

The Cambridge Companion to
**SIMONE DE
BEAUVOIR**

Edited by Claudia Card
University of Wisconsin



PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge CB2 1RP,
United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge, CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa
<http://www.cambridge.org>

© Cambridge University Press 2003

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without
the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Trump Medieval 10/13 pt *System* L^AT_EX 2_ε [TB]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

The Cambridge companion to Simone de Beauvoir / edited by
Claudia Card.

p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to philosophy)
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0 521 79096 4 (hardback) – ISBN 0 521 79026 3 (paperback)

I. Beauvoir, Simone de, 1908–1986. I. Card, Claudia. II. Series.

B2430.B344C36 2002

194 – dc21 2002067378

ISBN 0 521 79096 4 hardback
ISBN 0 521 79429 3 paperback

CONTENTS

<i>List of tables</i>	page xi
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
<i>Chronology</i>	xvii
<i>List of abbreviations</i>	xxiii
Introduction	I
CLAUDIA CARD	
I Beauvoir's place in philosophical thought	24
BARBARA S. ANDREW	
2 Reading Simone de Beauvoir with Martin Heidegger	45
EVA GOTHLIN	
3 The body as instrument and as expression	66
SARA HEINÄMAA	
4 Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on ambiguity	87
MONIKA LANGER	
5 Bergson's influence on Beauvoir's philosophical methodology	107
MARGARET A. SIMONS	
6 Philosophy in Beauvoir's fiction	129
MARY SIRRIDGE	
7 Complicity and slavery in <i>The Second Sex</i>	149
SUSAN JAMES	

x Contents

8	Beauvoir on Sade: making sexuality into an ethic JUDITH BUTLER	168
9	Beauvoir and feminism: interview and reflections SUSAN J. BRISON	189
10	Life-story in Beauvoir's memoirs MIRANDA FRICKER	208
11	Beauvoir on the ambiguity of evil ROBIN MAY SCHOTT	228
12	Simone de Beauvoir: (Re)counting the sexual difference DEBRA B. BERGOFFEN	248
13	Beauvoir and biology: a second look MOIRA GATENS	266
14	Beauvoir's <i>Old Age</i> PENELOPE DEUTSCHER	286
	<i>Bibliography</i>	305
	<i>Index</i>	321

TABLE

I	States of existence	<i>page 279</i>
---	---------------------	-----------------

I Beauvoir's place in philosophical thought

Simone de Beauvoir was an existential phenomenologist who was centrally concerned with problems of oppression and embodiment. Her philosophy, novels, and autobiography remain popular, especially *The Second Sex*, which continues to influence feminist thought. Beauvoir lived her life as an intellectual. She considered her life's work to be social commentary. Her tools for social analysis were philosophical.

Beauvoir was born in Paris in 1908 and died there in 1986. She went to school with Simone Weil, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claude Levi-Strauss, and Jean-Paul Sartre. She and Sartre became lovers and companions, and although their relationship was not exclusive, it continued throughout most of their lives. Beauvoir had many friendships and love affairs with women and men. Some are revealed in her autobiography, others in posthumously published letters. Beauvoir traveled widely and wrote about her experiences and views in fiction, plays, journalistic articles, autobiography, and philosophy.

Beauvoir's philosophical training began early. She went to a Catholic girls' school, which, like many schools in France at the time, included a great deal of philosophical reading, especially Aquinas and other writers thought to be significant to religious and moral life. In addition to medieval philosophers, Beauvoir read medieval mystics, Immanuel Kant, René Descartes, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and was generally well versed in the history of philosophy by the time she went to the Sorbonne. Taking a degree at the Sorbonne was acceptable to her parents only because she had no dowry, which made them believe her unlikely to marry and that she would therefore have to work to support herself. She obtained teaching certificates in literature, philosophy, Latin, Greek, and

mathematics and wrote her thesis on Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In 1929 she was the youngest student ever to pass the degree exam in philosophy.

Beauvoir's philosophical training is evident in all her writing. In this chapter I consider Beauvoir's place in philosophical thought in relation to existentialism, phenomenology, social philosophy, and feminist theory. Obviously, no single chapter could do justice to all of these themes. And so I organize my discussion around the development of three ideas central to understanding Beauvoir's philosophical thought – her notions of freedom, ambiguity, and situation – in order to show the complexity of a fourth idea, her notion of human subjectivity as embodied will. I focus on *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, two extended philosophical treatises.¹

The first section defines existentialism through Beauvoir's discussion of its major themes, such as freedom and bad faith. In the second I explain Beauvoir's use of phenomenology and her development of the notion of situation. The third section examines similarities and differences in the work of Beauvoir and Sartre. I further analyze Beauvoir's notion of freedom in the fourth section, on her social philosophy, especially her arguments for the necessity of universal liberation. In the fifth section I consider Beauvoir's influence on feminist thought.

BEAUVOIR AND EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism is a branch of philosophy best known from French writers during the 1940s and 1950s, especially Beauvoir, Sartre, and Albert Camus. Existentialism is mostly concerned with ideas of choice, meaning, and the limits of existence. In general, existentialists think human existence has no predetermined meaning. It is up to each of us to use our freedom to choose our actions and interactions in the world. Each individual carries the burden of finding, revealing, and making meaning in the world.

Existentialism's roots are found in the work of Fyodor Dostoevsky, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger. Existentialists are often rebelling against G. W. F. Hegel and Kant. But they are rebelling in very close dialogue and critique. A hallmark of existentialism is the authors' preoccupation with death, anxiety, and fear. In contrast to novelists who focus on escape from reality,

existential literature tries to express the always tenuous and questioning aspect of human consciousness, the human tendency to ask: why? A second hallmark is the focus on freedom, especially the burden of responsibility that taking up one's freedom entails. The focus on anxiety correlates with the focus on individual choice and freedom, because choosing freedom means constantly and repeatedly taking up the burden of one's own responsibility, and this constant burden creates anxiety, fear, and dread. As Beauvoir points out in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, most of us feel great anxiety in adolescence, the moment when we are first faced with freedom or with choosing for ourselves. It is also the moment at which we begin to realize that parents and authority figures are fallible. "But whatever the joy of this liberation may be, it is not without great confusion that the adolescent finds himself cast into a world which is no longer ready-made" (*EA* 39). Beauvoir, like Nietzsche, focuses on joy as well as anxiety. Also reminiscent of Nietzsche, she rejoices in the shedding of old values and the dynamic creation of choosing value.²

Existentialism is sometimes accused of being nihilistic. If there is no predetermined meaning, say critics, the world is meaningless. Beauvoir counters these claims in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She argues that value and meaning are ambiguous. It is a very different thing to argue that the meaning and value that exist in the world are ambiguous than it is to argue that there are no meanings or values. Ambiguity refers to the idea that meaning is not predetermined; however, there are meanings and values, but it is up to each of us to discover, create, or reveal them.

Beauvoir explicitly rejects nihilism, the view that nothing matters. Instead, she ascribes enormous responsibility to the individual. According to Beauvoir, each person "bears the responsibility for the world which is not the work of a strange power, but of himself, where his defeats are inscribed and his victories as well" (*EA* 16). It is the individual's responsibility to create meaning through her choices. Thus, individuals are free to make meaning, but they are also free to fail to make meaning. Freedom carries with it an enormous burden. Individuals are responsible for the ethical consequences of their actions – their successes and their failures. Failure to take up one's freedom results in failure to create and reveal meaning. Thus, the world becomes more bleak if one rejects or ignores one's responsibilities.

For Beauvoir, human freedom has meaning because of what we do with it. The value that we find in the world we find through our actions, our choices, and our investments in other people. Life has meaning, but it is up to us to find, discover, or reveal that meaning. Some value in the world must be revealed, other value must be created. Sometimes value must be revealed and created simultaneously.

Although it is not commonly stated this way, the existential crisis of how to act on and be responsible for one's own freedom brings into view the need for connection to others. Beauvoir's work, more than that of other existentialists, characteristically emphasizes the need for relationship.³ For Beauvoir, others are both obstacles to freedom and liberators. They attempt to block freedom by predetermining the world, and they liberate freedom by recognizing the meaning that one makes. The existential crisis is most often thought of as the realization that each individual must act for herself, make her own decisions, and bear responsibility for her own decisions and actions – alone, without the help of parents or the pregiven meaning of religious or social mores. This creates enormous anxiety, often paralysis. Suddenly, one no longer knows what to do but must decide. For Beauvoir, this crisis also involves the problem of the Other. One is alone in choosing. But one chooses amongst actions that involve others who may hinder or facilitate one's freedom. Crisis occurs because others do not seem to realize or notice that life has no predetermined meaning, or they fail to take up the meaning one makes. Those others can take one over by force. Parents are tyrannical. Lovers can be hard-hearted. The crisis of being alone occurs, in part, in failing to make genuine connections with others.

Another significant theme of existentialist literature is self-deception or bad faith. Bad faith is believing in something about yourself or the world even in the face of blatant counterevidence. The existentialist idea of bad faith is meant to replace the psychoanalytic idea of unconscious motivation. Individuals act in bad faith when they refuse to face their freedom or try to hide it from themselves, especially by refusing to see that one has to choose values for oneself. One can also be in bad faith by refusing to acknowledge others' freedom. Beauvoir's fictional characters wrestle with the self-deception of bad faith. They turn away from what they know must be true. Françoise in *She Came to Stay* convinces herself that murder is permissible, rather than face her own failures. For Beauvoir, the

persistent seduction of bad faith must be constantly refused. Taking up this struggle against self-deception is part of what is necessary in taking responsibility for one's own freedom.

Another example of bad faith is given in *The Second Sex*. Women's failure to take responsibility for their freedom is seen both as women's bad faith and as the trap of patriarchal society. In patriarchal society women are led to believe that they are happier rejecting their freedom than they would be taking responsibility for it. In fact, patriarchal femininity is defined by refusing responsibility – or, as Beauvoir puts it, by choosing to be Other, to be inessential. Beauvoir adds to this the phenomenological idea of woman's "situation." Women are so situated in patriarchal society that choosing against themselves may seem to be the only way to choose. But, once one becomes aware of the possibility of liberation, one must act. Otherwise one is in bad faith. The idea of situation counters ideas of human nature or essence. What structures lived experience is the social, political, and historical situation one finds oneself in. The gendered, sexed body is part of a person's situation, given that bodies are treated and regulated differently in various cultures and eras.

In addition to concerns about freedom and bad faith, another characteristic of existentialism is the rejection of given systems. Since existentialists reject given systems of value, they often pose the question of whether system-building is the best way to explore questions of human existence. Beauvoir rejected the idea of building a system to explain the world or human consciousness and instead used existentialism and phenomenology as analytical tools for understanding the human situation. Like Sartre and Camus, she used fiction and plays as well as philosophical treatises to explore philosophical thought. *She Came to Stay* (her first novel) is a fictional account of some of the philosophical questions found in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Beauvoir won the Prix Goncourt, the highest literary prize in France, for her novel *The Mandarins*, which asks whether ethical action is possible. Much of her philosophical thought can be found in her novels.

Beauvoir's philosophical thought is not only existentialist, but it takes existentialism as its foundation. Existentialism considers people to be actors rather than knowers. Initially, this may seem contradictory to the philosophical pursuit. Philosophers understand themselves as seekers of knowledge. Philosophy, however,

is traditionally defined as the love of wisdom. The existentialist philosopher chooses, acts, desires, feels anxious, and knows that meaning must be made. For Beauvoir, philosophers should not be as interested in acquiring knowledge as they are in engaging with it. She pushes herself and her readers to experience love, or engagement, with the world and human reality, rather than to abstractly possess wisdom.

BEAUVOIR AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Phenomenology is centrally concerned with engagement with the world, or between the world and the self. Phenomenologists often discuss "lived experience." Phenomenology is a philosophy of embodiment that views all knowledge as situated. Recent feminist scholars Sara Heinämaa, Karen Vintges, Sonia Kruks, Eva Gothlin, and Kristana Arp understand Beauvoir's work to be phenomenological as well as existential.

Edmund Husserl is generally regarded as the first phenomenologist. Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty are also foundational to understanding phenomenology. Beauvoir could be added to this list. Some philosophers think of phenomenology as a method of analysis, whereas others identify it as a collection of ideas about analyzing human interaction with and human understanding of the relation of self and world.

Beauvoir was well versed in phenomenology. She reviewed Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* in *Les Temps modernes* in 1945. In her memoir, *The Prime of Life*, she discusses reading Husserl and Heidegger.⁴ *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is first and foremost an existential ethic. However, Beauvoir's ethics also incorporates phenomenology. Heinämaa finds evidence of Husserl's influence in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and argues that Beauvoir presents a phenomenological ethic in which the ethical agent strives to reveal her relationships with others and the world. Part of the task of the ethical agent is to be cognizant of the "modes of reality" and the way in which reality is being represented.⁵ Gothlin argues that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* employs a phenomenological method by starting with the idea of the significance of the individual consciousness and from there developing a critique of the socialist idea that the end (such as a socialist utopia) can justify the means (such as a socialist

dictatorship).⁶ Vintges calls Beauvoir's ethics "an art of living," a phrase Beauvoir used in the novel *The Mandarins* to describe her ethical view.⁷ In *The Mandarins* the experience of joy is bodily. The main character, Anne, experiences a bodily celebration of her connection to the world. That the moment of ethical connection is, in part, physical, is significant to understanding Beauvoir as developing a phenomenological ethic. The bodily connection signifies Anne's experience of ethics as a lived connection to the world, an ethical understanding of human reality.

For phenomenologists, "the world" usually denotes a combination of the natural world and human relationships. A key aspect of phenomenology is the interaction between self and world, and *The Second Sex* may be best understood as a work of phenomenology in which Beauvoir examines the interaction between the gendered self and the gendered world. *The Second Sex* looks at how social ideas of femininity shape women's experiences of self. One of the most significant aspects of *The Second Sex* is its encyclopedic indexing of women's lived experience: biology, psychology, the experience of living in a female body and developing and living with a feminine mind-set. Many contemporary women's first reaction to reading it is that they do not experience themselves in the way Beauvoir describes. But this is to miss the point. Most of *The Second Sex* is a phenomenological, descriptive analysis. Beauvoir is not claiming that there is one way that we who are women experience ourselves, our bodies or our minds. Instead, she describes, and argues against taking as prescriptive, literary representations of femininity, biological sciences' accounts of femininity, psychoanalytic theories about femininity, and so on. It is easy, initially, to confuse her work as participating in negative stereotypes of femininity, rather than in cataloging them and analyzing their effect. Although Beauvoir's descriptions of women's bodies may seem negative, Arp argues that she is describing women's experience of bodily alienation in understanding their social bodies, that is, the body as known through the experience of a sexist world.⁸

Part of the misunderstanding among American readers correlates with H. M. Parshley's translation of *The Second Sex*, which disregards Beauvoir's use of philosophical terminology. For example, the French title of the second volume is *L'Expérience vécue*, or lived experience, which recalls Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account

of the lived body. Parshley translates this title as *Woman's Life Today*. He also translates "la réalité humaine" as "human nature" or "the real nature of man" rather than as the Heideggerian idea of human reality. Beauvoir particularly regretted this flaw, as she argued that there is no such thing as human nature.⁹

Beauvoir's most famous statement from *The Second Sex* shows the influence of phenomenology: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (SS 267). Beauvoir's suggestion is that being female does not make one a woman. Instead one becomes a woman through interactions with the world, through lived experience. One's lived experience may make one experience femininity as "real" in the sense that there are actual expectations about women's behavior that one may internalize and therefore experience as part of one's own understanding of the world. Femininity can be understood as an aspect of human reality but not as natural or innate. Beauvoir is clear about this interaction between self and world, between bodily experience and one's understanding of it. She wrote in the *Prime of Life* that her thesis in *The Second Sex* was that "femininity is neither a natural nor an innate entity, but rather a condition brought about by society, on the basis of certain physiological characteristics" (PL 291). Yet, she also held on to the belief in freedom associated with existentialists. "I attached small importance to the actual conditions of my life: nothing, I believed, could impede my will" (PL 291).

BEAUVOIR'S WORK AND SARTRE'S: THE DIFFICULTY OF SEEING BOTH EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE

The relationship between Beauvoir's philosophical work and Sartre's has been the subject of much recent scholarship. Beauvoir and Sartre represented their own relationship with each other as a philosophical partnership. But Beauvoir also gave Sartre center stage as a philosopher. There is no question that Sartre's work was highly influential on Beauvoir's thought. But there is much debate regarding how influential her work was on his thought and how much her work differed from his. While Beauvoir was alive many philosophers understood her work as purely derivative of Sartre's. Some philosophers continue to hold this view, and Beauvoir is often excluded from textbooks on existentialism and phenomenology. She is interpreted as applying Sartre's philosophy to women's situation or to other particular

issues, but not as contributing original work (as if such analyses were not original work!). Current Beauvoir scholarship, on the other hand, argues that Beauvoir's philosophical work differs significantly from Sartre's, that she changed her idea of freedom from the radical freedom of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* early in her work, at least by *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and that her version of existentialism has more to offer contemporary thinkers than Sartre's. Margaret Simons has shown that many central tenets of existentialism can be found in an undeveloped form in Beauvoir's early diaries, before she had met Sartre, evidence that Beauvoir was thinking along those lines in developing her own thought.¹⁰ Beauvoir was able to develop a social philosophy early on, whereas Sartre was impeded by his notion of radical freedom. Beauvoir's recognition of the significance of situation is evident throughout her work, another idea that Sartre came to more slowly.

Beauvoir repeatedly commented that Sartre was the creator of philosophical systems where she was not, suggesting that she was Sartre's disciple.¹¹ But what she means by the claim that she is not a philosopher is not to deny categorically the philosophical import of her writing. She insisted that the ideas and philosophical analyses in her books were her own. However, during her career, "philosophy" traditionally designated a systematic, comprehensive theory. What Beauvoir points to is a different understanding of her own work. As an existentialist, admittedly of her own stripe, Beauvoir was not interested in constructing a philosophical system, which might turn into a system of given meaning for others. Instead, she developed what we may think of as a set of tools for philosophical analysis, including her ideas of freedom, ambiguity, situation, the human condition, social ethics, reciprocity, and gendered existence. In our contemporary use of the term, Beauvoir is a philosopher precisely because her work engages in philosophical analysis. Her sets of theories are in line with many contemporary philosophers' understanding of their own methodology. Part of what we learn in studying Beauvoir's work on its own merits is that she came to view systems of thought as too rigid, as not recognizing the shifting nature of knowledge.¹²

Ideas of freedom are central to existential analysis, and it is generally agreed among Beauvoir scholars that Beauvoir's idea of freedom differed significantly from Sartre's. Sartre maintains in *Being and Nothingness* that we are always free to choose, even if that freedom

takes the form merely of refusing the situation, perhaps by committing suicide. Kruks, Kate and Edward Fullbrook, and Gothlin have written detailed analyses of Beauvoir's and Sartre's evolving notions of freedom. In fact, both Kruks and the Fullbrooks argue that Beauvoir disagreed with Sartre about freedom before the publication of *Being and Nothingness*.¹³ Kruks and Gothlin argue that Beauvoir's idea of freedom is much closer to Merleau-Ponty's and that Beauvoir was influenced by Merleau-Ponty long before Sartre was.¹⁴ The Fullbrooks argue that, contrary to popular belief, it is Beauvoir who inspired Sartre's idea of freedom and not the other way around.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir argues that each person needs the other's freedom for her own to be realizable. This is already a huge move away from the radical freedom of *Being and Nothingness*. She also argues that human reality is constituted from both facticity and freedom. One is simultaneously body and mind, whereas Sartre saw the mind or freedom as determining facticity's or the body's influence. Consequently, for Beauvoir, not all situations equally allow the ability to act on or take up one's own freedom. Freedom is situated, subject not only to the whims of embodiment but also to those of historical, social location.

Beauvoir is likewise aware of the effects of social institutions on freedom. The importance of situation in her work – and of social institutions on the historical, cultural, and political understanding of the self as free – begins in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and is fully developed in *The Second Sex*. Sartre's radical existential freedom assumes that each of us is equally free, regardless of our situation. Attempts to destroy another's freedom are only actions against the person's physical situation. Beauvoir's embodied notion of self allows her to argue that political oppression obstructs freedom because body, mind, and will are all one entity. Contrary to Sartre's idea that two freedoms are always in conflict, Beauvoir emphasizes that individuals have an important alliance and affinity through their mutual recognition of the ambiguity of the human condition and the meaning of their projects. Social institutions that allow for oppression predetermine human political inequality and thus harm our ability to recognize each other's freedom.

However, there is also no question that Beauvoir and Sartre shared many philosophical beliefs and that their mutual influence

is enormous. They read each other's work and commented on it before publication. They were continually discussing philosophy and presented themselves as a philosophical pair throughout many years. Regardless of the failures of reciprocity found by contemporary scholars and biographers, Beauvoir's and Sartre's own understandings were ones of mutual intellectual influence and regard.

Beauvoir's contribution to existential and phenomenological philosophy is to make situation and embodiment central to philosophical questions. *The Second Sex* makes it impossible to deny that philosophy must no longer ask the question of human existence, but must instead ask about situated or gendered embodied existence. This is a huge step forward in feminist philosophy, but it is also a huge step forward in philosophy generally. Situated, embodied existence cannot be ignored.

BEAUVOIR AND SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY

Beauvoir's idea of situated, embodied existence develops from existentialism and phenomenology. However, her idea of situation makes social philosophy central to her work. The significance of her work for social philosophy is broad-ranging. During her lifetime, Beauvoir wrote many journalistic articles regarding political events, most of which philosophical scholars have not yet considered. Beauvoir wrote about the Algerian war, women's rights, and a plethora of the political issues of her day. In addition to these topical essays, she develops a social philosophy in her philosophical essays and novels. Her autobiographical work can be understood as being similar to the ethical self-styling that Michel Foucault discusses.¹⁵ *The Second Sex* generated a huge shift in feminist social thought and was inspirational to a great deal of social philosophy more generally. In this section I concentrate on the importance of her central philosophical ideas for social philosophy, especially her argument for the relational nature of freedom and the consequent necessity of universal liberation.

Beauvoir's basic understanding of the human condition is one that puts each of us at the mercy of the other as well as giving us tremendous power over each other. She writes, "This privilege, which he [the human individual] alone possesses, of being a sovereign and unique subject amidst a universe of objects, is what he shares with

all his fellow-men. In turn an object for others, he is nothing more than an individual in the collectivity on which he depends" (EA 7). Each person is simultaneously sovereign and object; powerful and weak, the perpetrator of deeds and the dependent of the collectivity. While it is tempting to understand the existentialist position as advocating radical freedom, Beauvoir does not allow this. This ambiguity, being simultaneously free and dependent, is the basis of Beauvoir's ethic and the basis of her social thought. Individuals must and always do choose for themselves, but those choices are always situated in a social context. It may be tempting to interpret this ambiguity as replicating Cartesian mind-body dualism; however, what Beauvoir aims at is an embodied subjectivity. There may be moments in her writing where mind-body dualism slips in, but what Beauvoir attempts to accomplish is a phenomenological description of embodied consciousness in which we experience ourselves as willed bodies, passionate bodies, and thoughtful bodies, both at union with and in contradiction to the natural and the social worlds.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* Beauvoir argues that all value arises from freedom. But freedom only has meaning when other people exist to recognize it. These two claims lead to a social ethics, in which each person must work not only for her own freedom but for the freedom of every other person. For Beauvoir, we need free others who will recognize the meaning of our projects. Consequently, we must work for universal liberation. One way to understand this is through the notion of reciprocity. Beauvoir has a complex notion of reciprocity that entails understanding both self and other as ambiguous as well as recognizing the importance of others' freedom.

Freedom is inescapable for the individual in the sense that one cannot escape one's own freedom, but also in the sense that one cannot escape from others' freedom. Thus, for Beauvoir, freedom is relational. It requires reciprocal recognition. To deny others' freedom is to live in bad faith, just as denying one's own freedom is living in bad faith. Beauvoir writes: "To will that there be being is also to will that there be men by and for whom the world is endowed with human significations. One can reveal the world only on a basis revealed by other men" (EA 71). Simply stated, we need others to recognize our meaning. Those others must be free so that they too can see the world as endowed with human meaning. Beauvoir continues by arguing that "every man needs the freedom of other men and, in a sense,

always wants it, even though he may be a tyrant; the only thing he fails to do is to assume honestly the consequences of such a wish. Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity" (EA 71). We desire each other's freedom because we desire that others recognize the meaning we make and the significance of our projects. It is not enough to make meaning in front of slavish devotees, for their recognition is not valuable because it is not free.

When we deny another's freedom we simply deny what is patently true about that other, namely that the person is free, can make meaning, and that we need that person to recognize the meaning of our own actions. Oppression is "transcendence condemned to fall uselessly back upon itself because it is cut off from its goals" (EA 81). Oppression is a failure, in bad faith, to recognize the other's freedom. However, it is also a failure to recognize one's own ambiguity. The oppressor takes her own freedom as paramount, and acting out of hubris, fails to see that she is nothing but an object without the other's recognition. She falls into, or rather, chooses, a staid role that denies the flexibility of her own freedom and trades that flexibility for a violent power. In a sense, the oppressor uses herself as an object of force.

For Beauvoir we are each both subject and object, free and acted upon. Recognizing this ambiguity simultaneously in oneself and in others is another form of reciprocity. While Beauvoir's concerns about oppression in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* point to this, the idea is more fully developed in *The Second Sex*, especially in terms of interpersonal relationships. Beauvoir's novel *All Men are Mortal* also picks up her concerns about ambiguity. The main character, Fosca, reveals that he is immortal, but instead of making him the best human possible, his immortality makes him take an immoral view – immoral because outside of human reality. Fosca adopts a historical view that allows him to justify particular wrongs for broad historical goals. His focus turns to the overall progress of the human race, or progress itself, or the good for all without recognizing the significance of every individual. Such a utilitarian calculus will also lead to oppression, according to Beauvoir, because one is apt to forget whose liberation one is fighting for – the liberation of individuals.¹⁶ Immortality allows Fosca to stand outside human reality. He cannot risk his life for a cause or dedicate himself to loving one person. He

will live forever; his life cannot be risked, his beloved will be left. He forgets the significance of others' existence, the importance of each individual's freedom. And so he forgets where value springs from, and he is no longer part of the human world. His own freedom no longer has meaning. As such, he views himself as outside morality. He is surely outside an embodied ethic. He is also outside ambiguity, because the limitations of his bodily existence are no longer meaningful. Thus he cannot participate in making meaning.

Beauvoir's emphasis on the ambiguity of the human condition and the impact of taking up one's freedom led her to argue for radical political change. *The Second Sex* is the most influential analysis of women's situation in the twentieth century. Many fail to see it as a political work, in part because the analysis moves through literature, biology, and psychology. Nonetheless, *The Second Sex* is a political analysis of women's social, historical, and cultural situation. In it Beauvoir rejects liberalism and instead uses a Marxist critique to argue that women, as a class, are so situated that they are less able and less likely than men to act on their freedom. Beauvoir goes beyond Marxism, however, in arguing that women's psychology, education, and desire are so shaped by social influences that they learn to choose against themselves.

Margaret Simons compares *The Second Sex* to Marxist and radical feminism, to Richard Wright's phenomenological work on African-American lived existence, and to Gunnar Myrdal's comprehensive and influential analysis of racism in the United States. For Simons, the arguments for class, caste, and race struggle are similar insofar as they require a historical materialist approach as well as a phenomenology of oppressed consciousness.¹⁷ This position, as well as Beauvoir's unique views of freedom, ambiguity, and reciprocity, made *The Second Sex* one of the most influential books of the twentieth century. In it, Beauvoir further develops her analysis of the political workings of oppression and how the ambiguity of the human condition demands a risky freedom.

BEAUVOIR'S INFLUENCE ON FEMINIST THOUGHT

Beauvoir's influence on feminist thought is remarkable, even paradigmatic.¹⁸ *The Second Sex* influenced all subsequent feminist philosophy. Philosophy is the project of considering what it means

to be human and of asking what it means to experience and create a human reality. Beauvoir's work considers what it means to be a gendered human and asks what it means to experience and create a gendered human reality. Beauvoir takes up many of the central problems for feminist philosophy today: equality and difference; developing a postcolonial feminism; ethics for morally corrupt times; embodied consciousness; and a theory of the self that is both free and socially constructed. Beauvoir's work was quite influential to the second-wave feminist movement. Liberal, socialist, and radical feminists as diverse as Kate Millett, Betty Friedan, and Shulamith Firestone each acknowledge Beauvoir's influence on their own work. Beauvoir's work is referred to by psychoanalytic feminists, such as Juliet Mitchell and Carol Gilligan. Her influence on French feminists, such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous and Toril Moi is foundational, as is her influence on feminist postmodernists, such as Judith Butler. Beauvoir is the one author with whom most contemporary feminist theorists have some familiarity, regardless of their own theoretical preferences.

While Beauvoir's influence on feminist writers has been profound, it is important to remember that she was influenced by earlier feminists. She had, for example, read all of Virginia Woolf's work,¹⁹ and she refers to a wide variety of women writers in *The Second Sex*, including Madame de Staehl, Mary Wollstonecraft, Christine de Pisan, Emily Dickinson, Isadora Duncan, and Clara Zetkin. Although I focus in this chapter on the impact of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's fiction has also been quite influential to feminist theory.

Beauvoir's most famous statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," argues that there is nothing natural or inherent about woman or femininity. All of our lived experiences, our psychologies, our understandings of our physical and mental capabilities and gifts – everything that we know and experience about ourselves – is filtered through our situatedness. Beauvoir's famous statement initiated a storm of controversy as well as a plethora of commentary. Whereas many feminists understand Beauvoir to restate the distinction between sex and gender, others, especially postmodernist feminists, understand Beauvoir to confound that distinction. An enormous amount of feminist thought interprets Beauvoir's famous sentence and ponders what it might mean.

How does the statement "One is not born but rather becomes a woman" correspond to Beauvoir's notions of freedom, ambiguity,

and situation? I have argued that these three ideas lead to Beauvoir's distinctive analysis of embodied subjectivity. Beauvoir uses women's failure to take up freedom as an example of bad faith. *The Second Sex* is a phenomenological work that catalogs women's situation. Women's situation in patriarchal societies limits freedom. For Beauvoir, the ambiguity of each individual's freedom requires universal liberation. The complexity of Beauvoir's idea of freedom is only now being taken up by feminists. In part, this is because her analyses of situation and ambiguity and how they lead to a new idea of freedom are only now being fully understood.

Women's freedom is the most important theme of *The Second Sex*. From the 1980s to early 1990s many feminists understood Beauvoir simply to advocate that women, like men, could be free if they would only take up their freedom. Beauvoir is saying this in part. But it is important to notice that this understanding by itself forgets the ambiguity of the human situation, on which she insisted. We are simultaneously free and completely dependent. For each of us, women and men, social situation moderates our freedom. Women's historical, social, political, legal, psychological, and economic situation renders them less able to take up their freedom than the situations of some men. Recall that Beauvoir sees women's situation in relation to men as similar to African-Americans' situation in relation to white Americans and to the Jews' situation in relation to Christians (and, later, to the Algerians' situation in relation to mainland French). Beauvoir's analysis strives to take political and economic situations into account. To do this requires more than an argument for equality; it requires changing our view of the meanings of equality and freedom.

When Beauvoir was understood to advocate women's freedom and equality in relation to men, without noticing the sophistication with which that claim is moderated by her understanding of situation and the ambiguity of the human condition, then she was understood to advocate a liberal notion of equality in which women would become more like men. This misunderstanding is connected with the popularity of *The Second Sex*, which generated many interpretations and some misunderstandings. Although Beauvoir's work does emphasize freedom, her notion of freedom is not simplistic. As feminist theory grew more complex, thinkers began to interpret Beauvoir's work differently, seeing the importance of situation and ambiguity. Like Beauvoir herself, who wrote that the first thing she had to say about

herself is "I am a woman," feminist philosophy had first to negotiate the right of women to speak philosophically on their own behalf. In other words, it is only after feminist philosophy is somewhat successful in making arguments for women's equality and freedom that it has the luxury of understanding and responding to the complexity of Beauvoir's work, especially the complexity of her notion of freedom in terms of situation and ambiguity.

The phenomenological notion of situation tempers Beauvoir's idea of freedom. For Beauvoir, everyone is equally metaphysically capable of freedom. However, women are situated in ways that make it less likely that they can act on their freedom. Women's situation may influence and even impede women's freedom. While Beauvoir holds women culpable for not taking up their freedom and for the choices they make, she argues that some choices are not available. Neither men nor women can be radically free. All human freedom is situated, according to Beauvoir. All humans experience ambiguous subjectivity, and this ambiguity is constitutive of human reality and moral experience.

The idea of situation plays an important role in *The Second Sex*. For example, Beauvoir writes that "it is clear that none of woman's traits manifest an originally perverted essence or will: they reflect a situation" (SS 615). Femininity is a situation, for Beauvoir. There is no such thing as femininity itself, an eternal Feminine, a female essence or a feminine will. Contemporary feminist thought discusses femininity as a social, cultural, historical, economic situation, as socialization (or psychological or cultural identity), or even as a performance. Beauvoir's analysis in *The Second Sex* suggests all of these interpretations. In fact, one can understand the strands of feminist theory, liberal and Marxist, psychological, and postmodern and postcolonial feminism, as working through these understandings. Liberal and Marxist feminists take up political analyses of women's socioeconomic and historical situation and how it affects freedom. Psychoanalytic and psychological feminism take up how culture molds women's psyches into femininity and discusses what parts of women's cultural situation need to be deconstructed to allow for women's freedom, as well as what parts can be maintained. Postmodern feminists see gender as a performance. Women's psychic freedom, or lack of it, plays out in and through the body and their self-knowledge of their bodies, completely informing their

lived experience. The situation of femininity shapes the things we know about the world, the ways in which we think about ourselves, the ways in which we relate to others and so on.

These ideas of situation reflect one aspect of Beauvoir's idea of ambiguity: that we are both subject and object, body and mind. The second aspect of ambiguity is the idea of reciprocity, that we have to understand this simultaneous empowerment and disempowerment not only about ourselves but about each other, which means that we recognize both the other's freedom and her facticity. This simultaneous ambiguity is what we recognize in sexual activity. When we understand another in this way we can see that other as willed body and take delight in the pleasure brought by both the other's objecthood and subjecthood. Thus Beauvoir explains in writing about heterosexual sexual activity:

The verbs to give and to receive exchange meanings; joy is gratitude, pleasure is affection. Under a concrete and carnal form there is mutual recognition of the ego and of the other in the keenest awareness of the other and of the ego. Some women say that they feel the masculine sex organ in them as a part of their own bodies; some men feel that they are the women they penetrate. These are evidently inexact expressions, for the dimension, the relation of the other still exists; but the fact is that alterity has no longer a hostile implication, and indeed this sense of the union of really separate bodies is what gives its emotional character to the sexual act; and it is the more overwhelming as the two beings, who together in passion deny and assert their boundaries, are similar and yet unlike. [SS 401]

This description does not deny the tension of objectifying the other, but reframes it. Eros entails being drawn to the other, desiring the other, which may seem to make the other into a thing to be desired. Yet, in Beauvoir's description, part of the pleasure of eros is in experiencing the other as embodied will through the denial and assertion of boundaries. Beauvoir calls erotic activity the experience in which humans most poignantly experience their ambiguity. It is in erotic activity that human ambiguity in all its aspects is played out. As embodied consciousness, we reciprocally recognize each other, we act with and on each other, together, we express desire. We desire the other's freedom as much as our own in erotic activity, for the other's freedom is part of assertion and the denial of boundaries. What is erotic about sexual activity is its expression of ambiguity. For this

reason, Beauvoir's work emphasizes the importance of sexual activity. It is also for this reason that early receptions of *The Second Sex* described it as calling for sexual liberation and more recent interpreters describe it as philosophy of joy, philosophy as passion, an erotic ethic, and an ethic of liberation.²⁰

But Beauvoir does not solely rely on passion and the eroticism of ambiguity. The social and economic conditions of women's liberation are also significant. In order to analyze women's situation, Beauvoir combines traditional political concerns (social and economic systems) with ideas about ambiguity, freedom, and their effects on women's sense of self. Rather than using one system of analysis, 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. She makes a traditional liberal call for rights and equality, develops a political phenomenology, and uses an existential psychology. For Beauvoir, everything must be taken into account.

Beauvoir suggests that what we know about woman could change completely. What contemporary feminists find most provocative about Beauvoir's work is her idea of embodied consciousness and the ethic which develops from it. Would the embodied subject change social thought? What would existential ethics be if it focused on joy and engagement rather than anxiety and alienation? What Beauvoir understood was a connection to the world as ethical engagement. And it is this engagement that contemporary scholars seek to understand and employ in their own work. Of course, this was not always the question that feminist theorists interpreted Beauvoir as posing. As feminist thought evolves, so do our interpretations of Beauvoir. Her work serves as a place from which to ask the questions of feminist philosophy. She began the dialogue in which we are now engaged.

CONCLUSION

Through her writing and theorizing, Beauvoir attempts to engage the world. "Literature is born when something in life goes slightly adrift . . . the first essential condition is that *reality should no longer be taken for granted*; only then can one both perceive it, and make others do so" (*PL* 290, emphasis original). Existentialist writers are

often viewed as portraying the tragedy of human existence: our isolation from one another, the meaninglessness of our attempts to engage one another and the world, our failure to make meaning and our insignificance. Beauvoir is an existentialist whose work, faced with this tragedy, turns toward engagement and sees its possibilities as well as its dangers and potential failures. Her writing finds joy in moments of connection with others and the world, while it never forgets the potential oppression this connection may bring. The ambiguity of the human condition, for Beauvoir, is not a cause of misery. Instead, although it may produce anxiety and dread, it also produces a need for connection with others and engagement with the world. Ambiguity is erotic, for Beauvoir, and it produces the conditions for joy, engagement, and a celebration of the fecundity of the world. Ambiguity produces a celebratory excursion, a journey of discovering what it means to be a thinking animal or an embodied will. For Beauvoir, the world is a place of excess. There is always something to comment on, to fix, to strive for – in short, always something or someone to engage with. “Before writing *She Came to Stay* I spent years fumbling around for a subject. From the moment I began that book I never stopped writing, . . . Why was it that from this point on I always had ‘something to say’?” Beauvoir goes on to answer her question: “each book thenceforth impelled me toward its successor, for the more I saw of the world, the more I realized that it was brimming over with all I could ever hope to experience, understand, and put into words” (*PL* 478–79).

NOTES

- 1 *SS* (New York: Vintage, 1989 [1949]); *EA* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1948 [1947]). Because this chapter is written for the common reader, I have chosen the widely available English translations of these books. I note problems with translations of *The Second Sex* later in the chapter.
- 2 Beauvoir claims several significant differences between her ethic and Nietzsche's. See *EA* 72.
- 3 In fact, Beauvoir's idea of freedom can be understood as relational, an idea developed in Barbara Andrew, “Care, Freedom, and Reciprocity in the Ethics of Simone de Beauvoir,” *Philosophy Today*, 42, 3/4 (fall 1998): 290–300. Cf. Linda Singer, “Interpretation and Retrieval,” in Azizah Y. al-Hibri and Margaret A. Simons, ed., *Hypatia Reborn* (Bloomington, IN:

- Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 323–35; Jo-Ann Piliardi, “Philosophy Becomes Autobiography: The Development of the Self in the Writings of Simone de Beauvoir,” in Hugh J. Silverman, ed., *Writing the Politics of Difference* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991); Sonia Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990); and Margaret A. Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).
- 4 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life* (hereafter *PL*), trans. Peter Green (Cleveland, OH: World Publishing, 1962 [1960]), pp. 178 and 373.
- 5 Sara Heinämaa, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Phenomenology of Sexual Difference,” *Hypatia*, 14, 4 (1999): 114–32.
- 6 Eva Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, trans. Linda Schenck (Middletown, CN: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), p. 153.
- 7 Karen Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion*, trans. Anne Lavelle (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996 [1992]).
- 8 Kristana Arp, “Beauvoir’s Concept of Bodily Alienation,” in Margaret A. Simons, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), pp. 161–77.
- 9 See Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex*, p. 59.
- 10 *ibid.*, pp. 185–243.
- 11 See *PL* 178 and Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex*, p. 12.
- 12 See Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion* for an analysis of Beauvoir’s ideas of truth and knowledge.
- 13 See Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence*, pp. 83–112, and Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook, “Sartre’s Secret Key,” in *Feminist Interpretations*.
- 14 Gothlin, *Sex and Existence* and Eva Gothlin, “Simone de Beauvoir’s Notions of Appeal, Desire and Ambiguity and their Relationship to Jean-Paul Sartre’s Notions of Appeal and Desire,” *Hypatia*, 14, 4 (fall 1999): 83–95.
- 15 I borrow this suggestion from Vintges, who compares Beauvoir’s ethics to that of Foucault, both in Vintges, *Philosophy as Passion* and in her “Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Thinker for Our Times,” *Hypatia*, 14, 4 (fall 1999): 133–44.
- 16 Beauvoir also makes this point in *EA*.
- 17 Simons, *Beauvoir and The Second Sex*.
- 18 Vintges (*Philosophy as Passion*, p. 140) calls Beauvoir paradigmatic.
- 19 See *PL* 37 and 46.
- 20 See Vintges, Fullbrook and Fullbrook, and Bergoffen for these recent descriptions.