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**Women in the
History of Philosophy**



Simone de Beauvoir

Karen Green



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Elements on Women in the History of Philosophy

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New
Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781009011785

DOI: [10.1017/9781009026802](https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009026802)

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First published 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-009-01178-5 Paperback

ISSN 2634-4645 (online)

ISSN 2634-4637 (print)

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Simone de Beauvoir

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DOI: 10.1017/9781009026802

First published online: July 2022

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Abstract: Tracing her intellectual development from her university years, when she was trained in a Cartesian and neo-Kantian philosophical tradition, to her final decade, during which she was recognised as having inspired the emerging strands of late twentieth-century feminism, Beauvoir is shown to have been among the most influential philosophical voices of the mid-twentieth century. Countering the recent trend to read her in isolation from Sartre, she is shown to have adopted, adapted, and influenced his philosophy, most importantly through encouraging him to engage with Hegel and to consider our relations with others. *The Second Sex* is read in the light of her existentialist humanism and ultimately faulted for having succumbed too uncritically to the masculine myth that it is men who are solely responsible for society's intellectual and cultural history.

Keywords: feminism, existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre, phenomenology, Marxism

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ISBNs: 9781009011785 (PB), 9781009026802 (OC)

ISSNs: 2634-4645 (online), 2634-4637 (print)

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1 Beauvoir before Sartre

Born in 1908, Simone de Beauvoir was an early beneficiary of women's nineteenth-century campaigns for access to higher education. From 1926 to 1929, she studied for and gained the *agrégation* (the qualification for becoming a philosophy teacher) on nearly equal terms with a group of young men of her generation – Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Paul Nizan, René Maheu, Raymond Aron, and Jean-Paul Sartre – who, collectively, would become dominating influences on mid-twentieth-century French philosophy. She was particularly lucky in having been able to compete as an equal with this group of ambitious young men, for women had only been admitted to study for the *agrégation* in 1924, and by the late 1930s, the exam was segregated, thus for many decades confining women to success in what was taken to be an inferior female league (Imbert, 2004; Moi, 1994, 50–4).

Beauvoir's philosophy developed in conversation with these male contemporaries, whose preoccupations arose from a philosophical background that she shared. Merleau-Ponty's most influential book was *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), which attempts to characterise our perception of the external world, avoiding both empiricism, which postulates immediate causal relationships with sensory atoms (sense-data), and an intellectualism, which assumes that we have perceptual access to rationally comprehensible forms. He was deeply influenced both by Husserl's phenomenology and by gestalt psychology. Lévi-Strauss is remembered for *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (1949), which introduced structuralism and Marxism into anthropology, interpreting the mental structures and kinship relations of pre-colonial peoples through a series of dualistic oppositions and as economic relationships, in which the exchange of women is exemplary. Less famous as a philosopher, but a Marxist author of novels in the tradition of 'committed literature' to which Jean-Paul Sartre also contributed, Paul Nizan was an active communist, unlike the anti-communist Raymond Aron, who saw early the similarity between Fascism and Stalinism and is remembered as an important figure in French liberalism.¹ Of this group, only René Maheu failed to leave behind a substantial legacy of publications. An early advocate of individualism, he became director general of UNESCO in 1961, evincing, like his friends, a political commitment on an international level. Demonstrating similar concerns to these contemporaries, Sartre's major work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), explores the nature of consciousness and its relationship to the external world and to human freedom, while his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1961) attempts to fuse the existentialism of this earlier

¹ By 1955, Beauvoir includes him in her criticism of right-wing thinkers (*PolW*, 117, 127, 138).

work with Marxist concepts of historical dialectic, class consciousness, and ideology.

The works of the generation to which Beauvoir belonged thus cluster around two axes. One involves questions of the nature of the mind, perception, or consciousness, its relationship to reality, and the conflict between realism and idealism – issues that they inherited from a philosophical education deeply indebted to René Descartes's sceptical challenge, solved by the *cogito*, according to which we cannot doubt that our consciousness exists. Descartes's solution to scepticism results in his adoption of a problematic metaphysical dualism that divides mind and body into two causally disjoint substances. In the wake of Descartes and Kant, the teachers of Beauvoir's generation, who included Léon Brunschvicg and Alain (Émile-August Chartier), were Cartesian rationalists who tended towards a neo-Kantian idealism, against which Sartre, in particular, revolted. By contrast, Beauvoir was initially attracted to an idealist acceptance of the reality of mind, rather than matter, and for a time found Brunschvicg's ideas compatible with her own (*DPS*2, September 27, 1928, October 24, 1928; *CJ*, 463, 501; *MD*, 207).

The other axis that preoccupied members of this generation concerned the political sphere, the lead up to and experience of the Second World War, the fight against Fascism, and the legacy of Marxism. They had largely rejected the existence of God, so important for the Cartesian solution to scepticism, yet were still working with the legacy of Descartes and Kant, while attempting to approach traditional metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical problems from resolutely anti-theological grounds. Their philosophy was distinctive in beginning from the experience of existing in a world of sensible phenomena. As a result, Beauvoir, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre earned the reputation of being existentialists and phenomenologists. Indeed, Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* is subtitled *An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, thus, like Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, advertising its debt to Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenology, which they exploited and developed, without being particularly faithful to the intentions or conclusions of either of these German thinkers. The label 'existentialist', however, was one that was only applied to their works after the Second World War. It captured, in particular, the thought, which Beauvoir attributes to Heidegger and which Sartre develops in his own way in *Being and Nothingness*, that 'existence precedes essence'. That is to say, the existence of consciousness implies its essence; our nature is not something that precedes us – found, for instance, eternally in the mind of God – but is something that comes into being as a result of our existing (*PCe*, 123; Heidegger, 1962, I.i. §9, 67; Sartre, 1975, 348; 1993, Introduction, §3, xxxi).

The attitudes that make up the popular understanding of existentialism – denial of the existence of God, the consequent problem of the meaninglessness of human existence, and the absurdity of being – had been adopted by Beauvoir well before she met up with Sartre and his friends (*MD*, 228–9). Already in her first years of studying philosophy she was reading Schopenhauer, choosing to quote in her diary from his *World as Will and Representation*, ‘Existence itself, is a constant suffering, and is partly woeful, partly fearful’ (*CJ*, May 9, 1927, 336; *DPS*, 252; Schopenhauer, 1958, 3. §52.267). These diaries show her struggling with an all too common adolescent angst, vacillating between a somewhat arrogant confidence in her intellectual capacity and a sense of oppression by the demands of life. She laments ‘the metaphysical anxiety of man alone in the unknown’ (*CJ*, September 4, 1927, 403; *DPS*, 309). But she also already demonstrates a sense of responsibility for what she makes of herself:

I must affirm to myself that the truth is in my strength and not in my weakness, that this evening I am right, and not in the morning when upon opening my eyes, the anxiety of having to live again oppresses me even when the day’s program is attractive. (*CJ*, May 21, 1927, 349; *DPS*, 263)

Another influence, at this stage of her life, is the now almost entirely forgotten philosophy of Jules Lagneau, who had had a considerable influence on the philosopher Alain. She finds Lagneau’s expression ‘I have no support but my absolute despair’ beautiful (*CJ*, May 21, 1927, 348; *DPS*, 262). Already, she is committed to an attitude to life that will re-emerge in a more sophisticated form in her later writing, saying,

But knowing that this noumenal world exists, that I cannot attain, in which alone it can be explained to me why I live, I will build my life in the phenomenal world, which is nevertheless not negligible. I will take myself as an end. (*CJ*, May 21, 1927, 348; *DPS*, 262)

This renunciation of the possibility of justification coming from the world beyond human experience, an external absolute, or things as they are in themselves (the noumenal world) and its replacement with a self-justification grounded in experience (the phenomenal world) will re-emerge in more sophisticated form in Beauvoir’s later writing. The sense of the urgency of the question ‘Why do I exist?’ remains a theme even in her last novella, *Les Belles Images*, in which she puts this question in the mouth of a child and questions the capacity of consumerist society to offer an adequate response (*Ble*, 20).

The philosophy of Henri Bergson is also important for Beauvoir’s early philosophical formation (Simons, 2003). She takes from him the view that words, with their ‘well-defined outlines’, cannot capture ‘the delicate and fugitive

impressions of our individual consciousness', a thought that will also recur in her later fiction (*CJ*, August 13, 1926, 57; *DPS*, 58). This sense, that each private consciousness is closed in on itself and can never directly communicate with the consciousness of another, is part of the legacy of Descartes. It is a consequence of his dualism that while each of us knows immediately that we are thinking things, and so knows that our own ideas and impressions of the world exist, the minds of others cannot be immediately accessed. The problem of solipsism, the question of how we can know that we are not the one and only consciousness, thus looms large. Communicating with others, through the use of public, material signs, cannot give us full access to the other's private interiority. It may be because Beauvoir was already interested in this problem that her teacher, Brunschvicg, encouraged her to write a dissertation on Leibniz, who, in his *Monadology*, accepts that each individual perspective on the world is shut off from the other, constituting a 'windowless monad' that can only know its own ideas or subjective perceptions (*MD*, 266). To explain the correspondence that exists between our perceptions and those of other people, Leibniz proposes that God coordinates all the individual perspectives in harmony, so that we acquire the illusion of existing in an objectively existing material world. Beauvoir says little about this dissertation in her diaries but seems dissatisfied with Leibniz, which is understandable, given that she had lost her faith in God. So, the problem of solipsism continued to loom large for her, and she remained for some time a solipsist (*WD*, 320). The temptation to adopt a solipsistic attitude towards the world will be a feature of central characters in many of her novels. They will only be wrenched out of their solipsism by being forced to recognise the existence of the consciousness of others as it impinges on their own self-assessment and projects.

As well as tracing her philosophical formation, her student diaries are dominated by two themes that are not inherited from this philosophical background. The first is love, in particular her love for her cousin, Jacques Champigneulle, and the second the related question of our relations with others. In the autobiography that she began publishing in her fiftieth year, the relationship with Jacques plays a relatively minor role, while her friendship with Elizabeth Lacoïn, whom she calls Elizabeth Mabile, or 'Zaza', enters earlier into the account of her youth and extends throughout the narrative (*MD*, 91–6). By contrast, Jacques is presented as a cousin whom her family thought she might marry, and whom she believed, on and off, that she loved, but who also annoyed her (*MD*, 198–211, 232–4, 241–3, 263–4). Yet it is clear from the diaries she kept from 1926 to 1929 that her infatuation with him occupied a dominant, even obsessive, place in her mental life and developing sense of self during this period. She begins by being 'completely involved in the great joy' of this friendship and feeling that they have a mutual understanding, a communion of souls (*CJ*, October 29, 1926, 148; *DPS*, 142). By

November 1926, her soul's 'mystical attraction' to his soul demands a love that will never die (*CJ*, November 16, 1926, 193; *DPS*, 180). He introduced her to Alain-Fournier's novel *Le Grand Meaulnes*, and she identifies him with its eponymous hero (*MD*, 201). Her experience and account of this relationship is mediated through the works she was then reading, in particular the correspondence between Jacques Rivière and Alain-Fournier (Rivière & Alain-Fournier, 1926–8). Echoing the tortured self-affirmation of the first and the nostalgic romanticism of the second, her prose is particularly reminiscent of Alain-Fournier when she evokes soft summer evenings and tender moments shared in the Luxembourg Gardens. Rivière, who came from Bordeaux, near where she spent holidays at the Beauvoir family estate of Meyrignac, had a special significance for her, being closely bound up with her infatuation with Jacques. Rivière had been secretary of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* between 1912 and 1914, and then editor from 1919 to 1925, and through his literary criticism he introduced Beauvoir's generation to the works of Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, Sigmund Freud, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Éluard Mauriac. She later notes that when young she hardly read anything other than the writers associated with this review (*MD*, 229). It was during this period of infatuation with Jacques that she was developing her literary taste and orientation, reading and quoting from these and other similar authors, such as Paul Claudel, Maurice Barrès, André Gide, and Rainer Maria Rilke. These were members of a generation of writers whom she later characterised as having 'refused to accept the wisdom of their elders' but who 'did not attempt to find another to take its place' (*MD*, 194). Her love for this literature, which is bound up with this first early love, will endure. Traces abound in her novels as well as in her later analyses of the situation of women. Yet she would attempt to go beyond these writers by offering something to replace the traditional moralism they had rejected.

Many years later, when feminist scholars were beginning to disengage Beauvoir's ideas from those of Sartre, whose reputation and philosophy had, during the initial critical reception of their works, completely engulfed and overshadowed hers, Jessica Benjamin extracted from her the admission that, indeed, 'the problem of the consciousness of the Other, was my problem' (Benjamin & Simons, 1999, 10). The student diaries confirm that from very early on Beauvoir was drawn to the theme of 'this opposition of self and other that I felt upon starting to live' (*CJ*, July 10, 1927, 367; *DPS*, 279). In the diaries, the confused ideas that she expresses on the question of self and other are often tied to her ruminations over her relationship with Jacques, who continued to prey on her mind well into 1929. At this stage, as well as sometimes feeling a solipsistic alienation from others, she also expressed a need, in order to achieve an authentic sense of self, to depend on someone who loved her:

There is only one being who might give me back the authentic consciousness of myself, only one being who might define me and be the resistance for me to lean on, receiving my imprint, not this emptiness that lets me pass by without identifying traits that I seek almost with anxiety. I have hungered and thirsted for you, Jacques, these past few days, when I say words, there is no response, but sometimes suddenly a few words that you have really said emerge from the past with exactly your voice. (*DPS2*, March 24, 1929; *CJ*, 596–7)

She tells herself that she continues to love him, even after she becomes aware that he has had a lover, ‘Magda’, whom he abandoned and whom she meets up with, consoling herself that Jacques could not have felt the same love for this woman as he felt for her (*MD*, 315–16). Yet, although she does not admit it to herself, it is likely as a result of this discovery that by the summer of 1929 she has begun to transfer her affection from Jacques to the married René Maheu, whom she calls ‘Herbaud’ in her published autobiography and ‘Lama’ in the diaries, and who invents for her the nickname that Sartre will soon be using, ‘Castor’ (French for ‘beaver’) (*MD*, 310–14, 321–5; Kirkpatrick, 2019, 85–93). Maheu’s friendship with Sartre then leads to her intense intellectual and marginally erotic relationship with the latter, who will exercise an enormous influence on the rest of her life, while she will have a reciprocally important impact on him. Initially, she felt intellectually dominated by him, yet, at the same time, it is clear that her own intellectual self-confidence demanded a lover who could match or exceed her (*MD*, 343–4).

In the 1979 interview conducted by Margaret Simons and Jessica Benjamin, Beauvoir rather upsets them by insisting that she was a writer, not a philosopher. She was as much drawn to literature as to philosophy, and, though she underplays its significance, her first love for Jacques and the literary culture she imbibed while committed to him continues to influence her outlook throughout her career as a novelist. After meeting Sartre, her philosophical attitudes will change, but her love for literature and her early sentiments continue to bubble below the surface. She will attempt to fuse the literary and philosophical sides of her background by writing novels in which dry philosophical theory engages with rich concrete experience, as she explains in the article *Literature and Metaphysics*, in which she defends the philosophical novel, arguing that it ‘provides a disclosure of existence in a way unequalled by any other mode of expression’ (*LitM*, 1165; *LitMe*, 276). In emphasising her literary vocation and modestly declining to be considered a philosopher, Beauvoir suggests that to be a philosopher one has to build a great system; it is not enough to simply love or apply philosophical ideas (Benjamin & Simons, 1999, 11). This implies that she did not see herself as having built a philosophical system. However, in this account of her ideas, I propose that in fact, during the war, she did construct

a system as a result of her close reading of Hegel. The somewhat confused ideas that she had cobbled together concerning self and other during her university years then developed into a precise schematism, which began to emerge in the structure of her novels and which she elaborated in her more theoretical works, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*.

During the decade from 1929 to 1939, which separated their joint success in coming first (Sartre) and second (Beauvoir) in the *agrégation* and the beginning of the Second World War, both Beauvoir and Sartre would be employed as philosophy teachers, first separately, Beauvoir in Marseilles and Sartre in Le Havre, and then reunited, Beauvoir initially moving to Rouen and later both finding work in Paris. Sartre would publish his first novel, *Nausea* (1938), and a number of philosophical works, which laid the groundwork for the first parts of *Being and Nothingness*. Beauvoir's first attempt at literature, a collection of short stories, *Quand prime le spirituel*, was initially not accepted for publication and only appeared in 1979, and translated into English as, *When Things of the Spirit Come First* in 1982 (*QS*; *WS*). This early work demonstrates many of the preoccupations that had exercised her in the years prior to her relationship with Sartre, but it lacks the clear philosophical articulation that was to result from the fusion of his influence with that of Hegel. The stories build on her experiences as a student and as a young lycée teacher in provincial France. One is a fictionalised account of Zaza's relationship with Merleau-Ponty, called 'Pradelle' in the autobiography, and her tragic death from meningitis (*WS*, 119–66; *MD*, 349–60). The philosophies that had influenced her during this period are evoked. 'Marcelle', for instance, 'gazed despairingly at that stranger's body within which a soul was hidden, precious and inaccessible' (*WS*, 25), while Beauvoir evokes Bergson when 'Chantal' muses that 'dissecting our fleeting expressions, shutting them up in words, and turning them into thoughts very often means coarsely destroying the impalpable shimmer that gives them all their value' (*WS*, 55). But Beauvoir had not yet found a way to successfully integrate her philosophical ideas into her fiction. She would not achieve this until 1943, when she published *L'Invitée*, translated as *She Came to Stay* (*Inv*; *CS*).

2 Sartre and the Discovery of Hegel

Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre had a profound effect on her philosophy, but she also played an enormous part in the development of his ideas. Working on Hegel's philosophy during the first year of the war, while Sartre was first a soldier, then a prisoner of war, and so absent from Paris, Beauvoir wrote that

she worked in his name as much as in her own (*WD*, 320). This results in elements of his published work that owe a great deal to her. Revisionist interpretations of their philosophical relationship, published since the 1990s, have moved away from representing her as simply Sartre's disciple, and this is to be applauded; however, some have gone too far in the direction of denying his originality and influence on her, emphasising her impact on him, or the influence on her of other thinkers, to the exclusion of giving him credit for important aspects of the philosophy they jointly developed (Barnes, 1998–9; Fullbrook & Fullbrook, 1993; Kirkpatrick, 2019; Kruks, 1991; Simons, 1997). As a recent discussion of their relationship observes, 'their intellectual development unfolds as a complex dialogue' (Daigle, 2017, 260). Beauvoir had been exposed to similar philosophical trends before meeting Sartre. She had been trained in the same tradition as he, and many of their shared preoccupations were derived from common sources, in particular Alain, Bergson, and Nietzsche (Sartre, 2012, xv; *FA*, 23–5; *PL*, 16–18). But once their relationship had matured, Beauvoir would adopt much of Sartre's vocabulary, in particular the contingency of being and his notion that consciousness introduces nothingness into the heart of being, which without consciousness (being-for-itself) would be an undifferentiated plenitude (being-in-itself). This is related to his claim that it is by virtue of introducing negativity (nothingness) into the heart of being that humanity is not determined but is free. These ideas are intimately linked with the existentialist doctrine that the existence of human consciousness precedes any human essence. We can be conscious of laws that determine how things will act, but, in being conscious of some such law, we transcend it, for we are different from (we transcend) the thing of which we are conscious. So, Sartre concludes, while we can be conscious of laws, there can be no law of consciousness, no essence that constrains what we can become, since we constantly transcend what simply is, towards what is not (Sartre, 1993, Introduction, §3, xxxi–xxxii).

This language and orientation are particularly evident in Beauvoir's earliest published philosophical essay, *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, grounded in the question, what is worth pursuing (*PC*)? This is also the theme of her second novel, *The Blood of Others*. It is a question that became urgent for a generation that had given up the security of traditional answers offered by family, status, and religion and had then been faced with the rise of Fascism and the Second World War. Beauvoir agrees with Camus's alienated outsider that 'all those ties that others want to impose on him from the outside' are without value (*PCe*, 92). She, like Sartre, insists that it is only by making some goal one's own that it becomes worth pursuing. Value derives from the human capacity to pursue ends, to transcend what is in the light of some objective, and this is a constant

surging forward, a transcendence of what is and what has been, towards a chosen future. Those who claim that they act because God wills it or because they are determined by objective values existing in the world outside them are lying to themselves, since they choose to believe in God or the objectivity of the values that they allow to guide their actions. Ultimately, it is up to the individual to distinguish the false from the true God (*PCe*, 102–5).

In this essay, written during 1943 and published in the following year, she, like Sartre, denies that the other can rob us of our freedom. ‘The automobile and the airplane change nothing about our freedom, and the slave’s chains change nothing about it either’ (*PCe*, 124). She distinguishes the freedom intended here, the freedom to resign oneself to slavery or to revolt, from power. The freedom in question is metaphysical, not practical. Noting the close correlation between Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s views at this juncture, Sonia Kruks deems this essay to be ‘too closely aligned with the idealism and voluntarism of Sartre’s early ontology’ and suggests that, nevertheless, Beauvoir goes beyond Sartre in distinguishing metaphysical freedom from practical power, an interpretation also adopted by Ursula Tidd (Kruks, 2012, 12–13; Tidd, 2004, 34). But it is unfair to Sartre to deem him an idealist. As we have seen, Beauvoir was herself tempted by idealism before she met Sartre, while, from his earliest published works, he rejected idealism. In *L’Imagination* (1936) and *L’Imaginaire* (1940), both grounded in his thesis, Sartre had developed a theory of the difference between perception and imagination that insisted that both, as states of intentional consciousness, are experienced as directed towards objects existing in the real world. Idealism makes the chair I perceive an idea existing in my consciousness, but Sartre objects that it is ‘absurd to say the chair is in my perception’ (Sartre, 2004, 6–7). In perceiving, we are conscious of what exists outside us. But consciousness can also be directed towards things that do not exist in the present, immediately perceptible, world. Imaginary objects and images of absent things bring with them this element of non-being, nothingness, which, according to Sartre, grounds our freedom. In the introduction to *Being and Nothingness*, he argues, further, that idealism collapses, for if one claims that only ideas exist, then once one asks about the nature of the existence of the being that has those ideas, one is faced with an impasse. Either this being is itself an idea, and one is left with an evanescent set of immaterial Russian dolls – ideas containing ideas, containing ideas – or one must admit that something exists beyond ideas. Berkeley’s idealism is supported by the real existence of God and spirit, but without God, idealism collapses. The ideas that come to us from the world we perceive are clearly not within our control; their source exists independently of us, and so we can conclude that being is

something that transcends our minds – it exists in itself and does not depend on us (Sartre, 1993, Introduction, §§3–6). However, since it is what it is in-itself and cannot point beyond itself, contingent being is valueless. It is only consciousness – being in the form of being conscious of being – that introduces the nothingness that transcends what merely is and can introduce value and purpose into existence (Sartre, 1943, II.1.i, 109; 1993, 73).

Just as it is a mistake to attribute idealism to Sartre, so too it is a mistake to imply that he fails to distinguish metaphysical freedom from practical power. As Beauvoir insists, when she defends Sartre against a similar critique to Kruks's, developed by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* speaks of both freedom and facticity; of the imperative to choose and the material, social, and objective reality that constrains action and limits our power (*PolW*, 206–57). Often, we are free merely in relation to the attitude that we take to an objectively existing situation, but this does not imply that we are fully determined by that situation. These are ideas that Beauvoir and Sartre share at this period and that are at least partly original to him, though they also derive from a shared influence, that of Heidegger.

It is difficult to determine to what extent Beauvoir engaged with Heidegger independently of Sartre, for this question has only rarely been raised (Lundgren-Gothlin, 2003). A good deal of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* uses but transforms Heidegger's philosophy, in particular his speaking of nothingness. For both, the apprehension of nothingness is connected to anxiety (Heidegger, 1968, 60; Sartre, 1943, I.1.v, 64; 1993, 29). For Heidegger, nothing is the transphenomenal ground of being, while for Sartre, it is curled in the heart of being (Heidegger, 1968, 62). Heidegger attempts to escape the traditional Platonic and Cartesian philosophical stance, according to which thinking is a technique that works on a kind of being distinct from it, while Sartre remains within the Cartesian tradition but rejects substance dualism, attempting to distinguish consciousness from being-in-itself by making it no more than being's internal negation. He accuses Heidegger, in so far as he deprives *Dasein* of the features of consciousness, of turning human reality into a blind thing-like being, arguing that, in so far as human reality involves an ecstatic projection of the self, this must be a conscious projection (Sartre, 1943, II.1.i, 109–10; 1993, 73–4). Yet the language both he and Beauvoir use is often Heideggerian; in particular, their term 'réalité-humaine' is one that is taken over from the French translation of some of his works, which first appeared in 1938 (Heidegger, 1968, 14). So, on his own account and through their joint appropriation of Heideggerian terms, Sartre influenced Beauvoir. But this is not to say that he was not also influenced by her.

Beauvoir's major impact on him derives from her reading of Hegel. This results in the introduction, into an ontology that originally encompassed only being-in-itself (phenomenal being that is perceived) and being-for-itself (self-conscious being that perceives), a third ontological moment, being-for-others (consciousness of the self as an object existing for the other) (Green & Roffey, 2008; 2010; Sartre, 1993, III.i, 221–302). From July 1940 until January 1941, Beauvoir was studying and thinking about Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, using it to set up an opposition between a universal and an individual point of view. Initially, she reports finding the Hegelian idea of the unfolding of history consoling. The war overwhelmed her, presenting a moment in a universal history in which the individual is impotently swept up (*WD*, 304). Her fictional character, Jean Blomart, experiences this in *The Blood of Others*: 'war existed ... my thoughts, my desires, were no longer anything more than evanescent bubbles which vanished without leaving their mark on the world, without weighing on my soul' (*SA*, 203; *BO*, 158–9). By the end of the year, however, she had moved on from Hegel's 'historical infinity' and rediscovered a place for the individual in her world view (*WD*, 319). Now what she takes from Hegel is a possible foundation for 'a social view of the world' grounded in the mutual recognition of consciousnesses. In it, the only absolute will be 'human consciousness'. She suggests that the existentialist idea 'that human reality (réalité-humaine) is nothing other than what it *makes itself* be, that toward which it transcends itself' can be combined with 'the exigency of *mutual recognition* of consciousnesses' in order to provide an existentialist humanism that is more satisfactory than Sartre's anti-humanism, as expressed in *Nausea* (*WD*, 319–20). The metaphysical doctrine of human freedom thus nurtures the political doctrine that society should be governed by the mutual recognition of the freedom of consciousnesses. But Hegel also offers the germ of an account of why this is so difficult to achieve.

The Hegel to whom she was introduced at this period was that of Jean Hyppolite's recent French translation of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and Jean Wahl's *Le malheur de la conscience dans la philosophie de Hegel* (1929). Wahl emphasises the theological and romantic aspects of Hegel's thought: 'One motif runs from the beginning to the end of his thought, that of division, of sin, of pain and little by little it transforms into that of reconciliation and blessedness' (Wahl, 1951, 14). This motif, so reminiscent of themes found in Beauvoir's early diaries, must have drawn her to Hegel, and she was able to extract from his *Phenomenology* a much clearer formulation of the relationship of self to other than that found in these youthful musings. Central to this formulation is a reading of sections of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* devoted to self-consciousness, in particular that on the master and slave or 'lordship and

bondage' and the treatment of stoicism, scepticism, and the unhappy consciousness (Hegel, 1977, §§166–230, 104–38). It is perhaps worth noting that Hegel distinguishes perceptual consciousness from full self-consciousness more clearly than Sartre does. According to Sartre, consciousness is already consciousness through and through (Sartre, 1993, xxxi). Even when it is pre-reflective, it has within it a capacity to be reflective, and so brings with it self-consciousness. This constitutes a problem for Sartre's overall metaphysics, since animals plausibly have perceptual consciousness, but they are not metaphysically free. This is a significant failure, since, according to Sartre, consciousness brings with it freedom. Hegel, on the other hand, distinguishes the kind of perceptual consciousness that we share with animals from the sophisticated self-consciousness that we have as humans. Beauvoir does not initially mark this difference that exists between Sartre and Hegel, but instead develops a modified Hegelianism incorporating Sartrean assumptions. For Sartre, since consciousness is always consciousness of something other than consciousness – an object of consciousness that exists outside it – what we identify as the self is actually an ego, an imaginary object with which we identify. For Hegel, self-consciousness exists and can know itself, a position that Sartre rejects (Sartre, 1993, III.i.3, 235–44).

Hegel begins from a rather different place to Sartre, but one that is nevertheless compatible with the Sartrean idea of consciousness as the negation of being-in-itself. Self-consciousness, according to Hegel, begins as '*Desire in general*' (Hegel, 1977, §166, 105). Consciousness as self-consciousness is not just passive consciousness of perceptual objects, which are different from the conscious being, but is consciousness of the self's desire for the perceived objects, in particular as objects that the self lacks and desires to consume. As a living thing, '*being for itself* . . . comes forward in antithesis to the universal substance . . . [and] preserves itself by separating itself from this inorganic nature, and by consuming it' (Hegel, 1977, §171, 107). Self-consciousness, as life, described by Hegel in the subsequent sections, is very close to Sartrean consciousness, it is '*simple being-for-itself, self-equal through the exclusion from itself of everything else*' (Hegel, 1977, §186, 113). Other self-conscious beings (if they exist) do not exist for this self-consciousness as self-consciousnesses, but only as objects of consciousness. One could call this the state of solipsistic self-consciousness, the state that had initially attracted Beauvoir. For Hegel, this is a kind of unconscious self-consciousness, for he claims that it is only when a self-consciousness exists for another self-consciousness that '*the unity of itself in its otherness*' becomes explicit for it (Hegel, 1977, §177, 110). He promises a higher self-consciousness, which is,

the experience of what Spirit is – this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’. It is in self-consciousness, in the Notion of Spirit, that consciousness first finds its turning point, where it leaves behind the colourful show of the sensuous here-and-now and the nightlike void of the supersensible beyond, and steps out into the spiritual daylight of the present. (Hegel, 1977, §177, 110–11)

For Beauvoir and for Sartre, this resolution of the separation of self-consciousnesses in Absolute Spirit is a consoling myth. Consciousness, being mere negation of being-in-itself, is self-conscious but cannot be conscious of another consciousness. To be conscious of something is to be conscious of it as an object. So, although Beauvoir will adapt ideas, which for Hegel are steps on the path to the mutual recognition of self-consciousnesses, both she and Sartre will retain in their philosophies elements of the unbroachable separation of consciousnesses, which is the legacy of the Cartesian origins of their philosophy.

In the influential passages on lordship and bondage that follow his description of self-consciousness as desire, Hegel sees himself as tracing steps that will progress towards the unity of the I and the We. For Beauvoir, and even more clearly for Sartre, the forms of self-consciousness that he describes in these passages become two ineluctable moments in the human experience of the self, between which we ambiguously vacillate but which we can never completely transcend. Beginning from the solipsistic, individual, self-consciousness that is simple being-for-itself, Hegel describes the other self-consciousness as like an ordinary object (Hegel, 1977, §186, 113). At this point Hegel claims that for the truth of an individual’s self-consciousness to be objectively recognised, the self-consciousness of the other must also be recognised. He then introduces the rather strange idea that it is out of a life and death struggle, in which one consciousness seeks the death of the other, that the aggressor consciousness also stakes its life and so, in a sense, recognises the truth of its own self-consciousness as a living thing (Hegel, 1977, §187, 113–14). ‘Life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness’ (Hegel, 1977, §189, 115). But the death of the adversary robs the victor of this external recognition of the truth of its self-consciousness. It is only in submitting, suing for life and accepting slavery, rather than death, that the simple unity of self-consciousness transforms into two ‘essential moments’:

One is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman. (Hegel, 1977, §189, 115)

These two moments of self-consciousness will be put to use by Beauvoir in order to account for the situation of women. But before adapting them as the basis for her broad sociological thesis, she used them to structure her account of a series of fractured personal relationships in her first published novel, *She Came to Stay* (*Inv*; *CS*).

As with her earlier suite of stories, this novel is grounded in her own experience, a triangular relationship that developed between Sartre, Beauvoir, and Olga Kosakiewicz, while Beauvoir was teaching at Rouen, where Olga was a student. This was to develop into a four way relationship once Jacques-Laurent Bost entered the scene (Kirkpatrick 2019, 137–60). The novel opens with Françoise walking through a darkened theatre. Things jump into existence as she sees them: ‘when she was not there, the smell of dust, the half-light, and their forlorn solitude did not exist for anyone; they did not exist at all’ (*CS*, 1). She lives in a solipsistic universe in which she ‘wants to be everything’ (*FCh*, I.92; *FC*, 70–1). Françoise loves Pierre, feeling secure in herself as a result of this love, but this naïve solipsism is destroyed by the appearance of Xavière. At first, Françoise treats her with indifference, but as she begins to impose her own point of view on things, her judgements cannot be ignored. By the end of the third chapter of part one, Françoise cannot deny Xavière’s concrete existence; by the end of the fourth chapter of part two, she finds the recognition of this independent consciousness intolerable (*CS*, 61, 296–7). As a relationship between Xavière and Pierre begins to develop, Françoise becomes insecure; realising that she has become dependent on him, she attempts to retain her independence (*CS*, 108–9). Indeed, it seems that she is able to avenge herself against Xavière, not only by retaining Pierre’s love, but also by stealing from her Gerbert, with whom Xavière has begun a new relationship. But her duplicity is discovered, and unable to face the harsh judgement that she knows that she well deserves, Françoise retains her dominance by turning on the gas and killing Xavière in an act of destructive hate (*CS*, 402–9).

In an early analysis of this novel, Hazel Barnes showed how well the various attitudes expressed by these characters map onto the description of concrete relations with others, as described in *Being and Nothingness* (Barnes, 1959). But rather than simply being an application of Sartre’s philosophy, as Barnes assumed, we should see the schema applied there by Beauvoir, and also developed by Sartre, as grounded in her reading of Hegel. Hegel’s ‘independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself’, the consciousness of the master, becomes Sartre’s freedom that confronts the Other and makes it ‘a transcendence transcended’, as expressed in indifference, desire, sadism, and hate (Sartre, 1993, III.iii.2, 379), while Hegel’s slave consciousness, ‘the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for

another', becomes an attitude to the Other in which 'I make the Other the foundation of my being' expressed in love, language, and masochism (Sartre, 1993, III.iii.1, 364–5). Françoise exemplifies both forms of consciousness: she is the dependent consciousness in relation to Pierre, but in her relation to Xavière, both in her first indifference and later in her destructive act of hate, she attempts to transcend the other's transcendence. At the same time, there are elements in the novel that are not found in Sartre's adaptation of Hegel; in particular, the characterisation of love, as Françoise initially imagines it, as the unification of the consciousnesses of the lovers, does not correspond to anything found in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

The way that Beauvoir describes the relationship that she developed with Sartre has elements in common with the way in which she represents Françoise's love for Pierre. She and Sartre have so assiduously 'always criticized, corrected or ratified each other's thought that we might almost to be said to think in common' (*FCh*, II.489; *FC*, 659). But she also points out that, although their writings have sprung from a common ground, their temperaments are quite different and their writings 'almost totally dissimilar' (*FCh*, II.490; *FC*, 659). The equal intellectual relationship that she attempted to forge with him has, without her acknowledging it, elements of the Hegelian 'unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses', the I that is We and We that is I. This dream of unity in division appears far more insistently in Beauvoir's writing than in Sartre's, capturing, perhaps, what she imagined to be an authentic love.

In a letter to Sartre written during the war, Beauvoir had said, 'I would so much like us to develop a confrontation of your ideas on nothingness, being in-itself and being for-itself and the ideas of Hegel' (*LS*, 181–2). What emerged in Sartre's work, as a result of this confrontation, was a form of truncated dialectic, in which the two forms of self-consciousness that, for Hegel, emerge out of a life and death struggle, are never transcended but remain forever attitudes that individuals (at least those in bad faith) adopt towards each other. Significant liberties are taken by the existentialists with the Hegelian schema. The conflict assumed is no longer necessarily the result of a life and death struggle but, according to Sartre, emerges from the character of consciousness itself, which, he assumes, tends towards a solipsistic individualism that naturally wants to be sovereign, thus being threatened by the recognition of the existence of an external self-consciousness that promises to transform the conscious subject, experiencing the look of the other, into an object.

Beauvoir had continued the letter to Sartre, quoted above, by explaining that 'Hegel transforms into joy that which is with you more sombre and despairing. And it seems to me that both are true, and I would like to find

a point of equilibrium' (LS, 182). She was attracted to the possibility of an ethic grounded in some form of mutual recognition, and in her longest philosophical essay, *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*, translated as *An Ethics of Ambiguity*, she initially sets out to show how the existentialist emphasis on the isolation and separateness of the individual can nevertheless be made compatible with a universal ethic applicable to all (MA, 25; EA, 18). She is later critical of this essay, for the position it develops is arguably too abstract to be compelling; she condemns it for offering a solution to the ethical problem 'as hollow as the Kantian maxims' (FCh, I.99; FC, 76). Yet it contains the fullest outline of the existentialist humanism to which she adhered at that time and that she outlined as the joint position of a 'we' that encompassed Sartre. The ambiguity of the title is that of the human condition, of freedom and facticity and of the individual within the collective. For 'the privilege, which [humanity] 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). The principle on which Beauvoir attempts to build an ethic is one of honesty. If we are, as is claimed, metaphysically ambiguous, we should not flee this ambiguity but 'assume' it. But what does this mean? There are two ways in which individuals are tempted to flee their ambiguity: one is to deny their freedom, the other to deny the reality of the situation in which they find themselves. On the moral plane, the first form of bad faith involves fleeing freedom. It is the attitude of Sartre's 'serious' person, who claims that values exist in the external world and determine action, as he describes in *Being and Nothingness*, which Beauvoir calls, 'in large part a description of the serious man and his universe' (EA, 46). A serious attitude lies behind many of the most atrocious acts committed by humans, who, by claiming that their acts are necessary in the light of absolute values, absolve themselves from responsibility for their free choices. In the critique of seriousness one can read an analysis of the attitude that made Nazism possible. It is also the attitude of the inquisitor or, more recently, of the Islamic jihadist. Serious individuals appeal to external values, which compel their subjection. Diametrically opposed to this, but in a sense equally mistaken, is the nihilist, who, realising that there are no absolute objective values, concludes that anything is acceptable. This involves the denial of the reality of the situation in which we find ourselves, in which acts have consequences for other people: 'the nihilist is a systematic rejection of the world and man' (EA, 57). One can characterise these two ethical attitudes as corresponding to dogmatism and scepticism more generally, and in attempting to formulate what she takes to be an authentic ethical attitude, Beauvoir employs an

ethical correlate of Husserl's *epoché*, the suspension of belief that he recommends as a means of moving from scepticism to well-grounded belief. In the ethical sphere, this involves a 'conversion',

just as phenomenological reduction prevents the errors of dogmatism by suspending all affirmation concerning the mode of reality of the external world, whose flesh and bone presence the reduction does not, however, contest, so existentialist conversion does not suppress my instincts, desires, plans, and passions. It merely prevents any possibility of failure by refusing to set up as absolutes the ends toward which my transcendence thrusts itself, and by considering them in their connection with the freedom which projects them. (*EA*, 14)

Sartre will also explore the possibility of such an ethical 'conversion' in his *Notebooks for an Ethics* and will conclude that one cannot be converted alone (Sartre, 1992). In 1946, Beauvoir apparently considers it to be an attitude that individuals can and ought to freely adopt, though later in the essay, when she discusses the concept of oppression, she comments, 'for a liberating action to be a thoroughly moral action, it would have to be achieved through a conversion of the oppressors: there would then be a reconciliation of all freedoms. But no one any longer dares to abandon himself today to these utopian reveries' (*EA*, 96–7). Since she also claims that the oppressed find themselves in situations in which there is no real possibility of adopting an authentic attitude, it becomes difficult to conceive in what kind of situation authenticity is possible.

One might, nevertheless, find in Beauvoir's description of this 'conversion' an undertheorised divergence from Sartre. In his *Sketch for a Theory of Emotions*, he had treated emotional states as forms of play acting, suggesting that we choose to be sad, angry, or offended (Sartre, 1939; 1962). Counterintuitively, he suggests we are free, even in what we feel. Beauvoir is far more attuned to the way in which emotion wells up and takes us over, as she has a novelist's appreciation of the phenomenology of emotion. Thus, in the quoted passage, she does not deny the reality of instincts, desires, and passions, nor assume that we can choose what we feel. Rather, our freedom and capacity for authenticity consists in the ability to disengage from our emotional impulses – just as Husserl claims we can suspend belief in the apparent objectivity of perception – so as to more thoroughly ground them. In her novels and works on women and ageing, what one is made to feel about oneself by others, its emotional resonance, is an important aspect of the way in which not all situations are equal in regard to freedom.

The war had united different groups in France in opposition to Nazism, but with the liberation they had begun to disagree over the direction that left-wing politics should take. Written at this moment of history, *The Ethics of*

Ambiguity offers the first steps of an existentialist engagement with Marxism, which will come to dominate Beauvoir and Sartre's attention in the coming years. Beauvoir represents the Marxists as similar to the existentialists in regarding value as the creation of humanity but as differing from them in so far as they insist that what humans desire is not a free expression of the will. Rather, for them, what is willed is 'the reflection of objective conditions by which the situation of the class or the people under consideration is defined' (*EA*, 19). The issue of individual freedom 'is the essential point on which existentialist ontology is opposed to dialectical materialism' (*EA*, 20). Yet at the same time Beauvoir begins to utilise concepts of class, race, and oppression borrowed from Marxism and other movements of liberation, which sit rather uneasily with the existentialist emphasis on metaphysical liberty. She is not unaware of this tension, so one way of reading the *Ethics of Ambiguity* is as an attempt to deal with certain limitations of Sartre's existentialism, both as found in his early writing and as it had developed out of the confrontation of that early philosophy with Hegel's theories. Three related issues arise. First, if freedom is a metaphysical characteristic that cannot be lost, how can one will to be free? Second, since children are conscious, should they not also be considered free and responsible? But we don't consider them to be morally responsible. And third, if we are metaphysically free, how can one account for oppression, characterised as the loss of freedom? In another author's hands, these questions might be developed into devastating critiques of Sartre's metaphysics of consciousness and freedom, but Beauvoir attempts to offer a reconciliation of the tensions involved, though, arguably, they continue to reverberate throughout her subsequent writings, as well as in the reception of her philosophy.

The answer to the first of these questions has already been indicated. While there is justice in the remark that 'It is contradictory to set freedom up as something conquered if at first it is something given', it is also the case that individuals are tempted to deny their freedom. 'One can choose not to will oneself free. In laziness, heedlessness, capriciousness, cowardice, impatience, one contests the meaning of the project at the very moment that one defines it' (*EA*, 25). Beauvoir's answer to the second question attempts to flesh out how a situation in which one denies one's freedom can arise. The child exists in a world in which values are given, they form the structure of the child's world, and they cannot be chosen (*EA*, 35). It is only as it matures that a child comes to see itself as a temporal entity, with a past and a future, and in recognising its temporality it is faced with the imperative to create a future for itself. Then it is forced to either accept or question the values that surround it, so two options open up: one is to accept that it is free and

responsible, in so far as it chooses to adopt or reject the given values; the other is to fail to acknowledge this freedom, to flee the responsibilities of adulthood, and to mire itself in one of the inauthentic attitudes that Beauvoir goes on to describe. In effect, Beauvoir here introduces a distinction between metaphysical and moral freedom, which appears to be at odds with Sartre's identification of freedom with consciousness. Alternatively, she can be read as introducing a clarification, which makes explicit an element of his theory glossed over by Sartre, that saves his account from the objection raised earlier, that since animals and children are conscious, they ought, on his account, to be free. It is clear that the negativity that consciousness brings with it, according to Sartre, is bound up with temporality; that is, the capacity of consciousness to think of a time that is not yet, that is no longer, or that has never been. Arguably, animals and children, although they have perceptual consciousness, lack a fully developed temporal consciousness of this kind, which would allow them to transcend the present moment and project themselves into the future, or in imagination into various possible futures.² It is only this kind of full temporal self-consciousness that brings with it freedom, and this is something that children develop but also something that humans can deny when they choose not to recognise that various options are available to them. Beauvoir's understanding of conscious transcendence thus has Heideggerian as well as Hegelian roots, since it is the former who insists on the temporal structure of human reality as the opening up of possibilities or the revealing of being.

This elaboration, or modification, of the notion of consciousness allows Beauvoir to introduce the idea that not all situations are equally compatible with the exercise of freedom, and so to offer an account of oppression. There are some situations in which alternative possibilities do not present themselves. Beauvoir suggests that women, who were historically confined to a harem, and southern slaves were enclosed in such a situation (*EA*, 38). Not only were different possible futures physically closed off to them, but even the possibility of imagining an alternative future was unavailable. Although she does not mention them, laws prohibiting slaves from learning to read and traditions that refuse education to women fit well into this account of the nature of oppression, for such laws are intended to prevent the

² The idea that animal consciousness is completely atemporal may well be contested, since animals, for instance squirrels, apparently plan for the future and remember the past, so it can't be claimed that animals have no sense of themselves as temporal beings. Freedom, however, does seem to be intimately connected with the capacity to imagine various non-existent possible futures, and this kind of temporal consciousness does appear to be necessary and possibly sufficient for moral freedom and responsibility.

oppressed from being able to imagine alternative futures or to formulate choices, restricting their lives to present experience and confining them to a world, the shape of which is determined by others. Oppression is then characterised as the closing off of possible futures by other humans. And since it is possible for others to oppress us, and given that, as authentic free individuals, we will wish to pursue the values and futures we have chosen, consistency will require that we support the freedom of all.

My freedom, in order to fulfil itself, requires that it emerge into an open future: it is other men who open the future to me, it is they who, setting up the world of tomorrow, define my future; but if, instead of allowing me to participate in this constructive movement, they oblige me to consume my transcendence in vain, if they keep me below the level which they have conquered and on the basis of which new conquests will be achieved then they are cutting me off from the future, they are changing me into a thing. (*EA*, 82)

Since my freedom depends on how I am treated by others, I should promote the freedom of others. This is the prescriptive injunction that Beauvoir attempts to derive from the description of humanity as metaphysically free. The ethical position that emerges is therefore ‘at one with the point of view of Christian charity, the Epicurean cult of friendship, and Kantian moralism which treats each man as an end’ (*EA*, 135). But, as Beauvoir comments later, the existentialist ethic that emerges, which involves making freedom the absolute value, is hollow, for it offers no guidance with regard to the conflicts that inevitably arise between individual freedoms over the values to be pursued.

Having developed the position that there are oppressed groups, for whose members the failure to adopt an authentic attitude is not a moral failure, mired in bad faith, but is the result of oppression, Beauvoir moves on to discuss the antinomies of action. Given the situation in which the oppressed find themselves, she suggests that there is no option open to them but to revolt, but the aim of such a revolt is to constrain the freedom of the oppressors.

However, by virtue of the fact that the oppressors refuse to co-operate in the affirmation of freedom, they embody, in the eyes of all men of good will, the absurdity of facticity; by calling for the triumph of freedom over facticity, ethics also demands that they be suppressed; and since their subjectivity, by definition, escapes our control, it will be possible to act only on their objective presence; others will here have to be treated like things, with violence; the sad fact of the separation of men will thereby be confirmed. (*EA*, 97)

This paradox is so deep that it seems impossible to resolve. If freedom is understood in a libertarian manner, as an uncaused upwelling that creates value

through individual choice, while at the same time it is claimed that certain social situations can stifle freedom, it becomes almost impossible to imagine how to solve such antinomies of action. Actually, if members of an oppressed class are sufficiently aware of their oppression to be able to revolt, they must have attained the kind of temporal self-consciousness that posits a different future, and so to that extent be free. Yet, if this is so, their desire to limit the freedom of the privileged appears morally on a par with the oppressor's desire to limit their freedom. It is only by appeal to some sort of principle of justice, for instance, the idea that what is fair is that there should be the greatest extent of liberty compatible with a like liberty for all, that unjustified incursions into the freedom of others could be distinguished from legitimate claims. Yet, to set up a principle such as this as absolute would, from the existentialist point of view, be to fall back into the spirit of seriousness.

Ultimately, Beauvoir allows that this is a paradox that cannot be resolved. Since individuals have conflicting projects, 'if division and violence define war, the world has always been at war and always will be; if man is waiting for universal peace in order to establish his existence validly, he will wait indefinitely: there will never be any *other* future' (*EA*, 119). Nevertheless, since society is made up of individuals and the values that individuals adhere to are values for all that point beyond themselves towards an open future, value systems that fail to recognise the role that others play in their adoption are doomed to fail. If other consciousnesses fail to endorse the projects we choose, then our goals will die with us. No matter what the project, 'the practical attitude remains the same; we must decide upon the opportuneness of an act and attempt to measure its effectiveness without knowing all the factors that are present' (*EA*, 123). But since it is a paradox that cannot be resolved, just as the ambiguity of freedom and facticity cannot be resolved, it is a tension that has to be faced up to.

In order for the return to the positive to be genuine, it must involve negativity, it must not conceal the antinomies between means and end, present and future; they must be lived in a permanent tension; one must retreat from neither the outrage of violence nor deny it, or, which amounts to the same thing, assume it lightly. (*EA*, 133)

On the practical plane, then, the moral individual who has been converted from bad faith to authenticity will pursue their beliefs and values without giving up doubt. They will continue to question, asking, 'Am I really working for the liberation of men? Isn't this end contested by the sacrifices through which I aim at it?' Or, as Beauvoir explains in more philosophical terms, 'In setting up its ends, freedom must put them in parentheses, confront them at each moment with that absolute end which it itself constitutes, and contest, in its own name,

the means it uses to win itself' (*EA*, 133–4). Whether such an attitude can prevail against dogmatic certitude or cynical nihilism is a question that she fails to consider.

So, although at the beginning of this essay Beauvoir had claimed that 'An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existents can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all', by the end she has renounced the project of 'forging laws valid for all', offering instead the vision of the necessity of commitment to finite ends that make sense from a particular concrete point of view but that are bound to be contested by others. Taking the freedom of others seriously does not end up involving the mutual recognition of self-consciousnesses so much as the acceptance of the inevitability of conflict among consciousnesses, of which it is assumed, following Descartes, that their 'subjectivity radically signifies separation' (*EA*, 105). The existentialist adaptation of Hegel, which one finds also in Fanon, here points in the direction of a Manichaean, violent struggle, without any clear prospects for resolution (Green, 1999; Stawarska, 2020).

Three years separated the publication of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* from that of *The Second Sex*. During these years, Beauvoir visited America, became involved with the writer Nelson Algren, and published *America Day by Day* (*ADD*): an account of her rather unfavourable impressions of American chauvinism, racism, consumerism, and intellectual shallowness. While there, her introduction to US culture was partly guided by the black writer Richard Wright and his wife Ellen, whom she already knew from Paris, and she was encouraged by them to read *An American Dilemma*, which had been based on research by the Swede Gunnar Myrdal (1944). Reading it convinced her that she should broaden the scope of the essay on women that she had begun publishing in *Les Temps Modernes* and that would become *The Second Sex* (Simons, 1999, 170–1; *FM*). It also confirmed her in the view that there were analogies between racism and sexism. Myrdal comments that the 'negro' can only speak as a 'negro', 'he would seem entirely out of place if he spoke simply as a . . . citizen of America or as a man of the world' (Myrdal, 1944, 18). Similarly, Beauvoir points out that men can speak for the universal, while, when a woman speaks, she is taken to speak as a woman: 'man represents both the positive and the neuter' (*DS*, I.Intro, 14; *SSp*, 15; *SSbm*, 5). Myrdal examines 'the negro question' from a sociological point of view and takes racial difference to be socially constructed. *The Second Sex* has been read, similarly, as a sociological account of the situation of women, but reading it in this way minimises its phenomenological and existentialist underpinnings. In the following chapter, it will be analysed in the light of the philosophical schemata developed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* applied, extended, and to

an extent transformed in her account of the situation of women, which Beauvoir asserts is written from the perspective of an existentialist ethic (*DS*, I.Intro, 33; *SSp*, 27; *SSbm*, 17).

3 The Second Sex

One of the most influential philosophical works of the twentieth century, *The Second Sex* spawned a generation of feminist descendants, whose authors did not always acknowledge its influence and tended to ride rough-shod over its philosophical underpinnings (Dijkstra, 1980). Beauvoir herself is somewhat to blame for this. Although she states in her introduction that the perspective adopted is one of an ‘existentialist ethic’, she never spells out what this implies (*DS*, I.Intro, 33; *SSp*, 27; *SSbm*, 17). She also adapts and develops ideas from various philosophical, biological, anthropological, and psychoanalytic traditions that are ultimately not clearly compatible with an existentialist outlook. Nevertheless, in this, her most influential work, she put her considerable skills as a writer to use, in order to craft a compelling account of what it was to be a white, middle-class woman during the mid-twentieth century.³ Its descriptions resonated with many of those who read it, and she furnished subsequent generations of women with a vocabulary and framework that they soon put to use to articulate the situation in which they found themselves.

Central to its impact is Beauvoir’s application of Hegel’s distinction between the dependant and the independent consciousness to the situation of women and men. Adapting the words of Michelet, Benda, and Levinas, for whom woman is an Other, whose existence is relative to man, Beauvoir asserts of woman,

She is nothing other than that which man decides; thus, one calls her ‘the sex’, signifying, in so doing, that she appears to the male essentially as a sexed being; for him she is sex, so that is what she is essentially. She identifies and differentiates herself in relation to men and he does not do so in relation to her; she is the inessential presented with the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute: she is the Other. (*DS*, I.Intro, 17; *SSp*, 16; *SSbm*, 6)⁴

This is a claim that will have an incalculable impact on the development of feminism during the second half of the twentieth century. Yet, from its first articulation, it raises certain questions. In works such as *She Came to Stay*, Beauvoir had assumed that women could be the dominant, essential subject for whom others are objects – this is the attitude that Françoise attempts to maintain in relation to Xavière. Indeed, the account of the ambiguity of the

³ Some women of colour and from other cultures have questioned whether she speaks for them; others have found inspiration in her example (Gines, 2010; Perpich, 2017; Vintges, 2017).

⁴ Here and elsewhere, I have modified the available translations.

human condition that she had developed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* implied that all fully developed humans are both consciousness and matter, both subject and object. But this raises the question, how is it that women don't treat themselves as the Absolute? How is it that men are not made to define and experience themselves in relation to women? In *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir had begun to develop the idea that certain social situations prevent the possibility of experiencing oneself as a free transcendent subject, suggesting that this is the situation both for slaves and for some classes of women. *The Second Sex* extends this idea, arguing that the situation in which women find themselves is one that, in some cases, amounts to an oppression that eliminates the possibility of free self-expression, while in others it presents overwhelming temptations that encourage women to fall into the bad faith of denying their freedom (*DS*, I.Intro, 24–5; *SSp*, 20; *SSbm*, 10).

Having introduced the claim that woman is the Other of man, the inessential object in relation to the essential subject, Beauvoir turns to the question of why it is that women have not challenged the situation and made men their Other. In Hegel's dialectic, the slaves rise up, challenging the master's dominance, and a new stage of history is reached, one in which self-consciousnesses recognise themselves collectively in the Absolute Spirit. We have seen that the existentialists reject this Hegelian reconciliation of the separation of consciousnesses. Rather, according to them, the objectified and objectifying attitudes become two forms of consciousness, adopted by people in bad faith, among which individuals vacillate. When Beauvoir had applied this truncated Hegelian schematism to the situation of individuals in her novels, she had assumed that both women and men could adopt both attitudes, but in *The Second Sex* she proposes that certain social situations encourage members of certain groups to remain fixed in a particular attitude, as a result of their relationship with another group. This is what happens in the case of oppression. Beauvoir points to analogies between the situation of women and that of the proletariat under capitalism, of blacks in the USA, and of Jews in Europe. In each of these cases, members of a group find themselves represented, by members of a more powerful collectivity, as Other, as not part of the We who comprise the identity of a people. But, in each of these historical inequalities, the oppressed have more readily come together to challenge their objectification than have women. Beauvoir claims that the situation of women is singular. Whereas these other oppressions can be located at a particular historical moment and 'the opposing groups concerned were once independent of each other', in the case of women, who are identified 'by their physiological structure; as far back as history can be traced, they have always been subordinate to men; their dependence is not the consequence of an event or a becoming, it did not *happen*. It is, in part, because it does not have the

accidental character of a historical fact that alterity here appears to be an absolute' (*DS*, I.Intro, 21; *SSp*, 19; *SSbm*, 8).

The situation of women is thus, according to Beauvoir, singular. Women, she claims, 'do not use "we"; men say "women" and women adopt this word to refer to themselves; but they do not posit themselves authentically as Subjects'. She continues,

Women's actions have never been more than symbolic agitation; they have won only what men have been willing to concede to them; they have taken nothing; they have received. This is because they do not have the concrete means to come together as a unity that could posit itself in opposing itself [to some other]. They have no past, no history, no religion of their own.

(*DS*, I.Intro, 21; *SSp*, 18; *SSbm*, 8)

She continues by emphasising the incomparability of the relationship between men and women with these other historical oppressions by claiming that 'sexual difference is, in effect, a biological given, not a phase of human history' (*DS*, I. Intro, 23; *SSp*, 19; *SSbm*, 9). The opposition between the sexes developed within an original *Mitsein* or totality in which the two halves are riven together and depend on each other. Later, when she gives an account of women's history, she repeats the claim that 'the history of women was created by men' (*DS*, I.2.v, 222; *SSp*, 148; *SSbm*, 150). Men's technological advances have enfranchised contemporary women, who have 'never sought to play a role in history as a sex'. Even feminism itself had 'never been an autonomous movement'; it was merely 'an instrument in the hands of politicians' or 'an epiphenomenon reflecting a deeper social drama' (*DS*, I.2.v, 223; *SSp*, 149; *SSbm*, 151). These rather surprising conclusions are encouraged by influences that are quite alien to the existentialist perspective to which Beauvoir was explicitly committed, in particular, her encounter with Lévi-Strauss's *Elementary Structures of Kinship* (Lévi-Strauss, 1949).

The first results of Beauvoir's exploration of female identity were published in *Les Temps Modernes* as 'Les femmes et les mythes' (*FM*). Already, in these early essays, she had developed the idea that women are the Other of men (*FM*, 1923). In *The Second Sex* this was reinforced by being combined with Lévi-Strauss's claim that women are objects of exchange. As she tells us in her autobiography, she learnt that Lévi-Strauss had criticised aspects of the early essays, and as a result she contacted him and read a draft of his *Elementary Structures* before it was published (*FCh*, I.235; *FC*, 177). Later, she also published a laudatory review of this work, in which she had found confirmation of the claim that 'as far back as history can be traced' women have always been subordinate to men. There, following Lévi-Strauss, she asserts, 'relations of

reciprocity and exchange do not appear between men and women; they are established between men *by means of women*. A profound asymmetry between the sexes exists and always has existed' (*RES*, 60–1). She follows him in rejecting the idea that there was an earlier stage of culture in which women were dominant, and she accepts that, whether they are matrilineal or patrilineal, 'All matrimonial systems entail that women are given by certain males to other males' (*RES*, 61). The result encourages a reading of *The Second Sex* according to which to say that women are the inessential, or the Other of man, goes beyond the claim that they are tempted to experience themselves as dependent consciousnesses and implies a reading of women's situation according to which they are merely objects of exchange in cultures that completely depend on men's interests, language, and sexual desires. This results in later developments of the idea that culture is grounded in a contract between men, while woman is the Other of man, that problematise the possibility of any authentic female subjectivity (Irigaray, 1985a; 1985b; Pateman, 1988).

As Beauvoir herself had emphasised in *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*, each individual is thrown into history at a particular moment and pursues their finite projects without any certainty that others will collude in achieving them (*PCe*, 140). This applies as much to her own situation as to any other, and one can question whether, in following Lévi-Strauss so faithfully, she was not blinkered by the limitations of the historical moment in which she found herself. The elite university scholarship into which she had been inducted, during the first half of the twentieth century, assumed that culture had been created by men. Early anthropologists had acted on this assumption and in general confined their questioning of indigenous peoples to elite, older males, to a certain extent by necessity, since, as most of the anthropologists were men, they had little access to the women's sphere in what were generally sex segregated societies. So, men's views of women were recorded by anthropologists, and the theory of the maleness of culture was reinforced by the self-perpetuating method of excluding women from cultural investigation. This tendency was already being challenged during the 1940s by a few women, such as Margaret Mead (1943). Even earlier, Bronislaw Malinowski, whose works Beauvoir knew, had been interested in the extent of women's agency in matrilineal societies (Malinowski, 1937; *DS*, I.3.i, 259; *SSp*, 171; *SSbm*, 177). But it was not until the 1970s that female anthropologists and socio-biologists began to explicitly question the male bias in anthropology and evolutionary history and to engage seriously with female informants, exploring women's own accounts of their participation in cultural activities, taking their estimation of the significance of their role in the maintenance of their culture as authoritative, and theorising them as active competitors for resources in the process of evolution (Bell, 1983; Hrdy, 2000;

Sanday, 1981). These authors begin to describe how women actively participate in the complex structures of reciprocity between skins, generations, and sexes, which meld together indigenous societies, in which each individual participates in a web of complex oppositions between self and other, reciprocity and taboo. They began to propose that women actively engage in competition with men and with other women for resources, and that marriage and kinship systems achieve various kinds of equilibria among male and female interests. However, none of this later, feminist-inspired anthropology was available to Beauvoir.

The questionable objectivity of the male-centred anthropology to which Beauvoir was exposed is a symptom of a more general feature of her historical situation. As a member of a first small cohort of women initiated into what had, up until then, been a completely male-dominated academy, the philosophical works that she was exposed to were all written by men, the culture was male dominated, and the place of women within intellectual history minimised. Although she was aware of the activities of a large number of historical women, in particular poets, authors, and noblewomen, who had been influential from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, and whose names she catalogues in her sections on history, she does not allow that these women had achieved any significant cultural impact (*DS*, I.2.v, 222–31; *SSp*, 159–68; *SSbm*, 150–9). She mentions Christine de Pizan, whose *Letter of the God of Love* she knew. Yet, she had not read it sufficiently carefully to have noticed that, three hundred years before Poulain de la Barre – whom she quotes with approbation for saying that men's accounts of women are suspect, because men are both judge and party – Christine had already commented that 'men plead their own cases', observing that, had women written books, they would have written them differently (*DS*, I. Intro, 24; *SSp*, 21; *SSbm*, 10–11; Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 1998, 22–3). Beauvoir is well aware of Marguerite of Navarre's *Heptameron*, which she had studied at university, saying of her that she was 'the writer who best served the cause of her sex', but, as with other works by women, she does not attribute to it any significant impact, though it could be argued that its expropriation of Platonic ideas, in order to elevate the status of married love, made a decisive step in the direction of establishing women's image as men's spiritual equals and encouraged the development of conjugal marriage (*MD*, 171; *DS*, I.2.iv, 185; *SSp*, 129; *SSbm*, 125). Beauvoir knows the history of the women's suffrage movement, yet, in the end, she sums up her account of women's history with the assessment that 'a few isolated individuals – Sappho, Christine de Pizan, Mary Wollstonecraft, Olympe de Gouges – protested the harshness of their fate', but 'when they intervened in world affairs, it was in concert with men and from a masculine point of view' (*DS*, I.2.v, 222–3; *SSp*, 148–9; *SSbm*, 150–1). Here, the historical moment in which she wrote and the application of the modified

Hegelian schematism that she applied prevented Beauvoir from taking seriously the ample evidence of past women's striving for, and, to a certain extent, achievement of, transcendence. Indeed, ironically, the accusation of writing from a masculine point of view would, in turn, soon be levelled against her by feminists who had concluded, on the basis of the diffusion of her own schematism, that to pursue transcendence was, inherently, to adopt a masculine standpoint (Irigaray, 1985a; Lloyd, 1984; Seigfried, 1984; 1985).

Yet, Beauvoir herself was the beneficiary of a long history of women writers and activists who had challenged the derogatory stereotypes of women promoted by some men and who had argued for the education of women, in order to give them the same capacity to develop themselves as was accorded to men. Many women had criticised male domination in marriage and had offered alternative models of egalitarian friendship between the sexes that, arguably, led to a transformation of European culture and, in particular, the development of more egalitarian marriage relations (Green, 2021). As the cohort of female scholars grew, during the twentieth and twenty-first century, new research, often undertaken by women, made available a much richer selection of texts by past women than was available to Beauvoir. When she undertook her research in the Bibliothèque nationale, she would have been able to read a nineteenth-century collection of Christine de Pizan's poetry and Suzanne Solente's recent edition of her history of Charles V of France (Pizan, 1886; 1936–40). She might have come across extracts of other works by Pizan in Louise Keralio-Robert's multi-volume collection of the best works written in French by women, though I have not found mention of this work or its author in her publications (Keralio-Robert, 1786–9). But she would not have known any modern or even old French edition of Christine's most feminist work, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, which was not edited until 1975, when Maureen Cheney-Curnow undertook the task for a thesis at Vanderbilt University, in Tennessee. This book had never been printed in French, although an English translation had been published in 1521 (Curnow, 1975; Pizan, 1521). Since the publication of *The Second Sex*, the works of many of the women whom Beauvoir mentions in passing have become more widely available, works by other women have gained attention, and women's intellectual history has blossomed (Broad & Green, 2009; Green, 2014; Waithe, 1987–95). It no longer seems plausible to say that women have no history of their own, either in the sense of having written no history or in the sense of never having acted to make history. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that men have dominated past cultures and that any woman who wishes to participate in the production of the narrative through which her culture represents itself will have to engage with works written by men. Women may well figure in those works as the Other, but this does not imply that the women who engage with

them lack their own independent subject status. In fact, often, they have been spurred to write as a result of the false, derogatory images of women concocted by men. Yet the proposition that Beauvoir developed clearly spoke to women of her time, and it enabled her to develop an original account of the history of Western ideas, elements of which have since been taken up and developed, both by subsequent scholars and in popular culture.

Beauvoir's aim, in the first chapters of her work, is guided by the existentialist assumption that human culture and values are not determined by exterior conditions, despite the fact that material realities cannot be denied. She first considers biology, concluding that sexual difference is a reality, that their biology is 'an essential element of women's situation', and that the differences between male and female bodies implies that their hold on the world differs. Nevertheless, biology does not imply any fixed destiny, nor does it explain, according to what she says at this point, how woman has been subjugated or why she is the Other (*DS*, I.1.i, 78–9; *SSp*, 60; *SSbm*, 44–5). Similarly, with psychoanalysis, though it can provide an account of how the differences between male and female sexual anatomy – the possession or lack of the penis – can result in differences in the male and female subjective experience of the self, it cannot explain why women become the Other. Nor can the Marxist perspective, developed by Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884), which places the development of tools and consequent rise of private property at the heart of female subjection, really account for women's status as the Other. Beauvoir concludes that the phallus, the tool, and biological strength cannot by themselves explain women's status, arguing that they must be integrated into the overall perspective of human existence, 'the fundamental project of the existent transcending itself towards being' (*DS*, I.1.iii, 107–8; *SSp*, 86; *SSbm*, 69). This she sets out to do in her chapters on history.

In these chapters, she follows the thread offered by Hegel in order to develop an original account of the unfolding of history, which might be called a dialectic of sex. She does not use this term, which was coined twenty-one years later by Shulamith Firestone ([Firestone, 1970](#)). Rejecting the nineteenth-century proposal that there had been an ancient matriarchy, which had been used by Engels to claim that, with the rise of private property, there had been a historical defeat of women, Beauvoir asserts that the 'world has always belonged to males' (*DS*, I.2.i, 111; *SSp*, 87; *SSbm*, 73). She then offers her 'key to the whole mystery', an adaptation of Hegel's dialectic that 'explains' how it is that men develop an independent consciousness. This happens because it is in risking life that men come to recognise that life is not the highest value but is something that can serve greater ends (*DS*, I.2.i, 115; *SSp*, 89; *SSbm*, 76). Woman, she postulates, is biologically destined to repeat life, while at the same time she recognises that

life has no value in itself, apart from these higher ends to which men aspire. These ends, which are recognised in the conscious sacrifice of life, are not concretely hers, since she 'is originally an existent who gives life and does not risk her life; there has never been a combat between the male and her'. Thus, Beauvoir concludes that Hegel's definition of the dependent consciousness, 'whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another', applies particularly well to women (*DS*, I.2.i, 116; *SSp*, 90–1; *SSbm*, 76–7). This is not to say that women are completely unconscious – they do wish to transcend the present towards an open future – but Beauvoir asserts that it is men who concretely attain these values. This results in a situation that Beauvoir suggests is different from slavery. Rather, in transcending life and affirming spirit, men open up the future towards which women also aspire. Yet, paradoxically, the values that she vicariously adopts imply the subjection of nature and of woman.

One might question whether this is in fact an accurate representation of the values of all cultures. Many ancient societies appear to have valued nature, to have seen themselves as belonging to the land, or to have worshipped natural fecundity in various forms of goddess or great mother. But Beauvoir follows Lévi-Strauss in denying that these facts demonstrate that women ever wielded political power, repeating his assertion that 'authority, whether public or merely social, always belongs to men' (*DS*, I.2.ii, 124; *SSp*, 96; *SSbm*, 82). Women are goods that men possess, that are exchanged among men, so they are a kind of Absolute Other, and 'inessential', not other subjects with whom reciprocal relations can be set up. Even when nature and her goddesses are worshipped, it is men who set them up as idols. When he posits her as the essential, he is the one who is actually the essential. He is consciously creating values, which he can and will voluntarily overthrow as his early sense of his dependence in the face of unpredictable nature transforms, with the development of instruments and agriculture, into a sense of his capacity to dominate and control nature (*DS*, I.2.ii, 127; *SSp*, 98–9; *SSbm*, 84–5). In Beauvoir's hands, then, the rejected historical overthrow of women becomes a development in the values that men have created, which, at an early stage, involved their sense of dependence on powerful maternal, natural forces and later their overcoming of these forces; 'man frees himself definitively from subjugation by women' and women become no more than servants, initiating legends that capture men's representation of their triumph over nature in which 'the forces of order and light win over feminine chaos' (*DS*, I.2.ii, 135; *SSp*, 103–4; *SSbm*, 90–1).

Although Beauvoir had denied that biology is destiny, there is a sense in which her transformed Hegelianism relies on biological difference to explain the purported fact that women have always been the Other of men and have never set themselves up as possessing a countervailing subjectivity. Men are

hunters and warriors, women repeaters of mere species life. Indeed, despite the lip service that she gives to the existentialist account of metaphysical freedom, she also claims that ‘the deep reason which from the beginning of history condemned woman to domestic work and prevented her from taking part in the construction of the world, is her subjection to the generative function’ (*DS*, I.2.v, 203; *SSp*, 139; *SSbm*, 138). One reaction to this analysis was that offered by Firestone: that women’s liberation would only happen with the transcendence of their biology (Firestone, 1970). But Firestone’s prescriptions were fanciful, and it is questionable whether either women or men could deny the reality of sexual difference without falling into bad faith. In fact, Beauvoir seems to be reading back into prehistory features of women’s situation that only arose after the establishment of herding and enclosed agriculture. Contemporary research into precolonial Australian societies, for instance, show that women’s activities – gathering and cultivating roots and grains in their natural environmental ranges, hunting small animals, and fishing (including collecting shellfish, crustaceans, and eels, often through the use of traps, nets, and weirs) – produced the bulk of the society’s food. There was no demos for women to be confined to, and the construction of their social world was exercised as much in their production of cloaks, baskets, nets, body art, other forms of artefact, and ceremonial and daily ornamentation as in men’s participation in ceremony, tool making, and hunting. If there is an element of truth in the claim that men have always wielded authority, it resides in the facts that political power has been upheld by force, that it is men who have banded together to engage in warfare with other groups of men, and that it is men who most often use physical strength to enforce the law and dominate weaker elements within society. This feature of human societies can possibly be explained on the basis of biology, but does this justify the complete discounting of female cultural activity and authority that Beauvoir, following Lévi-Strauss, postulates?

In the introduction to her discussion of myths, Beauvoir adds a new element to the transformed Hegelian schematism that she had developed. She returns to the passage from *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which Hegel claims that ‘being for itself ... comes forward in antithesis to the universal substance ... [and] preserves itself by separating itself from this inorganic nature, and by consuming it’, noting that this process does not supply consciousness with a stable sense of itself, for in consuming the object it desires, consciousness destroys it (Hegel, 1977, §171, 107). This throws it back into its solipsistic immanence (*DS*, I.3.i, 239; *SSp*, 159; *SSbm*, 163). Beauvoir then takes from Hegel the idea that consciousness only recognises itself by differentiating itself from something that it is not – it requires another consciousness, which it recognises as

consciousness, but which is not identical to it, to reflect it. 'It is the existence of other men which wrests each man from his immanence and allows him to achieve the truth of his being, to fulfil himself as transcendence, as escape towards an end, as project' (*DS*, I.3.i, 239–40; *SSp*, 159; *SSbm*, 163). But this results in the conflict between consciousnesses, in which each attempts to enslave or objectify the other. Although the resulting unhappy conflict between conscious selves could be overcome by a conversion of the kind she had discussed in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, where each would posit both the other and itself as equally consciousness and object, such authenticity is difficult to achieve. Instead, she postulates, men find in women another consciousness that does not demand reciprocal recognition. Intermediary between unresponsive nature and an equal who would demand recognition, she allows him to escape the dialectic of master and slave (*DS*, I.3.i, 241; *SSp*, 172; *SSbm*, 164). She is an object of desire that can be consumed without thereby disappearing. Thus, she appears to be an Absolute Other who never demands reciprocity. Although she is like the slave in so far as she is the dependent consciousness, she is not like Hegel's slave, for she has never entered into conflict with men, and this gives her relationship with men a special character.

The exact relationship to Hegel's dialectic of Beauvoir's postulated non-dialectical recognition, which men thus attain with women, has perplexed Beauvoir's interpreters (Bauer, 2001; Bergoffen, 2017; Lundgren-Gothlin, 1996; Mussett, 2006). It stands out as a distinctive adaptation of both Hegel's original progress towards the reciprocal recognition of consciousnesses in Absolute Spirit and of the truncated dialectic of objectifying and being objectified that one finds in *Being and Nothingness*. Beauvoir's description of the attitude that men adopt towards women nevertheless contains definite echoes of the attitude of desire, as described by Sartre; woman is a consciousness that it seems possible to possess in her flesh (*DS*, I.3.i, 241; *SSp*, 160; *SSbm*, 164; Sartre, 1943, III.3.§2, 428–34; 1993, 388–94). In woman, man 'hopes to realise himself as a thing by possessing another being in its flesh, while at the same time being confirmed in his freedom by a docile freedom' (*DS*, I.3.i, 242; *SSp*, 161; *SSbm*, 165). This idea allows Beauvoir to offer a powerful ontological characterisation of the mythic identification of woman with nature. 'Appearing as the Other, woman, as a result, appears to exist in opposition to the nothingness that he recognises in himself, as a plenitude of being' (*DS*, I.3.i, 242; *SSp*, 161; *SSbm*, 165). Woman is identified with Nature, to which man stands in an ambivalent relationship: he exploits it as an exterior object and it crushes him, being beyond his capacity to control. 'It is a material envelope in which the soul is held prisoner', a metaphor that Luce Irigaray will develop at great length (*DS*, I.3.i, 245; *SSp*, 163; *SSbm*, 167; Irigaray, 1985a). Over many pages, Beauvoir

develops the theme of the mythic female character of nature, of man's fear of reproduction and death, which he opposes with the equally mythic representation of his own transcendence of feminine chaos, finitude, fecundity, and death, towards rational order, infinity, immaterial spirit, and eternal life, images that will also be taken up and developed in a different key by Irigaray, Susan Bordo, Genevieve Lloyd, and other writers (Bordo, 1987; Irigaray, 1993; Lloyd, 1984).

This powerful characterisation of what is, for Beauvoir, a mythic structure adopted by men in order to flee the difficulty of reciprocal relations with others who are, like them, ambiguously subject and object – transcendence striving towards infinitude combined with finite materiality – has reappeared in various guises in subsequent feminist philosophies. In some it retains, to an extent, its mythic character, as it does in Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason*, in which it is put to work to account for the difficulty that women have in locating themselves within the philosophical tradition (Lloyd, 1984). Although only an effaced metaphor, the image of mind, reason, or consciousness, which men have posited as distinct from the engulfing feminine body, operates so as to constitute the substance of philosophy (Lloyd, 1986). In other writers, male transcendence is used to characterise the philosophical tradition as a continuation of the mythic oppositions described by Beauvoir (Bordo, 1987). In others it becomes a truth about what it is to be male or female, resulting, by the 1980s, in the emergence of ecofeminist philosophies in which the identification of woman with nature is used to ally women's liberation with that of nature (Gray, 1981; Merchant, 1981; Plumwood, 1989; Salleh, 1992; Warren, 1990). The earliest example of this ecofeminist tendency came from Françoise Eaubonne and was continued in Irigaray's later work (Eaubonne, 1974; Irigaray, 1989). In many cases it is combined with elements from psychoanalysis and tends towards essentialist theories of masculine and feminine difference, which are quite at odds with Beauvoir's avowed existentialism. Indeed, paradoxically, although she was later criticised as a philosopher of equality who desired to efface sexual difference, her account of what she represents as a masculine mythology, adopted in the service of men's bad faith, provided later authors with ample material to be drafted into the service of subsequent feminisms of difference (Gross, 1990; Irigaray, 1991; 1993). Mythic structures were thus problematically transformed into psychic and even essential realities (TCF, 508; ASD, 458; Green, 1994).

There is no doubt that the Western tradition has tended to imagine nature as feminine, but had Beauvoir taken more time to explore women's philosophical imaginary, she would have discovered rather different metaphoric adaptations of this identification. Historical women have had no difficulty in imagining nature as an intelligent, female agent. Margaret Cavendish, for instance, says,

‘though Nature is old, yet she is not a Witch, but a grave, wise, methodical Matron, ordering her Infinite family, which are her several parts, with ease and facility’ (Cavendish, 1664, 302). She wittily deconstructs Descartes’ dualism, denying that nature needs ‘a Spiritual Nurse, to teach her to go, or to move’ (Broad et al., 2006; Cavendish, 1664, 149–50). Nature, or matter, is, she believes, itself infinite and self-moving. Equally, philosophy, wisdom, and transcendent reason can take on a mythic, feminine persona, as they do in Christine de Pizan’s *Book of the City of Ladies*, in her *Advison Cristine*, and in Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy*, which partly inspired her (Boethius, 1999; Broad & Green, 2006; Pizan, 1983; 2001). For Mary Wollstonecraft as well, with the advent of the French Revolution, reason becomes a woman who has ‘at last, shown her captivating face, beaming with benevolence’ (Wollstonecraft, 1989, 22). Beauvoir overdetermines the mythic characterisation of woman as nature, a bodily other that offers up its yielding recognition to a masculine transcendence, by ignoring, or being unaware of, an underappreciated tradition of countervailing myth, often promoted by women.

The first volume of *The Second Sex* thus develops an original philosophical schematism, inspired by Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in order to account for the supposed fact that woman has always been the Other of man without opposing to him her own independent consciousness. The second volume has a somewhat different character, setting out to capture the lived experience of being a woman. It offers a sociological account of women’s situations in the West, dependent on available early twentieth-century descriptions of women’s experiences, coloured by Beauvoir’s own personal background. The existentialist schema of the first volume is less apparent but re-emerges in the descriptions of women’s attitudes towards themselves and others, particularly in its later sections on women’s ‘justifications’.

The second volume begins with the famous line, ‘one is not born a woman: but becomes one’ (*DS*, II.1.i, 13; *SSp*, 273; *SSbm*, 294).⁵ Although Beauvoir then repeats her claim that women are not destined by biology, psychology, or economics to become what they are socially, and although she had prefaced the volume with a phrase attributed to Sartre, ‘part victims, part accomplices, like everyone’, it has been easy for her readers to interpret this opening line as implying that women are socially determined to play a role not of their own making. Indeed, much of the power of her work lies in the descriptions of the social pressures that mould feminine behaviour, and women’s subjective responses to those pressures, which result in a reading according to which the sentence expresses a belief in the social construction of gender roles (Offen,

⁵ For controversy over how this should be translated, see (Mann and Ferrari, 2017).

2017, 11). The existentialist concept of ‘choosing to become’, or of making oneself be, emphasised by Julia Kristeva and Jennifer McWeeny, is often obscured by the lengthy descriptions of the forces that propel women to adopt traditional, feminine characteristics, which, Beauvoir contended, showed that the dissimilarities between the sexes are ‘of a cultural not a natural order’ (*FCh*, I.259; *FC*, 196; Kristeva, 2018, 352–3; McWeeny, 2017).

It is in adolescence that these pressures begin to weigh heavily. Despite all the difficulties of childhood, Beauvoir suggests that, as children, girls experience their autonomy and transcendence. Adolescence is a time of transition during which they await their fate: Man. Menstruation makes matters worse, being represented by Beauvoir as a painful state of oppression and alienation from the body. She observes that during adolescence girls give up active sports, become timid, and lose ground in intellectual and artistic fields (*DS*, II.1.ii, 88–96; *SSp*, 327–32; *SSbm*, 352–7). The demands of modesty limit their freedom and they begin to experience themselves as objects of an exterior gaze, being encouraged to turn towards a self-conscious narcissism. Although some of Beauvoir’s descriptions relate more to the situation of young women in mid-twentieth-century Europe than to that of the much freer and more highly sexualised culture of the developed world in the early twenty-first century, her Hegel-inspired existentialist account of relations with others offers a powerful analysis of the ambiguities in the behaviour of young women that continue to resonate. There is a conflict between a girl’s narcissism and the revolt that she feels in being captured by the male gaze and reduced to mere fleshy immanence. While she makes an object of herself, it is one that is an idol, in which she recognises herself, and that allows her to bask in male attention, but as soon as she is objectified, she feels shame. ‘So long as she feels responsible for her charm, which she seems to exercise freely, she is enchanted by her victories: but in so far as her features, her figure, her flesh are givens to which she submits, she wants to deny possession of them to this foreign, indiscreet freedom that desires them’ (*DS*, II.1.ii, 118–19; *SSp*, 347–8; *SSbm*, 375). As a subject she wishes to dominate the other, enslaving him through her desirability, but once he reaches out to possess her, she herself becomes no more than an object of desire. At this juncture, the metaphysical framework of the conflict between consciousnesses throws considerable light on behaviours that can appear to men to be no more than hypocritical teasing. At others, the schema through which Beauvoir analyses woman’s situation results in a somewhat distorted account, or at least one that overlooks perspectives that don’t fit in with her metaphysical assumptions.

The chapter on sexual initiation is particularly bleak, emphasising man’s active initiation of the sex act. ‘Since she is object her inertia does not

profoundly alter her natural role . . . one can even go to bed with a dead woman' (*DS*, II.1.iii, 148; *SSp*, 368; *SSbm*, 396). Steeped in nineteenth-century traditions of feminine sexual modesty, horror at the thought of penetration, and assumptions about girls' sexual ignorance, Beauvoir accepts that, 'however deferential and courteous a man might be, the first penetration is always a violation' (*DS*, II.1.iii, 161; *SSp*, 376; *SSbm*, 406). She quotes extensively from William Stekel's, *Frigidity in Women*, reinforcing the impression that women fear sex and seldom achieve satisfaction ([Stekel, 1943](#)). She concludes that,

Even if she adapts herself more or less completely to her passive role, woman remains frustrated as an active individual. She does not envy him his organ of possession, but his prey. It is a curious paradox that man lives in a sensual world of sweetness, softness and tenderness, a feminine world, whereas woman silences herself in the male world which is hard and severe.

(*DS*, II.1.iii, 188–9; *SSp*, 394; *SSbm*, 427–8)

Women, she goes on to say, dream of possessing a soft, smooth, feminine lover, explaining the wide appeal of lesbianism – then considered to be a sinful aberration – for women, expressing her own, concealed, experience of lesbian love ([Kirkpatrick, 2019](#), 137–86). In the following chapter, she openly discusses, without judgement, the many different forms of feminine homosexuality, as well as what would now be called cases of intersex and transgender individuals, undoubtedly contributing to the early movement to normalise what were, at the time, generally characterised as deviant forms of sexuality.

In later interviews, Beauvoir expresses some regret in relation to the way in which female eroticism was treated in these chapters and confessed that her views had since changed considerably ([Bainbrigge, 1995](#), 160; [Schwarzer, 1984](#)). Paradoxically, one could claim that it is through them that the language that she introduced, according to which woman is the Other of man, has had the greatest impact on the development of popular culture and late twentieth-century feminism, for the idea that women are sex objects, and that it is objectification by an alien male sexual rapaciousness that is at the heart of women's oppression, has become ubiquitous. Although she does not use the phrase 'sexual objectification', she is now read as claiming that it is responsible for women's oppression ([Kirkpatrick, 2019](#), 262). An implicit solution, that women can only achieve an authentic eroticism through lesbianism, has been widely adopted ([Dworkin, 1981](#); [Jeffreys, 1990](#); [MacKinnon, 1987](#); [Rich, 1980](#)). Although these authors do not in general acknowledge their debt to Beauvoir, the powerful movement against sexual objectification and pornography that has arisen since the 1980s develops images similar to those found in her account of sexual

initiation, divorcing them from the metaphysical and existentialist underpinning of her essay. Beauvoir saw herself as describing a social situation in which women's sexual agency had been closed off to her, but she believed, at least in principle, that sexual agency was something that women could regain. Near the end of the book, she admits the existence of many sexually egalitarian couples for whom 'notions of victory and defeat are replaced by the idea of exchange' (*DS*, II.4. Conclusion, 648; *SSp*, 683; *SSbm*, 779). She believed that, although male sovereignty had been ubiquitous, it also constituted a kind of bad faith, an attempt, through the possession of the flesh of women in which consciousness resides, to experience their transcendence without facing up to the difficulties of mutual recognition. She is vague as to how the social situation will come about in which mutual recognition between the sexes is achieved, yet she is committed to the possibility of an eroticism in which each lives the ambiguity of their condition. For,

Man is like woman flesh, hence passive, plaything of his hormones and of the species; and she is like him, in the midst of her carnal consenting fever, voluntary gift, activity; each lives in their own way the strange equivocation of [conscious] being made body. (*DS*, II.4. Conclusion, 648; *SSp*, 683; *SSbm*, 779)

But the later theory of sexual objectification offers no positive representation of heterosexuality. Cut off from its original metaphysical underpinnings, the description of male sexuality as domination becomes implicitly essentialist, and although writers such as Catharine MacKinnon claim that eroticism and gender are socially constructed, the absence in their writing of any positive representation of heterosexuality is the natural correlate of the assumption that any form of sexual objectification by men of women constitutes, in itself, sexual oppression.

Beauvoir seems to have assumed that she could eclectically combine Lévi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology, Engels's Marxist account of the role of the family and private property, and existentialism to develop an account of women's situation. But fundamental elements of these outlooks are incompatible with her existentialism. Even though she rejected the sufficiency of Engels's account of the origin of women's subordination in the rise of private property, she represents her book as owing 'much to Marxism', and she often implies that women are less oppressed in societies where ownership is collective (*FCh*, I.265; *FC*, 200). Thus, Sparta is assumed to have accorded women greater agency than did Athens, and women's liberation requires an 'economic evolution' (*DS*, I.2.iii, 147, II.2.x, 515; *SSp*, 112, 595; *SSbm*, 99, 680). But, as she had noted earlier, Marxism, in general, is incompatible with the existentialist emphasis on individual liberty, and, apart from extreme cases of slavery, it

remains unclear how different economic systems impact differentially on metaphysical freedom. Even more obvious than the tension between existentialism and Marxism is its conflict with the structuralist orientation of Lévi-Strauss's anthropology.⁶ According to structuralism, human conscious decisions are determined by the social and linguistic structures of the society within which individuals operate. Human freedom is a myth. Early on, Beauvoir had been impressed by the Bergsonian idea that there is a phenomenal reality, available to the senses, that cannot be fully captured in the sharp but inadequate contours of public language. The structuralists posit, rather, that there is no unmediated phenomenal experience. What we see and feel is determined by the linguistic structures that we inherit from our community. This combines rather neatly with the Marxist concept of ideology, according to which beliefs are determined by underlying economic relations, being ways of representing reality that are in the interests of the dominant class. Linguistic structures become the intermediaries by means of which power relations colonise minds and form compliant subjects. Even as she was publishing *The Second Sex*, the phenomenological and existentialist outlook that Beauvoir shared with Sartre was being overshadowed by the rise of structuralism, so that her representation of women as objects of male desire came to be read through this lens. Later, pornography emerged as the sexual sign system par excellence and the vehicle by means of which gender is socially constructed (Dworkin, 1981; 1987; MacKinnon, 1987). Beauvoir's critique of objectifying forms of male sexuality, which she interpreted as instances of bad faith and an attempt to escape the difficulty of reciprocal relations, was replaced by the claim that the language of heterosexual pornography creates the reality of male sexual desire. The contrast between her outlook and that of the later anti-pornographers is clear in their quite different attitudes to the Marquis de Sade, yet there is a clear sense in which the anti-pornographers build on her claim that woman is the Other of man (MBS; Butler, 2003; Green, 2000).

In the light of the impact of Marxism on her thought, Beauvoir's account of the way women are represented can be interpreted as detailing patriarchal ideology, but her descriptions then inherit a general problem faced by all appeals to ideology, which is that, in order for beliefs to be ideological, there must be some true perspective. It is insufficient to say that the perspective of the oppressed is true, since the oppressed do not always agree with each other, nor is

⁶ Sartre attempted to resolve these conflicts in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* but failed to convince Lévi-Strauss of the success of his project, and the general consensus, articulated, for instance, by Foucault, has been that the triumph of structuralism was the death knell of the theory of the free, conscious subject nostalgically presumed to exist by Sartre (Doran, 2013; Eribon, 1993; Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Sartre, 1976).

there always agreement as to who are the oppressed. The outlook of white, Western women, such as Beauvoir, has been criticised from the perspective of black people and indigenous people (Gines, 2010). Beauvoir herself has been accused of writing from a misogynist perspective, apparent when she says of some women that, 'their vain arrogance, their radical incapability, their stubborn ignorance, turn them into the most useless beings, the most idiotic that the human species has ever produced', a sharp invective that she directed at upper-class women (*DS*, II.2.x, 515; *SSp*, 594; *SSbm*, 679). This is a judgement that, given her own class background, might well be judged to be a spectacular expression of bad faith (or self-loathing). Not only has her assumption, that the pursuit of transcendence is of value, been deemed incompatible with a woman-centred philosophy, but such passages express a general disdain for women's concerns and lives. In particular, her accounts of motherhood and marriage show considerable contempt for the attitudes, concerns, and projects of many ordinary women. This was a particular focus of attack when her book first appeared, for she represents motherhood as rarely an authentic choice, summing it up as a 'strange compromise of narcissism, altruism, dream, sincerity, bad faith, devotion and cynicism' (*FCh*, I.266; *FC*, 201; *DS*, II.2.vi; *SSp*, 492; *SSbm*, 570). Long before the movement to legalise abortion, Beauvoir had begun her chapter on motherhood with a call for birth control and the legalisation of abortion, in order to change the prevalence of unplanned pregnancy. She quotes Stekel, 'Prohibition of abortion is an immoral law, since it must forcibly be broken every day, every hour' (*DS*, II.2.vi, 338–9; *SSbm*, 546).⁷ Not surprisingly, this caused outrage in some quarters. In general, the very ambivalent attitude that Beauvoir evinced towards pregnancy and motherhood shocked conservative sensibilities in a still largely Catholic country.

Given the opposition between transcendence and immanence that structures her ontology, it is unsurprising that she presents pregnancy as a threat. It is the engulfment of consciousness by the flesh, 'the opposition between subject and object disappears; she and the child who swells in her form an ambivalent couple that life submerges; snared by nature she is plant and animal, a collection of colloids, an incubator, an egg' (*DS*, II.2.vi, 345; *SSp*, 477; *SSbm*, 552). Woman has become the passive instrument of the reproduction of life. Of women who enjoy pregnancy and have many children, Beauvoir says that they are not mothers, but 'breeders' who 'eagerly seek the possibility of alienating their liberty to the benefit of their flesh'. As flesh, being pure inertia, cannot embody even a degraded transcendence, such a woman is trapped in the

⁷ This sentence was not translated by Parshley, presumably because it was deemed too inflammatory.

‘great cycle of the species’ (*DS*, II.2.vi, 346–7; *SSp*, 478–9; *SSbm*, 552–3). It is certainly true that, in pregnancy, a woman becomes particularly aware of bodily processes largely beyond her control. Yet one cannot help thinking that, in these passages, Beauvoir becomes enmeshed in the masculine mythology that she had detailed so extensively in the first volume of her work. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Diotima, Socrates’ philosophical midwife, represents sexual desire, pregnancy, and birth as a corporeal bringing-forth of beauty, a repetition of species life directed towards infinity, that is inferior to the spiritual engendering of laws, through which men reproduce culture. In her refusal to see pregnancy and motherhood as valuable projects that can, and often do, involve women’s transcendence of the past towards an imagined future, Beauvoir likewise accepts that the artisan, or man of action, achieves a level of transcendence unavailable to women. Yet what justifies this, other than men’s past denigration? The marathon runner, the body builder, the competitive swimmer could equally be said to ‘alienate their liberty to the benefit of their flesh’ as, in the effort of their physical exertion, their consciousness becomes subsumed by its bodily effects. Yet we understand this state as a temporary situation, submitted to in the pursuit of higher goals and compatible with the achievement of other ends. Why not take the same attitude to pregnancy? Beauvoir’s own situation seems to have encouraged the assumption that motherhood and transcendence inevitably conflict.

Beauvoir had assumed, in her own life, that being a writer and being a mother were incompatible, claiming that, as a result of wanting to write, she had never wanted to have children ([Patterson, 1989](#), 296; *FA*, 91; *PL*, 78). To assume that this must be the case is to perpetuate elements of the past situation of women that have made it difficult for them to achieve historical recognition. It is to overlook that one of differences between men’s and women’s situations is that, in the past, men have been able to pursue artistic careers as well as founding families, while women only have the same freedom when motherhood does not present itself as an insurmountable barrier to literary or other success. Sartre and Beauvoir attempted to subvert the usual implications of childlessness by adopting younger women, who would commit themselves to perpetuating their legacy, yet this can hardly become a universal strategy. Assuming the incompatibility of motherhood and active self-expression thus seems to be succumbing to a form of the old ‘biology is destiny’ myth. It is true, as some have pointed out, that Beauvoir does not deny the possibility of an authentic motherhood, which she imagines as possible in a situation where ‘the society would assume charge of the children’, thus making motherhood compatible with a career (*DS*, II.4, Conclusion, 644; *SSp*, 680–1; *SSbm*, 776–7). Yet this solution glosses over the fact that, if motherhood and childcare are not projects compatible with

transcendence, the lives of an underclass of mothers and child-carers will be sacrificed to the care of the children of elite women, a situation that has tended to develop in wealthy communities, where women with careers often depend on poor, black, or immigrant women to look after their children and to take on other domestic tasks. One needs a more positive conception of motherhood, as constituting an important form of participation in society, compatible with other forms of construction of culture, in order for women to have the same ability to develop themselves as do men. This form of criticism of Beauvoir's outlook began to be developed during the 1980s, though the tensions between mothering and autonomy remain significant (O'Brien, 1981; Ruddick, 1990).

Beauvoir's ambivalent and somewhat hostile attitude towards motherhood was arguably also coloured by her own relationship with her mother. In an interview, she claimed that mother–daughter relationships are generally catastrophic, and her relationship with her own mother was often strained (Schwarzer, 1984, 91). This is symptomatic of an underlying difficulty in the whole method of attempting to combine a metaphysical outlook with concrete description that is pursued by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, as well as in her fiction. Elsewhere, in a passage where she asserts that she did not regard herself as a philosopher, she rejects the 'lunacy known as a "philosophical system" from which those who have constructed them, derive that obsessional attitude which endows their tentative patterns with universal insight and applicability' (FA, 254; PL, 221). Applying this critique, she herself claims that, in the face of class, race, and individual difference, it is as absurd to speak of 'woman' in general as to imagine 'eternal man' (DS, II.2.x, 515; SSp, 638; SSbm, 679). Yet the method she adopts encourages just this tendency. Descriptions of concrete individual experience, when interpreted in the light of a metaphysical schematism, are in danger of being universalised and generalised beyond the specific temporal and cultural moment of the experienced reality. This is evident both in Beauvoir's account of motherhood and in the related reading of the woman in love, which universalises features of Beauvoir's own experience and sentiments along with those of women of her class, culture, and time.

Beauvoir's description of the woman in love is wedged between that of the narcissist and the mystic, as one of women's justifications, attitudes that Beauvoir describes as strategies that individual women adopt in order to attempt to justify their existence within their immanence. These are projects converting 'servitude into sovereign freedom', or one might say in different language, in which individuals freely choose to adopt attitudes of subjection and objectification (DS, II.2.x, 516; SSp, 639; SSbm, 680). Narcissism is a peculiar version of this tendency, for the narcissist is both the transcendent subject who loves herself and the object of that love. The woman in love also objectifies herself

but does so through the agency of a lover. She tries to ‘overcome her situation as inessential object by assuming it’, and, since men present themselves as sovereign subjects, with whom equality is not permitted, she makes a religion of love and posits her lover as a divinity, the supreme reality to which she devotes herself, through whose transcendence she vicariously realises her being (*DS*, II.3.xii; *SSp*, 656; *SSbm*, 700). The woman in love is like the mystic, who annihilates herself before God, but the former makes man into a God, while the latter makes herself God’s bride and lover.

The woman in love, who attempts to live through her lover and is destroyed, or at the very least deeply threatened and disappointed in life, by the threat or reality of her lover leaving her, is a recurrent figure in Beauvoir’s novels. Françoise, in *She Came to Stay*; Régine, in *All Men are Mortal*; Dominique, in *Les Belles Images*; and Paula, in *The Mandarins* are all women whose lives and sense of self-worth depend on the love of a man who does not have the same need for them. There are echoes in these relationships of Beauvoir’s youthful infatuation with Jacques, and the dependence on the love of another that she attempted to keep at bay in her relationship with Sartre. Dependent love was a temptation that she had felt, but one that she consciously and proudly resisted (*PL*, 80). In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir represents the woman in love as wanting to serve her lover and being justified by the existence into which she is integrated (*DS*, II.3.xii, 550; *SSp*, 660; *SSbm*, 707). The lover wants to be identified with her beloved and her supreme happiness consists in being part of a ‘we’ in which she is recognised by him. But the dependence of the woman becomes a burden for the man and equally harbours the danger of disillusionment for the woman when the man to whom she has devoted herself fails to live up to her high ideals. In these descriptions, Beauvoir has captured the situation of many women of her time and place, but it is arguable that she has overextended the common situation of twentieth-century, middle-class women, who had little option but to live vicariously through the achievements of the men they had loved and married, with the situation of women at all times and places.

In opposition to the idolatrous but dependent love that women offer to men, through whom they wish to justify their existence, Beauvoir offers the alternative of an ‘authentic love’ that would ‘take on the other’s contingency, that is his lacks, limitations and originary gratuitousness’. Such a love would be no salvation but an ‘interhuman relation’ and ‘the reciprocal relation of two freedoms’ (*DS*, II.3.xii, 554, 571; *SSp*, 619, 631; *SSbm*, 711, 723). In her autobiographical memoirs, beginning with *Memoirs d’une jeune fille rangée*, published in the late fifties, when she herself had reached her fiftieth year, Beauvoir wrote an account of her own life as one attempt to live out such an ‘authentic love’ (*MJ*; *MD*). In these autobiographies, she found a more natural

medium through which to capture the concrete realities of lived experience from a distinctive ontological perspective than that of the novel. Whereas, in her novels, the metaphysical framework within which she structures her character's lives can become forced, in her memoirs, her own development as a writer and thinker provides a natural starting point for a meditation on existence, the unfolding of time, relations with others, and the possibility of an authentic and fulfilled life. If *The Second Sex* plays the role in Beauvoir's oeuvre that she attributes to *Being and Nothingness* in Sartre's, of being an account of humanity in bad faith, her memoirs attempt to offer an alternative positive image of a woman striving to live according to her own conception of honesty and freedom. Yet sometimes the autobiographies gloss over uncomfortable facts. Recently, Kate Kirkpatrick has used previously unavailable material to question the extent to which earlier biographers had too uncritically swallowed Beauvoir's narrative (Kirkpatrick, 2019; see also Bair, 1990; Rowley, 2005). Pointing to the lacunae in the account of her bisexual affairs and the extent to which both she and Sartre were less than honest with their friends and lovers, she questions whether Beauvoir lived up to the ideal of authenticity to which she aspired. Yet, whatever her actual bad faith, the biographies allowed her to reflect on the inadequacies of certain metaphysical assumptions and to introduce philosophical themes into a novelistic narrative in a perfectly natural way. Without the continuing reflection on her life offered in her autobiographies, Beauvoir would not have achieved either the notoriety or breadth of audience that she did. They extend the last chapter of *The Second Sex*, that on 'the independent woman', over the course of a lifetime, offering a model, albeit a problematic one, of her existence as a free, female subject who understood her fulfilment to lie in her transcendence of the concrete situation into which she had been born, towards a chosen future. But, along with her later essays, they attest to a change in her own political and philosophical orientation that conflicts with the humanistic existentialism of her middle years.

4 Autobiography and Politics

At the conclusion of the second instalment of her autobiography, *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir represents the war as a watershed period in her life. As an adolescent she had felt stifled by the constraints of a well-ordered bourgeois life, and her activities were governed by the requirements of propriety and her mother's overbearing presence. Success at university had offered her freedom and economic independence, in which she had revelled. Despite her great love for Sartre, she declined the opportunity of marrying him, so that they could be posted together, and took up a teaching post at Marseille, where she learned to

live independently, acquiring a passion for solitary rambles in the sparsely populated Provençal hinterland of this port. She was an individualist, determined to enjoy what life had to offer, imagining herself to be living the life of Katherine Mansfield's 'solitary woman' (*FA*, 118; *PL*, 85). The war was to change all this, bringing with it fear and scarcity, throwing her existence into uncertainty and turmoil, making it impossible to ignore the extent to which we are hostage to the actions of others for our freedom and happiness. It fractured the self-absorption and insouciance of her early adult life, forced the recognition of the possibility of death, caused the death of friends, and constituted a break with her earlier self, which gave her the critical distance from her past necessary to write a successful novel, as she had for a long time desired to do (*FA*, 684; *PL*, 606).

She Came to Stay, completed during the war, chronicled a world inhabited by individuals. *The Second Sex* began to consider how the individual is shaped by society. Subsequently, Beauvoir repudiated the individualism of her own former attitudes and fell more and more under the sway of Marxism. Yet one theme from her existentialist background would continue to haunt her works: Heidegger's being towards death (Heinämaa, 2010). Death, over which she had agonised as a child, was rehabilitated in *All Men Are Mortal* as the necessary precondition for finite human projects, the source of the value of life, and the 'common link between the individual and mankind', while also remaining the source of loneliness and separation (*THM*; *MM*; *FA*, 685; *PL*, 607; La Caze, 2004–5, 148). The very solipsism of her early years made death, the cessation of her own consciousness, appear impossible, the annihilation of the world, while the death of a friend, even more acutely than their living, thrust her out of her solipsism and into the recognition of the finite fragility of her own partial perspective. When she heard of the death of Camus, who had been a good friend, but with whom she and Sartre had fallen out politically, Beauvoir experienced the 'world through his dead eyes'. She 'had gone over to the other side where there is nothing', realising 'how everything still continued to exist' though she/he was no longer there (*FCh*, II.278; *FC*, 497). The death of the other thus wrenches her out of her solipsism, while plunging her into dismay at the realisation that, when she is gone, the world will continue without her. Her almost obsessive turn towards autobiographical writing attempts to cheat death, to capture on the page, in well-chosen words, the evanescent passage of her life, the lush warm grasses of Meyrignac, the damp smell of Parisian autumns, the sharp clear vistas of Provençal treks. Despite her early commitment to Bergson's claim that the multifaceted shimmer of our perceptual experience escapes the dry rigour of words, in later years she worked tirelessly to capture in words the unique thread of her experience, to crystalise it for futurity, and to

break out from the separation of consciousnesses by means of that ubiquitous linguistic vehicle through which we share our experience with members of our linguistic and cultural community.

After the success of the Goncourt-prize-winning *Les Mandarins* (LM; TM), which gives a fictionalised account of the conflict among different elements of the left during and after the war, Beauvoir became famous. This period, during which the Algerians and Vietnamese began to throw off colonial French rule in viciously opposed movements of national liberation, saw her deepening her critique of capitalism and colonialism. The Algerian conflict moved her deeply. She was appalled by and ashamed of the French army's resort to torture, rape, and illegal killing in Algeria and, in a preface to Gisèle Halimi's *Djamila Boupacha*, published an impassioned account of the way in which these activities had been kept secret and the circumstances that led to the publication of the book (PolW, 272–82; Halimi, 1962). Two motifs, Marxism and being towards death, engendered two long essays, neither of which was nearly so successful or influential as *The Second Sex*. The first, *The Long March*, was the result of a visit to China in 1955 (LoM; LoMe). The second, *Old Age*, was prompted by Beauvoir's own confrontation with her ageing self (LV; OA). Like *The Second Sex*, these essays are compilations of the available historical, biological, sociological, and anthropological data concerning their subjects, but unlike it, they are not structured around the Hegelian conflict between consciousnesses that provided the framework for the earlier work (Deutscher, 2017, 440; Stoller, 2014, 2–3). Instead, a Marxist orientation often prevails. Beauvoir does not discuss at length the extent to which she continued to accept that her adaptation of the Hegelian conflict between consciousnesses was an accurate analysis of the origins of women's subordinate position, but the orientation of these later works to an extent undermines it. In *Force of Circumstance*, she endorses the account based on 'facts of supply and demand' that she had adopted in her book on China and indicates that, had she written *The Second Sex* later, she would not 'base the notion of woman as *other* and the Manichaeon argument it entails' on 'an idealistic and *a priori* struggle of consciousnesses' (FCh, I.207; FC, 202). But to have done so would have robbed her work of all its originality, which essentially resides in the adaptation of Hegel's master/slave dialectic to account for the relationship between men and women.

Written during the Cold War, *The Long March* is both a travelogue and an apology for the communist government of China. It emphasises the extent to which order and cleanliness had been achieved in Chinese cities, which had, prior to the revolution, been renowned for their disease, poverty, opium addiction, and filth (LoMe, 52–3, 448–50). Beauvoir's turn towards Marxism is particularly evident in her discussion of the family. Whereas, in *The Second*

Sex, she had argued against the Marxist view that family structures are fully determined by economic realities and that the rise of private property had caused the subordination of women, in *The Long March* she offers an economic explanation of the long persistence, in China, of extended patriarchal families cohabiting under one roof.

This results, she claims, from China's late industrialisation. In Europe, the transition from the patriarchal to conjugal or companionate marriage is assumed to have coincided with the advent of industry, moveable property, and a working-class proletariat. The traditional Chinese family 'is to be explained by the country's agrarian economy' (*LoMe*, 127). Yet she also subscribes to the widely held view that women were more thoroughly oppressed within the traditional Chinese family than in almost any other country. She explains this by the fact that 'in every civilization the history of women's rights is directly linked to the history of inheritance which has evolved as a dependent variable of the changing economic and social complex' (*LoMe*, 130). This, she claims in a footnote, she had tried to show in *The Second Sex*. It was because inheritance in China was exclusively male that women were unable to achieve any kind of economic autonomy or other form of independence.

Yet, this kind of purely economic explanation of the differences in women's social situation in China and Europe is not particularly illuminating. From the twelfth to fifteenth centuries, both Europe and China were agrarian economies, the family was governed by a patriarch, and inheritance was generally male. However, in Europe, daughters could occasionally inherit, when a male heir was lacking, and, in many jurisdictions, widows could own property in their own right and operate with almost the same legal and financial autonomy as men. In China, lack of literary talent was considered a virtue in women, whereas in Europe it was not impossible for elite women, such as Hildegard von Bingen, Heloise, or Christine de Pizan, to achieve significant literary success. These differences are difficult to explain on purely economic grounds. Arguably, it was Christianity, with its emphasis on the virtue of chastity and valorisation of monogamy, that allowed some women to remain virgins and opened up the possibility for widows to resist remarriage and operate independently, if they wished. Furthermore, monogamy was more prone to result in a lack of a male heir than the polygamy practised in China and elsewhere, so that in Europe, female inheritance became a fairly widespread, though often contested, practice. In China, excess daughters were killed at birth; in Europe, they were consigned to a convent. It is such cultural factors, rather than pure economic circumstances, that are at least part of the explanation of the differences between the situation of women during periods of similar economic development in China and Europe. In Europe, the rise of conjugal marriage coincides with the

emergence of Protestantism, so, since Marxists like to explain Protestantism as the result of an economic evolution, a committed Marxist is unlikely to be swayed by the foregoing observations. Yet reading the works of the women mentioned by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* suggests that the transformation from patriarchal to conjugal or companionate marriage in Europe was as much the result of women's participation in the ferment of ideas, brought about by the rise of vernacular literature and the printing press, as by any significant change in economic production (Green, 2021). This is not the place to pursue the question of the origins of conjugal marriage, but by uncritically adopting a Marxist line, Beauvoir neglects the opportunity of more thoroughly exploring the reasons for the differences in the situation of women in pre-industrial Europe and in China.

Her discussion of old age is also largely framed by Marxist rhetoric, though Beauvoir here also returns to the way individuals are treated as other, in order to describe the situation of the aged. Following Marxist assumptions, it is, she says, 'the ruling class that imposes their status upon the old' (*LV*, 230; *OA*, 216). But this sheds no light on the difference in attitudes towards old age in different societies, it being something of a tautology to say that those with power impose various kinds of status on themselves and others. Her own earlier account of China indicates how tradition, philosophy, and culture impact the respect afforded the aged, whose status also remains tied to class and sex. In the patriarchal Chinese family, the old woman, once she is a successful mother who has produced grown sons, will govern her unmarried daughters and daughters-in-law, and be accorded considerable authority and respect within the multigenerational household. This is a status rarely achieved by the aged female in contemporary Western societies, where she is often consigned to an institution and the negligent care of strangers.

As with *The Second Sex*, which is most successful when it turns to giving an account of the experience of being a woman in the culture to which Beauvoir belonged, so with *Old Age*. The second volume of *The Second Sex* describes 'l'expérience vécu'; similarly, the fifth chapter of *Old Age* is subtitled, 'expérience vécu du corps' (*LV*, 301). It is when she turns to describing the phenomenon of ageing, as it is experienced by her and her contemporaries, that her account is most authentic. Disappointingly, however, the old woman features very rarely among the subjects whose experience of ageing she recounts. Her own experience had piqued her interest in the subject, yet, although she acknowledges in an appendix that there are many more very old women than very old men, the accounts that she exploits are largely those of men who, like her, have left a literary legacy. In the last pages of *Force of Circumstance*, she had already observed that the most significant thing that had happened to her was that she had grown old. The first story in

the collection *The Woman Destroyed* also focuses on a couple struggling with this realisation (*FR*, 9–84; *WDes*, 9–85). Like that of the characters in this novel, the world around her had narrowed and ceased to be full of new wonders to explore. A time had come when she and Sartre no longer met up with startling new intellectual superiors who possessed the ‘magical prestige’ that even ordinary individuals can have in the eyes of a child (*FCh*, II.502; *FC*, 669). For years, she had thought of her work as stretching out before her, but by 1963 it already appeared to exist in the past. In *The Second Sex* she had attempted to characterise the situation of women; in *Old Age* she turns to considering the temporality of existence from the perspective of someone who is approaching the end of their life. Her mother’s death was undoubtedly also a cause of this turn to a meditation on our mortality, for it had affected her far more deeply than she had expected, as she recounts in *A Very Easy Death* (*MTD*, 151–3; *VED*, 89–90). It brought with it a softening of her attitude towards her mother, evident in the last volume of her autobiography, as well as reinforcing her recognition that she was entering into a new phase, that of old age (*TCF*, Prologue; *ASD*, vii, Prologue).

The old person who, when young, had seen themselves as projecting their existence towards an open future, on which they had hoped to make an impact, is forced to face up to the finitude of their existence, and often looks back nostalgically towards their youth. For the young, the future seems to stretch forward to infinity. For the old, their past is fixed, there is no time to left to refashion it (*LV*, 399; *OA*, 377). Indeed, the self, the ego, becomes a past object, a congealed element of what Sartre had come to call the ‘practico-inert’, the congealed history of one’s past actions and creations. Old age brings us face to face with our existence as we are for the other. Our internal self-image is constructed while we are young, and our bodies change gradually without this image of ourselves transforming. It comes as a shock when we suddenly find ourselves treated as old by others. Old age involves ‘a dialectical relationship between my being for others, in so far as it is objectively determined, and the consciousness that I have of myself by means of it’ (*LV*, 302; *OA*, 284). It is myself as I am for others that is old, and yet, that being that I am for others is myself. Actually, this kind of ambiguous situation is one that, according to Beauvoir’s own philosophy, characterises our human condition. We are, at all periods of our life, both an internal consciousness of our bodily self and the exterior material being that exists for others. But Beauvoir suggests that the situation of being old has a particularly confronting character. Whereas one can challenge other images of the self that come from outside and refuse to identify with them, there is an undeniable biological reality to being sixty, seventy, or eighty years old that cannot be denied or overcome.

Yet, despite the pessimism and sense of being at the end of her life that exudes from her account of old age, Beauvoir's active life was by no means at an end. The generation who had been born while *The Second Sex* was gestating was coming of age. Twenty-one years after its publication, a spate of books appeared that, in one way or another, developed its ideas in a more radical, feminist direction. Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch*, and Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Powerful* all appeared in 1970, heralding the emergence of the women's liberation movement, and Beauvoir 'learnt with great pleasure that the new American feminism quotes *The Second Sex* as its authority' (TCF, 504; ASD, 455; Firestone, 1970; Greer, 1970; Millett, 1970; Morgan, 1970). Although she had not initially identified as a feminist and had taken the position that women would be liberated by a socialist revolution, during these last years she changed her attitude towards women's liberation and contributed actively to at least some feminist initiatives, particularly those aimed at the legalisation of abortion, a reform that she had already advocated in *The Second Sex* (TCF, 492; ASD, 444; Van Houten, 2015).

The last volume of her autobiography, *All Said and Done*, therefore adopts a more positive tone than the previous one. There is an element of a Sorites paradox about ageing. No single day can be said to mark the boundary between maturity and old age, yet at some point one is forced to accept that one has crossed over into a new status. Having accepted that she was old, Beauvoir ceased to feel as though she was ageing (TCF, 40; ASD, 30). The routine of her life went on as before: she continued to read, write, listen to music, and go to the cinema and theatre. There was also the gratification of new friendships, most significantly that with Sylvie le Bon Beauvoir, who was to become her literary executor and would be responsible for the publication and translation of the early diaries and essays that are now available (TCF, 68–74; ASD, 58–64). And she continued to travel, both for pleasure and as a result of the position that she and Sartre had obtained as celebrities of the 'New Left'.

She did not return to China and admits to having been unable to understand what was occurring while the Cultural Revolution was in full swing, when those of her acquaintances who had been there told her of the cult of Mao and the Little Red Book, which was constantly being waved about and read aloud over loudspeakers (TCF, 455–9; ASD, 411–15). She was sympathetic to its aim, as she understood it, of preventing a new privileged class from forming, but dismayed by the dogmatic naivety of the publications produced by the Chinese government. She was even more disillusioned with the USSR, which, in 1968, had sent tanks and troops into Czechoslovakia, thus quashing the movement towards a more liberal socialism that had proposed some workers'

control over the management of factories. This occupation condemned writers who had been her friends to exile (*TCF*, 362–74; *ASD*, 325–37). Cuba, which, for a time, had represented ‘the very embodiment of socialist hopes’, had also disappointed, becoming dependent on the USSR and adopting its repressive policies (*TCF*, 453–4; *ASD*, 409–10). Yet the USA was acting in an equally intolerable manner by interfering in Vietnam to prevent the election of the government of a unified country, as had been agreed at the Geneva agreement of 1954 (*TCF*, 375; *ASD*, 334). From 1966 she and Sartre were closely involved in the unofficial trials, initiated by Bertrand Russell, set up to judge the USA on the count of committing war-crimes in Vietnam. The congresses that they supported and attended in Sweden and Denmark had a considerable impact as they were arenas for the dissemination of information about the atrocities being committed by the Americans and their allies and encouragement for the rising tide of moral condemnation against this unnecessary war (*TCF*, 379–403; *ASD*, 338–64). Beauvoir was as condemnatory of the unconscionable interference of the USA in the affairs of Latin America, which resulted in the military dictatorships of Brazil and Argentina and, a little after she had completed her memoir, of Chile (*TCF*, 463–5; *ASD*, 418–20).

The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians left Beauvoir devastated (*TCF*, 403–449; *ASD*, 364–406). Having lived through the Second World War and seen the persecution of the Jews, she was sympathetic to their need for a secure homeland, yet she was also moved by the plight of the Arabs whom she met when she visited Israel not long before the 1967 war. Just prior to this visit, she and Sartre had been invited to Egypt by a close associate of President Nasser, where they had been officially fêted by the government and had met Palestinian refugees in Gaza. Beauvoir’s existentialist humanism and liberal socialism left her impotent in the face of the fanatical resentment of the Arabs and Palestinians, who threatened to push the Jews into the sea, an attitude that she found even more distressing than the wary distrust of the Israelis, who discriminated against those Arabs who continued to live among them and resisted Sartre’s advocacy of the return of at least some of the displaced. She finds the idea that Israel should ‘vanish from the map of the world perfectly hateful’ (*TCF*, 448; *ASD*, 405). At the same time, she is critical of Israel’s policy, which she sees as insufficiently focussed on peace. Fifty years later, the situation is no better, and fanaticism on both sides has destroyed communities, cost thousands of lives, and infected the whole of the Middle East with a horrifying and self-destructive disease. Existentialist humanism can appear impotent in the face of the religious dogmatism, nationalist self-righteousness, and cynical trade in arms that now blights the whole region.

During her travels, Beauvoir took a particular interest in the situation of women. In Egypt she met with ‘a very old lady’ who had been ‘the first to declare war on the veil before 1914’ (*TCF*, 418; *ASD*, 377). Rather prematurely, a footnote tells us that this war has been won. She criticised the continuing inequality between men and women in Egypt, accusing men, in a lecture that she gave in Cairo, of ‘behaving like feudalists, colonialists and racists towards women’ (*TCF*, 419; *ASD*, 378). In Israel she also met with women who, despite the theoretical equality of men and women in the kibbutzim, complained that they were not treated equally, while some felt that the earlier generation of women had made a mistake in giving up their womanliness and would have preferred to have looked after their own children, rather than relinquishing them to communal care (*TCF*, 426–8; *ASD*, 385–7). In France, Beauvoir became involved with the women’s liberation movement. Following Juliet Mitchell’s *Woman’s Estate*, she concluded that socialism by itself did not account for women’s subordinate position, but she did not want to go so far as those who would accuse men of being oppressors (Mitchell, 1971). She rejected feminist separatism and hatred of men, while endorsing Firestone’s critique of the family (*TCF*, 506–8; *ASD*, 456–9). She also confirmed the social constructivist interpretation that ‘one is not born a woman’, adding to it the observation that it is also true that ‘one is not born a man’ (*TCF*, 497; *ASD*, 445). She was pleased that her work had had an impact, but in many ways her feminist legacy was one of confusion. As a result, subsequent writers were to extend her ideas in various conflicting directions.

5 Beauvoir’s Impact

It is as a result of *The Second Sex* that Beauvoir has had the greatest impact on subsequent social and political movements, but its influence is both ambiguous and contested. Few feminists identify as existentialists, and Beauvoir’s insistence that she had adopted a great deal of Sartre’s existentialism as her own has been difficult for some to swallow (Le Dœuff, 1980; 1990, 164–5; Simons, 1986). Yet, even as they explicitly distance themselves from her, subsequent writers in the feminist tradition have adopted and developed methods and concepts that she pioneered. By fusing the interior perspective of existentialist phenomenology with the exterior analysis of social relations offered by Marxists, Beauvoir facilitated the turn towards ‘feminist consciousness raising’ and the articulation by women of their personal experience of oppression (Marks, 1986). Her proposition that woman is the Other of man feeds into accounts of sexual objectification and continues to have an enormous influence on feminist discourse. Her philosophy, as we have seen, was one of ambiguity,

so that different interpreters have taken up different aspects of her work, developing them in their own way. At least some of the roots of quite different forms of feminist thinking can be traced back to her writing.

There are, indeed, two Simone de Beauvoirs. One, the author of *The Second Sex*, represents women as the Other of man, a dependent consciousnesses, constrained by social conventions to represent themselves to themselves through the eyes of men, who transform women into objects and confine them to a socially inferior status. The other, the author of the autobiographies, represents herself as an independent individual who may, from time to time, have been tempted to become emotionally dependent on some other, but who courageously carved out a career for herself and enjoyed a series of egalitarian sexual and personal relationships with men who treated her as their intellectual collaborator and equal, the most important of these being Sartre. The second Beauvoir operates as something of a pragmatic contradiction of the first. She wrote an account of women's situation that apparently did not apply to her. One can reconcile these conflicting stories by reading *The Second Sex* as an account of the past and a call for the transformation of society, so that women can come to experience themselves as authentic, transcendent consciousnesses, as she had managed to do. Both Beauvoirs had an impact: the first on the content of later feminist writings, the second as a transformative example to be emulated (Brock, 2016, 163).

Betty Friedan, who was one of the earliest authors to have been influenced by her, took up the call to question social expectations and learnt from her analysis. Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* of 1963 had a far greater impact in America than *The Second Sex* had done in either France or in America, where the first English translation had appeared ten years earlier (Brock, 2016, 54–7, 68, 160; Friedan, 1963). However, Friedan did not acknowledge her debt to Beauvoir until 1975. It was, she then admitted, *The Second Sex* that had introduced her to 'an existentialist approach to reality and political responsibility' (Dijkstra, 1980; Friedan, 1975, 16). In particular, Beauvoir's description of housework as being like the labours of Sisyphus resonated with Friedan, an American housewife for whom motherhood, children, and housework had become less than completely fulfilling. Although Beauvoir called *The Feminine Mystique* 'an excellent book', by 1975, when she and Friedan met, it was clear that their politics were fundamentally opposed (TCF, 502; ASD, 453). Friedan was interested in choice, in wages for housework, and in finding ways in which women's traditional domestic labour could be valued. Beauvoir was far more sympathetic to radical proposals, such as those developed by Firestone to abolish traditional motherhood and the family, (TCF, 506; ASD, 457). Friedan wanted women to achieve equality of opportunity, within the relatively inequalitarian, liberal

democracy of the USA. Beauvoir wanted to abolish both economic inequality and traditional sex roles, approving of that strand of feminism that attempted to avoid traditional politics, which she now deemed ‘a men’s fight’ (Beauvoir & Friedan, 1975, 56). For Beauvoir, Friedan’s aspirations must have smacked too much of those of the successful woman who invested in a consumerist society, critically portrayed in *Les Belles Images* (Vintges, 2017, 21–4; *BI, BIE*). Though they managed to remain polite, it is clear from their exchange that, by 1975, they shared little common ground (Beauvoir & Friedan, 1975).

This mix of influence and opposition is also characteristic of the impact Beauvoir had on later French feminists. Irigaray’s treatment of woman as ‘the other of the same’ clearly has roots in Beauvoir’s characterisation of woman as Other. Indeed, she sent Beauvoir a copy of *Speculum of the Other Woman* when it first appeared and was disappointed that Beauvoir did not acknowledge the gift (Green, 2001; Irigaray, 1991, 31). Beauvoir had argued that men are transcendent subjects who have made women their Other. She had assumed that women could equally achieve transcendence. Irigaray demurred. She accepted with Beauvoir that ‘We can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the “masculine”’. But she concluded that when a woman sees herself as transcendent, she ‘fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. Subjecting herself to objectivization in discourse – by being “female”. Re-objectifying her own self whenever she claims to identify herself as a masculine subject’ (Irigaray, 1985a, 133). If ‘woman’ and ‘femininity’ are nothing but male myths, as Beauvoir had postulated, an individual female will simply be succumbing to masculine ideology, in so far as she identifies with this mythic character. But, as Irigaray recognises, Beauvoir’s own account of the masculine origins of culture suggests that the free transcendent male is equally a mythic construct of the masculine imaginary, making it just as problematic as an identification for women. The point had already been anticipated in *The Second Sex*, where Beauvoir suggests that both ‘playing at being a man’ and at being a woman, that is as being an object, the Other, are two kinds of self-alienation (*DS*, I.1.ii, 96; *SSp*, 77; *SSbm*, 61). But Irigaray’s response, which is to attempt to find an authentic feminine language in the disruption of the symbolic order, is not one with which Beauvoir sympathised. It results from a strange hybridisation of Beauvoir’s ‘woman is the Other of man’ with structuralism and in an adaptation of Lacan’s structuralist Freud, which emerged in France during the 1970s (Whitford, 1991, 53–74).

‘Women have always been defined in relation to men’, claim Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron in their introduction to the influential anthology *New French Feminisms*, which includes a reprinting of the introduction to *The Second Sex* (Courtivron & Marks, 1985, 4, 41–56). They do not bother to cite

Beauvoir as their authority for this claim, which, in their version, now takes on a linguistic caste: ‘a polarity of opposites based on sexual analogy organizes our language and through it directs our manner of perceiving the world’ (Courtivron & Marks, 1985, 4). They accord Beauvoir an exemplary place within French feminism, reading her as having argued that ‘all systems were biased because they were limited, because from the beginning of history women had been left out’ (Courtivron & Marks, 1985, 8). The significance of Beauvoir’s ‘women have no history of their own’ is now read in the light of ‘the structuralist assault on the existentialist I’. She had assumed direct knowledge of a lucid consciousness, condemned to freedom. The structuralism that she had helped to popularise by promoting Lévi-Strauss disagreed. It deemed the free conscious self to be an illusion, an introjection of language, a symbolic system, imposed on the individual from without. In Lacan’s structuralist reading of Freud, the privileged signifier in this symbolic system is the phallus: a masculine sexual signifier in relation to which the feminine sex is a lack. Read through such structuralist prisms, Beauvoir’s position came to imply that ‘there can be no revolution without the disruption of the symbolic order’ (Courtivron & Marks, 1985, 30–2).⁸ Or, perhaps, more bleakly, there can be no revolution. The whole enlightenment tradition of an interior self, oppressed by wicked others and seeking to liberate itself towards a realm of freedom, dissolves in the face of the supreme power now accorded to the sign.

It is not only the radical French feminists anthologised by Marks and de Courtivron who owe a great deal to Beauvoir, while going beyond her. The same is true of English-speaking feminists, first in the popular works of the 1970s and later in the academy. Just one year after *New French Feminisms* was published, the journal *Yale French Studies* devoted a special issue to Beauvoir’s ideas, which contained, as well as articles by Marks and de Courtivron, one by Judith Butler and another by Margaret Simons, each of which anticipated two of the directions in which Beauvoir’s impact would be felt over the next decades (Butler, 1986; Courtivron, 1986; Marks, 1986; Simons, 1986). Simons embarked on the quest to read Beauvoir independently of Sartre. Butler initiated a radical reconceptualisation of gender that would lead to *Gender Trouble* and the ongoing movement that attempts to disrupt gender dualisms (Butler, 1990). Reading Beauvoir’s ‘one is not born but rather becomes a woman’ as distinguishing sex from gender – a distinction that Beauvoir did not, in fact, make – Butler, unlike most of those who read this sentence, was sensitive to the existentialist and productive element of choice in Beauvoir’s philosophy. The

⁸ Often, the ‘new French feminists’ are interpreted as rejecting Beauvoir’s philosophy (Gross, 1990; Kaufmann, 1986). As Marks and de Courtivron show, their ‘going beyond’ her has deep roots in her writing.

female body becomes ‘the arbitrary locus for the gender “woman”, and there is no reason to preclude the possibility of that body becoming the locus of other constructions of gender’ (Butler, 1990, 35). Whereas Le Dœuff had criticised that element in Beauvoir’s ‘one becomes a woman’ that imbues it with choice, the attribution of bad faith, and the possibility that a woman might be responsible for taking the ‘easy path’ of dependence and irresponsibility, Butler reads her more positively as offering an analysis with emancipatory potential (Butler, 1990, 41; Le Dœuff, 1980). She does not accept that to pursue transcendence is ‘masculine’, involving an attempted transcendence of the body. Noting that for Beauvoir consciousness is always consciousness of the body, an insurmountable element of the human situation, she proposes that in fact Beauvoir wants to suggest an alternative to ‘the gender polarity of masculine disembodiment and feminine enslavement to the body’ so that ‘to the extent that gender norms function under the aegis of social constraints, the reinterpretation of those norms through the proliferation and variation of corporeal styles becomes a very concrete and accessible way of politicizing personal life’ (Butler, 1990, 45). Now, since there is no natural body, the sex/gender distinction collapses, sexual difference is itself socially constructed, and the mythic nature of natural sex is exposed. Endorsing Monique Wittig and Michel Foucault’s rather different writings, she finds that ‘the political uses of biological discriminations in establishing a compulsory binary gender system’ is already implicit in Beauvoir’s existentialism (Butler, 1990, 45; Foucault, 1984; Wittig, 1992).

It is the fate of every great and seminal philosopher to be developed in various directions by succeeding generations, in ways that deform and distort their original texts and intentions. The fate of Beauvoir’s most influential work attests to the fact that, despite her own reservations in this regard, she was a philosopher. Her ideas have been expropriated by many different descendants and transplanted into new soils, resulting in hybrids that she might well not have recognised. Emerging out of the heavily Cartesian, French philosophical tradition that dominated her early twentieth-century education, she was torn between solipsism and a romantic desire to merge with some other: God or a perfect lover. Her egoism ‘I shall take myself as an end’ stood her in good stead in the competitive intellectual atmosphere of her student years (*CJ*, May 21, 1927, 348; *DPS*, 262). Except for Zaza and Simone Weil, she was not greatly impressed by her female contemporaries and found many women stifling and conventional. In Sartre she discovered a lover who lived up to her own high self-estimation, a man who was her equal, whom she never betrayed intellectually, since to have done so would have been a self-betrayal. She was a woman and a transcendent being who wanted to be a writer and who, indeed, became one.

When she came to write *The Second Sex*, she encountered women as relative beings, mostly described by the pens of men, for whom women are an alien sex. Women, it seemed, had failed to leave a lasting mark on culture – their preoccupations, when they wrote, were deemed vain and self-centred. Hegel's dialectic offered a compelling original schema within which to account for this cultural inferiority. The situation she described, in which men were the orchestrators of culture and women found themselves subordinate, dependent creatures, at best acolytes or muses of male genius, spoke to women of the generations that followed. Yet it was never a particularly satisfactory account of the situation it purported to explain – the supposition that women had always been subject to men – for it assumed the truth of female cultural impotence, accepting the reliability of man-made history. The marriage of the thesis that men had experienced themselves as transcendent subjects, whereas women experienced themselves as objects, with structuralist and social constructivist assumptions subsequently resulted in an unbridgeable impasse. Beauvoir had believed in authenticity, in both transcendence and bodily reality. But without bodily reality, there turns out to be nothing for women to be, apart from society's 'proliferation and variation of corporeal styles'. Irigaray may have attempted to find an authentic, material, feminine signifier in the 'two lips' of the female body, but Butler responds that the figure of materiality is itself already sexed (Butler, 1994). Individuals with male bodies can be women, those with female ones, men. Yet, without biology there is no unity among women, so that the prospects for women – divided by history, skin colour, class, caste, nationality, religion, family, and ethnicity – of finding an authentic 'we' are dim (Green, 1999).

Despite the inroads of structuralism and post-structuralism, there are those who still find her 'phenomenological' method relevant. This places her work within a broad community of feminist phenomenologists, some of whose aims and presuppositions were very distant from hers (Bergoffen, 1997; Stoller, 2017). Yet, although influenced by existentialism and phenomenology, Beauvoir was an eclectic thinker who was happy to draw on ideas gleaned from structuralism, Marxism, and psychoanalysis – incompatible philosophies that she wove together into her own original syntheses. She did not attempt to reconcile the conflicts among them into a single coherent system, which prevented her from claiming to be a philosopher. From a less rigorous perspective she certainly was one, but the eclecticism of her method and its development over time means that she does not fit neatly into any traditional school.

Beauvoir's impact has been considerable, but it points in various directions, and what her lasting legacy will be remains undetermined. Formed in the context of existentialist phenomenology and Marxism, her ideas took root as

a structuralist and post-structuralist wave swept up her interpreters. Her feminist descendants have accepted her thesis that woman is the Other of man, often reading it as though it can still be sustained without assuming her expropriation of the Hegelian conflict between consciousnesses. But, if the sovereign consciousness of Descartes is a myth, if the free conscious subject is an illusion, then the sovereign subjectivity of men, and the conflict that is supposed to arise when one consciousness is objectified by another, is also a myth. Beauvoir's key to the mystery can then unlock nothing. Men and women must equally be prisoners of language. Individual men can no more be free sovereign subjects than women, no matter what stories they have told themselves. The dominance of men will reside merely in the dominance of their weapons and their texts in the history of our culture, and the female subject will have already emerged, in so far as she has articulated herself in the rich history of her texts. Thus, the turn to the history of women's philosophical and political writings that has taken place over the past three decades can also be recognised as a legacy of Beauvoir's Hegelianism, but one that rejects the fundamental male myth to which Beauvoir succumbed: the idea that woman is somehow a less self-conscious, self-articulating, linguistic being than is man (Broad & Green, 2009; Broad et al, 2006; Green, 1995; 2014; 2020; Waithe, 1987–95).

Abbreviations of Works by Beauvoir

<i>ADD</i>	<i>America Day by Day</i> . Translated by Carol Cosman, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
<i>ASD</i>	<i>All Said and Done</i> . Translated by Patrick O'Brian with an Introduction by Toril Moi, New York: Paragon, 1993.
<i>BI</i>	<i>Les Belles Images</i> . Paris: Gallimard, 1966
<i>Ble</i>	<i>Les Belles Images</i> . Translated by Patrick O'Brian, London: Fontana Collins, 1969.
<i>BO</i>	<i>The Blood of Others</i> . Translated by Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964.
<i>CJ</i>	<i>Cahiers de Jeunesse, 1926–1930</i> . Edited by Sylvie le Bon de Beauvoir, Paris: Gallimard, 2008.
<i>CS</i>	<i>She Came to Stay</i> . Translated by Yvonne Moyse and Roger Senhouse, London: Flamingo, 1995.
<i>DPS</i>	<i>Diary of a Philosophy Student. Volume 1, 1926–27</i> . Translated by Barbara Klaw. Edited by Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, and Margaret A. Simons, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.
<i>DPS2</i>	<i>Diary of a Philosophy Student. Volume 2, 1928–29</i> . Edited by Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Margaret A. Simons, and Marybeth Timmermann, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2019.
<i>DS</i>	<i>Le deuxième sexe</i> (1949), 2 Vols. Paris: Gallimard, 2nd edn. 1976.
<i>EA</i>	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> . Translated by Bernard Frechtman, New York: The Citadel Press, 1948.
<i>FA</i>	<i>La force de l'âge</i> . Paris: Gallimard, 1960.
<i>FC</i>	<i>Force of Circumstance</i> . Translated by Richard Howard, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.
<i>FCh</i>	<i>La Force des Choses</i> . Paris: Gallimard, 1963.
<i>FM</i>	'La Femme et les mythes I, II, III'. <i>Les Temps Modernes</i> 3, XXXII, XXXIII (1947–49), 1921–43, 2199–24, <i>Les Temps Modernes</i> 4, XXXIV (1948), 62–95.
<i>FR</i>	<i>La femme rompue</i> . Paris: Gallimard, 1967.
<i>FW</i>	<i>Feminist Writings</i> . Edited by Margaret A. Simmons and Marybeth Timmermann, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015.
<i>Inv</i>	<i>L'Invitée</i> . Paris: Gallimard, 1943.
<i>LitM</i>	'Littérature et Métaphysique'. <i>Les Temps Modernes</i> 1 (1946), 1153–63.

- LitMe* 'Literature and Metaphysics'. Translated by Veronique Zaytzeff and Frederick M. Morrison, in *PhilW*, 268–77.
- LM* *Les Mandarins*. Paris: Gallimard, 1954.
- LoM* *La Longue Marche*. Paris: Gallimard, 1957.
- LoMe* *The Long March*. Translated by Austryn Wainhouse, London: André Deutsch and Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1958.
- LS* *Lettres à Sartre*. Paris: Gallimard, 1990.
- LV* *La Veillesse*. Paris: Gallimard, 1970.
- MA* *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*. Paris: Gallimard, 1947.
- MBS* 'Must we Burn de Sade?' Translated by Annette Michelson, in *The Marquis de Sade: An essay by Simone de Beauvoir with selections from his writings* (London: John Calder, 1962).
- MD* *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. Translated by James Kirkup, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1963.
- MJ* *Memoirs d'une jeune fille rangée*. Paris: Gallimard, 1958.
- MM* *All Men are Mortal, a Novel*. Translated by Leonard Friedman, Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1955.
- MTD* *Une mort très douce*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964.
- OA* *Old Age*. Translated by Patrick O'Brian, London: André Deutsch and Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1972.
- PC* *Pyrrhus and Cinéas*. Paris: Gallimard, 1944.
- PCe* 'Pyrrhus and Cineas'. Translated by Marybeth Timmermann and Stacy Keltner, in *PhilW*, 89–150.
- PhilW* *Philosophical Writings*. Edited by Margaret A. Simmons and Marybeth Timmermann, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004.
- PL* *The Prime of Life*. Translated by Peter Green, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
- PolW* *Political Writings*. Edited by Margaret A. Simmons and Marybeth Timmermann, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- QS* *Quand prime le spirituel*. Paris: Gallimard, 1979.
- RES* 'A Review of *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*'. Translated by Veronique Zaytzeff and Frederick Morrison, in *FW*, 58–66.
- SA* *Le Sang des autres: roman*, [Lausanne]: Marguerat, 1946.
- SSbm* *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier, London: Vintage Books, 2010.
- SSp* *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, London: Jonathan Cape, 1953.
- TCF* *Tout compte fait*. Paris: Gallimard, 1972.
- TM* *The mandarins: a novel*. Translated by Leonard Friedman, London: Collins, 1957.

- THM* *Tous les hommes sont mortels: roman*. Paris: Gallimard, 1946.
- VED* *A Very Easy Death*. Translated by Patrick O'Brian, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
- WD* *Wartime Diary*. Translated by Anne Deing Codero, edited by Margaret Simons and Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009.
- WDes* *The Woman Destroyed*. Translated by Patrick O'Brian, New York: Pantheon Books, 1969.
- WS* *When Things of the Spirit Come First: Five Early Tales*. Translated by Patrick O'Brian, London: Deutsch, 1982.

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