: Would you explicate that? You make a very sharp distinction between theory and philosophy.

NB: When I say “theory”, I mean the attempt to explain something with a general model that has various kinds of commitments that are not empirical, where the theory can be articulated apart from the examples. This means that things having to do with real life are always separable from the theory, which can be stated independently of any
examples. The examples are often supposed to be there to illustrate the theory, or to offer some support for it, or to be explananda. Although that kind of work has its place in the world, also outside of science, I think it’s in tension with philosophical inventiveness, or creativity. Especially in a world that is structured the way that universities are structured, where we’re producing these little bite sized journal articles that are supposed to conform to certain ways of proceeding. I don’t want to say that there’s no place at all for theory in philosophy, but I think theory often kills philosophy. Theory stops thought, sometimes. It’s about setting up a machine and then running the machine.

JS: Moving back to scepticism. Why do you think that scepticism is such an important concern for modern feminism?

NB: The kind of answer I’m going to give is probably going to sound not as though it’s directly responding to it, but I feel I want to say something like this: There are a lot of times in women’s lives where I think women feel as though they’re going crazy, or in which it is unbelievable hard for them to trust their initial impressions of how things are. Just anything, from walking down the street and having someone leer at you, where suddenly you think: “Should I have worn this? Did I do something? Should I be happy? Was that nice? Should I yell?” That kind of questions. Another example is that nobody tells you the truth about what it’s like to have a baby. When you’re actually having a baby, you feel like you are losing your mind, that something is wrong with you and you can’t understand how anybody could have had a moment of happiness. I insist on talking about these things in these terms, even though I have four children that I love, two of which were babies that I physically gave birth to. It’s horrible having a little baby, it’s unbelievably hard and it is romanticized by the culture. So you have a little baby, you’re not sleeping at all and the baby needs to nurse, wants to nurse, literally twenty hours a day. And you think: “Something is wrong with me, am I crazy? I’m not supposed to talk about this.” There are no words.

Yet another example is that our culture’s discourse about sex is so out of whack with people’s actual experiences. There are films, books and porn where sex is always wonderful and happy for almost everyone and even when it’s violent and painful, everybody ends up satisfied. But the fact of the matter is that it’s really hard to be in tune with somebody else sexually over the course of a relationship or even during one encounter, especially if you’ve never been with that person before. Moreover, it’s really easy to be bored during sex, or tired, or think to yourself: “When is this going to be over”, or: “That kind of feels bad, but I don’t want to mean, I love the person, but...” Every once in a while, maybe even for lucky people most of the time, it’s wonderful and transcendent, but a lot of the time it’s like any other thing in human relationships; some of the conversations are good and some are shitty; sometimes we know how to talk to people and sometimes we don’t, but we don’t tell the truth about that. So if a young woman has a boyfriend and they decide to have sex, and it’s not like a thousand rockets and fireworks going off, she is likely to think to herself: “What’s wrong, is it supposed to be like that...” There are so many occasions for women to feel that way. And that’s a kind of scepticism, like you’re losing your mind. Like you’re crazy, like Descartes thought he was crazy.

JS: And yet, it’s still the scepticism experienced in relation to other people...
NB: That’s right, it’s in relation to other people, it’s not sitting in your own room. For a lot of women, it’s when you’re in a room of your own, literal or metaphorical, that everything feels okay. But sometimes when you’re out there in the world, you just think you’re crazy. We don’t talk about this enough. You pretend that you don’t think you’re crazy, because that’s what you’ve been taught to do and if you’re of sound enough constitution emotionally, or if you have some help from medications, then you sort of make your way through the world. But I think a lot of the experiences that women have just makes them wonder whether their most ordinary beliefs could possibly be true. That there’s something wrong with them.

JS: I started this interview by asking whether feminism and philosophy should come together and I should like to reverse that question. Could political concerns enrich philosophy and in what way?

NB: Absolutely, there’s no doubt about it. If political concerns are what’s motivating you, then the likelihood that you will allow your theory to let you drift away from what motivated you to start philosophizing in the first place goes down. If it really matters to you that things change in the world, then you are more likely to notice if your theory is not helping you get there. But still I think one has to realize that philosophy and political concerns fit uneasily with each other, for the same reason that you’ve got to be open to the idea that your political views will shift a little bit while you’re thinking about them; it’s possible. That’s very frightening. Maybe they won’t, but if you’re not open to that, you’re not really doing philosophy.

Philosophy is dangerous; because what it says is that you should take your settled views and shake them up. If your settled views are political views that can make your philosophy very productive and very grounded, but it also can make your philosophy anti-philosophical. So I do think it’s a wonderful thing to have your politics push your philosophy, I think that’s the way that I work. On the other hand you’re risking dogmatism. But I think at one and the same time strong personal motivations that are not strictly speaking philosophical are the best grounding for thinking. A great example is the platonic dialogue “The Euthyphro”, in which Euthyphro has accused his father of impiety and is testifying against him. [15] He walks out of the court and Socrates says: “We’re having a conversation over here. What is piety?” You can do two things if you’re Euthyphro. You can have your whole world be shaken up and ask yourself what on earth you’re doing, or you can do what Euthyphro does, which is basically say: “Fuck off Socrates”. And that’s the thing. On the one hand it’s because he’s so interested in the case with his father that Euthyphro was willing to talk to Socrates at all, on the other hand, there’s only so far he’s willing to go before the dogmatism kicks in again. And that’s the way people are. That’s why doing anything that’s worth it in philosophy is very, very hard to do. That’s what I don’t like about theory, because that’s another sort of dogmatism. If the theory is not dogmatic, then go do your theory. Read somebody like Kant or Marx. Even though I don’t agree with everything Kant or Marx did, I still think that their thought is productive, fabulous and brilliant. But then I think of Simone de Beauvoir. Look at what she did in the world with her work. It’s just astonishing.

Footnotes

1. Judith Butler, "Can the 'Other' of Philosophy Speak?" Undoing Gender, Routledge,
2004.


7. Here, Bauer is semi quoting from Beauvoir 1949, p 4-5.


10. For a more thorough reading of scepticism and the ordinary, see my introduction to this interview.


12. Descartes 1641, 17.


15. Plato, "Euthyphro", The Dialogues of Plato, vol. I, R. E. Allen (trans.), Yale University Press, 1984. In this dialogue Euthyphro prosecutes his father for murder, since the father deliberately acted in such a way that one of Euthyphro's day labourers, who has cut the throat of a slave, starved to death. Euthyphro claims that the prosecution is an act undertaken in piety, but as the conversation proceeds it is obvious that Euthyphro's notion of piety is fuzzy. After discussing for a while, he gets tired of Socrates and leaves.

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