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Reply to Beata Stawarska

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REPLY TO BEATA STAWARSKA

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I want to begin by thanking Professor Stawarska for her careful reading of my book *Feminist Experiences* and for her critical insights on some of its key ideas. Before I go into a more detailed discussion of the two guiding questions she poses for me, I would like to clear one possible misunderstanding. Stawarska suggests in various places that my book is intended as a critique of phenomenology from the external perspective of Foucauldian genealogy. She writes, for example, that my “sympathies seem to lie with Foucault” (Stawarska 2019, 33); I advocate “a move beyond phenomenology to a Foucauldian genealogy” (36); I leave “phenomenological grounds behind” (39); and I advocate “the Foucauldian conception of experience . . . as an alternative to the phenomenological conception” (35).

I would like to make clear that my intention is not to side with Foucault against phenomenology. I have written extensively on the important continuities between phenomenology and Foucault’s thought elsewhere (e.g., Oksala 2005). In this book, my central argument is that immanent social critique must take the form of transcendental philosophy and that “both phenomenology and Foucault’s genealogy can be understood as engaging in transcendental philosophy in this historical and critical sense” (Oksala 2016, 5). I contend that “they can therefore contribute important methodological insights and conceptual tools to the project of feminist philosophy” (2016, 6).

In other words, when I engage in critical investigations of the phenomenological method, its conception of the subject, and understanding of language, I see my project as immanent critique. The book is an attempt to contribute to the phenomenological tradition and to apply its methods and insights for philosophical questions of gender as well as for contemporary feminist political theory. As Gayle Salamon generously writes on the back cover, my aim is to help bring “phenomenology into the twenty-first century.” As far I understand, Salamon, Stawarska, and many other feminist philosophers share this project with me. Stawarska writes that “phenomenology needs to be transformed to accommodate the complex phenomenon of gender” and its conception of the subject needs to be more radically historicized and politicized than many phenomenologists have been prepared to do (39). Whether we call this project transformative phenomenology (Stawarska), post-phenomenology (Oksala), or perhaps critical phenomenology or political phenomenology, debating such labels should not be the decisive issue. Rather, the decisive issue should be what this transformation entails philosophically and politically. And that is what my book attempts to investigate.

I.

I have to object to Stawarska's first question which suggests that I am guilty of venerating canonical male philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger, at the expense of feminist thinkers who still need to make a case for philosophical legitimacy insofar as they are feminists. Stawarska accuses me of adopting a problematic reading strategy, which places feminist philosophy and feminist philosophers "on a lower shelf" (33), reaffirms "a general trend of devaluing feminist works" (36), and contributes to a "dismissal of *feminist* philosophy."

It is difficult for me to respond to this accusation except by repeating here that the book explicitly defends the importance and contemporary relevance of feminist philosophy. The very first sentence is: "The purpose of this book is to provide a sustained defense of feminist philosophy" (2016, 3). I explain what I mean by feminist philosophy – it is a form of social critique attempting to undertake a philosophical and critical analysis of the world we live in – and then, again, sum up my aim: "My aim is thus not just to defend the importance of feminist philosophy in the above sense, but also to identify a series of fundamental questions and challenges that such an understanding implies and that feminist philosophers have to face down (4).

I wrote this book because I firmly believe in the importance of feminist philosophy, particularly in this politically troubling time when many people believe that feminism is no longer relevant. The book is an attempt to contribute to the endeavor of feminist philosophy by trying to strengthen some of its foundations and by posing critical questions about its future. In other words, I want to make very clear that my aim is not to argue that the boomtown of feminist philosophy should be "replaced with foundational texts by non-feminist philosophers" (Stawarska 2019, 36). My interlocutors are not dead male philosophers, but rather, my fellow travelers in contemporary feminist philosophy: Christine Battersby, Joan Scott, Linda Alcoff, Sara Heinämaa, Sonia Kruks, Wendy Brown, and Christine Schuess, just to name a few seminal contemporary feminist thinkers whose work I engage with. I am not treating their works "chiefly as objects of critique"; they are my interlocutors (35). In other words, the aim of the book is not "a recovery of foundational texts in Foucauldian genealogy as well as Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology" (36). The book is first and foremost a contribution to the debates and discussions in contemporary feminist philosophy, and more specifically, to feminist appropriations of and engagements with phenomenology and Foucault. The contention that my book would "benefit from including feminist phenomenological works in its philosophical library" is thus somewhat difficult for me to accept (34).

II.

Stawarska's second question requires a more complex response. She formulates her second problem as a general question on whether these omissions of references from the feminist philosophical library affect my argument, especially my "assessment of phenomenology as a tradition in need of radical revision if it is to be of merit to an emancipatory project" (34). Later, Stawarska specifies that the key problem is the omission of one particular reference: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. She contends that because I do not read this work, but merely "adopt an unexamined endorsement of Sara Heinämaa's reading of it," this leads to "a significant omission of the founder of feminist phenomenology's work that affects the overall argument in the book" (37).

I would first like to note that it is not self-evident that Beauvoir is "the founder of feminist phenomenology" or that *The Second Sex* is "an exemplar of a feminist phenomenological approach" (Stawarska 2019, 37). Feminist scholars such as Sara Heinämaa, Eva Gothlin, Beata Stawarska,

Debra Bergoffen, Bonnie Mann, Gail Weiss and Megan Burke have done groundbreaking work in identifying phenomenological influences in Beauvoir's work and in spelling out her various contributions to the field of feminist phenomenology. However, it is also well-documented that Beauvoir herself did not identify as the founder of feminist phenomenology. Instead, Beauvoir had a complex and conflicted relationship, not just to phenomenology, but to philosophy more generally, and even to feminism itself. The scope of her philosophical interests and references was exceptionally broad. Positioning her as the founder of feminist phenomenology is an interpretative claim that can only be made retrospectively by her commentators. She can, and has been read also through other interpretative frames than phenomenology.

Barbara S. Andrew, for example, situates Beauvoir in philosophical thought by placing her work in four areas of contemporary philosophy where her ideas remain influential: existentialism, phenomenology, social and political philosophy, and feminist theory. Rather than using one philosophical method of analysis in *The Second Sex*, “she combines phenomenology, existentialism, psychology, historical materialism, and liberal political concerns to come up with a unique and comprehensive view of women's lived reality” (2003, 42). I, too, understand Beauvoir's position in the canon of philosophy as being more complex than Stawarska assumes. I read Beauvoir as doing something different and more radical than “enact[ing] a methodological transformation of phenomenology” (Stawarska 2019, 38). Beauvoir does not discuss how we should understand the reductions, or whether we should give up the first-person perspective as the exclusive starting-point of phenomenological investigation into the constitution of gender. She does not pose questions about the importance generative phenomenology, or take a stance on what we should understand by transcendental intersubjectivity. Rather, Beauvoir attempts to completely redraw the borders of philosophy itself: she poses searching questions about what philosophy is.

As Claudia Card writes, Beauvoir consistently refused the label “philosopher” on the grounds that she did not offer a systematic comprehensive theory. Her topics were “not conventional among philosophers when she took them up...: psychoanalysis, biology, sexuality, gender, women, lesbians, prostitution, marriage, love” (Card 2003, 2). Perhaps even more importantly, her methodology was unconventional for philosophy. She used novels, diaries and memoirs as vehicles for doing philosophy, but also as the means of exposing the limitations of rational argumentation. For her, academic philosophy was a form of discourse which was incapable of making space for moral ambiguity, political complexity, and partial agency. She appropriated what today would be called interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary methodologies and discarded the standard formats of philosophical writing. Hence, when I attempt to investigate whether phenomenology as a philosophical method can account for gender in chapter six, I do not discuss Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in detail because I do not read it as an application of the phenomenological method or even as an explicit problematization of it.

This is not the right context for debating our respective readings of Beauvoir, however. The relevant question here is how my book could be improved and my central arguments transformed if I foregrounded *The Second Sex* as a central reference. And although Stawarska claims that my “omission of the founder of feminist phenomenology's work . . . affects the overall argument in the book,” she also seems to admit that, had I made *The Second Sex* a central reference, the main philosophical conclusions of my investigations would have remained essentially the same (39). Stawarska contends that although my critique of the phenomenological method fails to recognize the compatibility of Foucault's genealogy and “Beauvoir's feminist phenomenology (as read by Butler),” a more careful study of these thinkers would show that “Oksala's Foucault and Butler's Beauvoir” are essentially making similar arguments (39). Both “my Foucault” and “Butler's Beauvoir” argue that the subject is constituted and critically transformative; they both insist that it is necessary to theorize the dialectical expansion of subjectivity

and structure; they emphasize the significance of subjugated knowledges as sites of reflection and critique of dominant social norms, as well as adopting the methodological imperative of engaging with empirical studies (39). In other words, a Butlerian reading of Beauvoir would essentially bring us to the same philosophical conclusions as my reading of Foucault and phenomenology does in *Feminist Experiences*.

In sum, Stawarska and I agree that “the goal of social transformation grounded in feminist experiences can be realized by drawing on both traditions of inquiry”—feminist appropriations of Foucault’s historical ontology, as well as feminist phenomenology (39). I look forward to reading more of Stawarska’s work on transformative phenomenology, as well as to learning how Beauvoir’s work, and transformative phenomenology more generally can contribute to our contemporary feminist critiques of neoliberalism. I also appreciate the “good news that Oksala’s project can be partially carried out on the grounds of feminist phenomenology itself,” since this is what I attempt to do in my book (39). However, I would also like to suggest caution regarding the idea that making a book on gender written by a woman the central reference is necessarily going to make our projects of developing feminist phenomenology more feminist or philosophically relevant. And I cannot help thinking that Beauvoir would have unequivocally agreed with me on that point.

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