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Gender and Subjectivity: Simone de Beauvoir and Contemporary Feminism

Sonia Kruks

THEORETICAL DEBATE among North American feminists in the last decade has been widely influenced by postmodernism. Indeed, some have gone so far as to claim that feminist theory is inherently postmodern, its very project necessarily challenging such "Enlightenment myths" as the existence of a stable self or subject and the possibility of attaining objective truth about the world through the use of reason. They argue that feminist theory, with its deconstruction of what appears natural in our society, its focus on difference, and its subversion of the stable phallogentric norms of Western thought, "properly belongs in the terrain of postmodern philosophy" and that "feminist notions of the self, knowledge, and truth are too contradictory to those of the Enlightenment to be contained within its categories" (Flax 1987, 625).

I am not convinced, however, that such claims can be substantiated. For one thing, they presuppose a binary opposition, Enlightenment/postmodern, that is itself both historically and conceptually questionable. For another, we do not have a sufficiently clear consensus on what we might mean by "feminist" notions of "the self, knowledge, and truth" to permit us to be able to claim that they "properly" belong anywhere in particular. Most important, feminism is much more than a field of scholarship, and it is when we come to the terrain of feminist politics that postmodernism arguably presents the greatest difficulties.

In a spate of recent articles, authors such as Wendy Brown (1987), Nancy Hartsock (1987), and Linda Alcoff (1988) claim that postmod-

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ernism depoliticizes feminism and urge feminists to have virtually no truck with it.¹ Such authors argue that the problems that postmodernism presents for feminist practice, its radical nominalism or constructivism (including a constructivist account of the body) and its discourse-boundedness, preclude a grasp of the objective conditions of women's lives. Most significantly, they hold, the postmodern refusal to conceive of the self or subject as a knowing and volitional agent—a conception of agency that has underpinned most prior feminist visions of political action—implies an unacceptable passivity: women are reduced to no more than the effects of discursive practices, products of the play of signifiers, victims of a “discourse determinism.”² No place, they charge, is left in the postmodern account of social change for the organized and conscious struggle of groups or individuals. For postmodernists erroneously claim that change takes place through a suprahuman play of discourses over which we can have little or no influence.

Though such writers portray postmodernism as irremediably flawed and inimical to effective feminist politics, others who share some of their concerns also believe that it is still worth attempting to work toward a rapprochement with postmodernism. Sandra Harding, for example, has recently argued that feminist epistemology needs both Enlightenment and postmodern agendas and that neither agenda can be constructed to the total exclusion of the other (1990). Mary Poovey has neatly summed up the problem this way: “The challenge for those of us who are convinced both that real historical women do exist and share certain experiences *and* that deconstruction's demystifying of presence makes theoretical sense is to work out some way to think both women and ‘woman.’ It isn't an easy task” (1988, 52–53).³

My own view, while critical of the more grandiose claims sometimes made in the name of postmodernism—including those for the “death of the subject,” for the impossibility of any totalizing or continuous account of history, and for the irrelevance of biology to sexuality (let alone

¹ The following passage from Wendy Brown's article well sums up the general concerns and sentiments of these authors: “What woman needs to be deconstructed, to know herself as a field of discourse, a ‘fiction,’ a ‘text,’ a play of ‘free-floating signifiers’? These are the very things woman has been; indeed they constitute a marvelous, if parodied, shorthand for the history of women's oppression. Deconstructive politics may indeed be a remedy for a disease afflicting men—an inflated sense of self as *sui generis* individuals, as inventors, as systematizers, and as capable of godlike omnipotence. . . . But women will deconstruct only at the peril of sustaining their exclusion from history, losing the ‘narrative’ that is essential to their emergence into visible history, shying from power and the discovery of their own voices. Women can only emerge into the world as subjects and as claimants of power” (1987, 15).

² The phrase is Wendy Holloway's, cited by Teresa de Lauretis (1987, 15).

³ Two recent anthologies that encapsulate much of the debate about feminism and postmodernism are edited by Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby (1988) and Linda J. Nicholson (1990).

gender)—is that, at a more modest theoretical altitude than that to which its adherents usually aspire, postmodernism offers valuable tools and techniques to feminism. The best of what postmodern feminism has developed so far is not “high theory” so much as a series of radical glosses on the now classic starting point proposed by Simone de Beauvoir: “one is not born a woman, one becomes one.” Postmodern deconstructive techniques and genealogical methods, like the work of Beauvoir, may help us to de-essentialize and de-naturalize the concept of “woman.”

What we have learned (or perhaps re-learned) from postmodern theories is the very real power of discourse and the lack of transparency of language: there is no returning to a simple realism today. Yet I share with Poovey a concern that we remain able to talk about “real historical women” and that we do not embrace a kind of postmodern hyperconstructivism⁴ in which the very category of “women” can disappear (as, e.g., in Riley [1988]).

Similarly, what we have learned from the postmodern critique of the Enlightenment subject is that we should not attribute to consciousness the absolute power to constitute its own world: subjectivity is never “pure” or fully autonomous but inheres in selves that are shaped by cultural discourses and that are always embodied—selves that thus are also gendered. Yet to acknowledge all of this does not mean that we are obliged to proclaim definitively “the death of the subject.” It is important for feminist politics (as Alcoff and others have argued) that we remain able to grant a role to individual consciousness and agency, to insist even on a notion of individual responsibility for our actions. But we must do so while also acknowledging the ways in which subjectivity is discursively and socially constructed. In particular, we need to be able to account for gender as an aspect of subjectivity, but to do so without either essentializing or dehistoricizing it.

As a contribution to such an attempt to re-construct the subject, this article sets out to re-examine the work of an earlier thinker: Simone de Beauvoir. For it is not the case that before postmodernism there was only the Enlightenment or modernity. Indeed, if ever there was a binary op-

⁴ I have in mind here what Donna Haraway (1988) has critically referred to also as “strong constructivism.” Alcoff (1988) refers to this position as “nominalism.” However, this does not seem to me the appropriate term to use as it is quite possible to be at one and the same time a realist (in the sense of claiming that things have a substantial existence independent of our consciousness) and a nominalist (in the sense of denying that universal or general concepts describe anything more than a collection of discrete entities). Hume, e.g., subscribes to such a position and can be described as both a realist and a nominalist. Postmodern thinkers generally reject the claim that things have an existence independent of the human discourses (if not consciousnesses) that construct them. They do not, however, necessarily reject the claim that general concepts refer to something more than a collection of discrete entities. They are, in other words, antirealists who are not necessarily committed to nominalism in its classical sense.

position that needs deconstructing, it is that between modernity and postmodernity. Fortunately, we do not have to choose between the unhappy alternatives of an Enlightenment subject (i.e., an autonomous or self-constituting consciousness) on the one hand and the attempt, as Michel Foucault pithily put it, “to get rid of the subject itself” on the other ([1977] 1980, 117).⁵ In the work of Beauvoir, I want to argue, we find a nuanced conception of the subject that cannot be characterized as either Enlightenment or postmodern: rather, it is a conception of the subject as situated.

In her account of women as subjects “in situation,” Beauvoir can both acknowledge the weight of social construction, including gender, in the formation of the self and yet refuse to reduce the self to an “effect.” She can grant a degree of autonomy to the self—as is necessary in order to retain such key notions as political action, responsibility, and the oppression of the self—while also acknowledging the real constraints on autonomous subjectivity produced by oppressive situations. As I suggest later, Beauvoir’s account of situated subjectivity is one from which we could begin to develop an account of the gendering of subjectivity that can avoid both essentialism and hyperconstructivism.

It will perhaps be helpful to return to Beauvoir through a brief overview of recent intellectual history, recalling that, like the main proponents of postmodernism, Beauvoir wrote in a distinctly French intellectual milieu. Postmodernism and the existential phenomenology that shaped Beauvoir’s thought form (to write old-fashioned narrative) part of the same history. Although the postmodern critique of modernity can be traced back to Nietzsche or to the later work of Heidegger, what has been imported into American feminist theory in the last decade under the rubric of postmodernism is a cluster of ideas formulated primarily in France from the late 1960s onward.⁶ I would argue, however, that these ideas do not constitute the profound epistemic or epistemological break their authors frequently claim for them but, rather, are both absorptions of and reactions against the work of earlier generations of French thinkers.

Postmodernism emerged in France above all as a radicalizing critique of 1960s structuralism, as “poststructuralism.” In spite of its objectivist stance and claims to scientificity, structuralism easily passed into poststructuralism through their shared hostility to the classical notion of the subject. What links structuralism and poststructuralism in France is what

⁵ In another essay Foucault writes that if we are to talk of “the subject” at all, it “must be stripped of its creative role—thus analyzed as an effect only” ([1969] 1977a, 138). See also, for a “feminist” version, Julia Kristeva’s formulation: “The subject never is. The subject is only the signifying process and he appears only as a *signifying practice*, that is, only when he is absent *within the position* out of which social, historical and signifying activity unfolds” (1984, 215).

⁶ See Poovey (1988) for an excellent brief overview of this process of importation.

may be summed up as their antihumanism. From the insistence of Claude Lévi-Strauss that the aim of the human sciences is “to dissolve man” and the claims of Jacques Lacan and Louis Althusser that “the subject” is a mere “effect,” to Jacques Derrida’s attacks on the metaphysics of “presence” and Foucault’s arguments that subjects are “constituted” as a function of discourse, what has been under attack are those notions of autonomous subjectivity and agency that have indeed been central to philosophy since the Enlightenment.

Although this attack can, if one so chooses, be located in the broad historical sweep from modernity to postmodernity, the emergence of French antihumanism was in its origins also a far more parochial phenomenon: a Parisian-based reaction against the hegemony exercised by humanistic existential phenomenology and Marxism in postwar France. It was, above all, against Jean-Paul Sartre that the battle was waged. Indeed, the “dissolution of man” was first proclaimed by Lévi-Strauss in 1962 in the context of a chapter-length attack on Sartre’s *Critique of Dialectical Reason* ([1962] 1968, chap. 9, esp. 247). In the late 1970s, Foucault still bluntly stated his agenda as the attempt to use genealogy to displace not only Marxism but also the phenomenology of his student days: the phenomenological subject, in any form, had to be destroyed, he insisted. Long after we might have thought phenomenology dead in France, Foucault felt it necessary to insist on killing it yet again:

I don’t believe the problem can be resolved by historicizing the subject, as posited by the phenomenologists, fabricating a subject that evolves through the course of history. One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework . . . [Genealogy] is a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history. [(1977) 1980, 117]

This statement opposes as stark alternatives a conception of the subject as “constituent” (or constituting) and as “transcendental” to history, on the one hand, and a conception of the subject as constituted and to be analyzed as an “effect” of its historical framework, on the other. In it we find posed those oversimple choices between humanism and antihumanism, between Enlightenment or modernity and postmodernity that postmodernists frequently tend to present us with because of the dichotomizing lenses through which they view the history of

philosophy. In order to account for the weight of social structures, discourses, and practices in the shaping of subjectivity and yet still to acknowledge that an element of freedom is intrinsic to subjectivity—an element that allows us to talk, as I think we must, of individual human agency and responsibility—we need a far more complex, indeed dialectical, account of the subject than Foucault's work would grant us.⁷ Ironically, such an account is to be found in the work of some of the very French phenomenologists Foucault dismissed, including Beauvoir and Maurice Merleau-Ponty.⁸ It is also to be found in Sartre's later works, such as *Critique of Dialectical Reason* ([1960] 1976) and his monumental study of Flaubert ([1971] 1981, [1971] 1987, and [1971] 1989). As I have argued elsewhere (1990a, 1990b), however, it was not yet present in his 1940s "existentialism," of which *Being and Nothingness* (1943) was the fullest formulation: a work that still asserted (albeit paradoxically) a version of the classic Enlightenment subject.⁹

Simone de Beauvoir, the "Mother" of second wave feminism (Ascher 1987), was, of course, closely associated with Sartre personally and philosophically. When *The Second Sex* (1949) was adopted by American feminists in the late 1960s, its insight that one is not born but becomes a woman, that femininity is a social construct and not an unchangeable essence or a biological destiny, seemed a revelation. But although this insight remains central to postmodern feminism, by the late 1970s *The Second Sex* began to seem rather passé. It was not only that Beauvoir's descriptions of women's experiences increasingly applied to a bygone age and to women of a narrow social stratum. Her solutions—the book ended with a call for a "fraternal" collaboration of men and women in establishing "the reign of liberty in the midst of the world of the given"¹⁰—seemed to deny the female difference that many feminists now valorized. Her notion of liberation arguably implied making women conform to a male ideal. Her persistent use of sexist language (the Sartrean

⁷ This is the case at least until Foucault's very last years. There are some intriguing indications in one of his last interviews, e.g., that he was beginning to shift his ground on the question of the subject (see Foucault 1984, 381–90).

⁸ It was above all Merleau-Ponty (1908–61) who developed such a dialectical account of the subject. Merleau-Ponty worked closely with Beauvoir and Sartre on the journal *Les Temps Modernes* in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and Beauvoir had a deep familiarity with his work. I have argued elsewhere that in many ways her conception of subjectivity is closer to his than to Sartre's (see Kruks 1991, 285–300).

⁹ There are, of course, serious disagreements among Sartre scholars over what Sartre's early conception of subjectivity was and whether he altered it significantly in his later works. I have argued for this reading, that Sartre shifted his conception of subjectivity over time, in Kruks (1990a, esp. chap. 5, 146–79).

¹⁰ Beauvoir ([1949] 1974, 814). Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent page references citing Beauvoir are to *The Second Sex*.

language of “man” and “his” world) demonstrated how insensitive she had been to male dominance in her own intellectual milieu.

Moreover, since Beauvoir was said to share with Sartre not only a misogynist dislike of the female body but the entire philosophical baggage of “existentialism,” including the Sartrean conception of the subject, postmodern feminism has come to dismiss her as methodologically naïve.¹¹ Today Beauvoir is generally treated as a venerable ancestor, but she is no longer regarded as having anything of significance to contribute to the on-going development of feminist theory. Rather than consigning her to ancestor worship, however, I want to argue that Beauvoir remains highly relevant to current theoretical concerns. In particular she still speaks to the problem of developing an adequate feminist theory of the gendering of subjectivity.

Both in her ethical essays of the 1940s and in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir developed a somewhat submerged account of “being-in-situation,” or situated subjectivity, that was radically different from Sartre’s.¹² To claim that Beauvoir departs significantly from the notion of the autonomous subject is also, of course, to say that Beauvoir was far more philosophically independent from Sartre than has generally been recognized. I will begin from this last point, to show that Beauvoir’s work is not as consistently rooted in Sartrean philosophy as has been commonly supposed and that it departs from Sartre’s identification of subjectivity with an inviolable, autonomous consciousness. I will then suggest, in the final section, what it is about Beauvoir’s conception of the subject that makes it of enduring significance for the project of reconstructing our account of the gendering of subjectivity.

* * *

It was Beauvoir herself who insisted that her work was philosophically derivative of Sartre’s. Repeatedly, and until the last years of her life,

¹¹ For criticisms of her attitude to the female body see, e.g., McCall (1979, 209–23); Evans (1980, 395–404). For a discussion of Sartre’s horror of the female sex in *Being and Nothingness*, see Collins and Pierce (1976, 112–27). For critiques of Beauvoir’s adherence to existentialism and allegations of her ensuing philosophical naïveté, see McCall (1979); Le Doeuff (1980, 277–89); Elshtain (1981, 306–10); O’Brien (1981, 65–76); Evans (1985); and Okely (1986). For a discussion of some of these criticisms in their original French context, see Kaufmann (1986, 121–31).

¹² For Sartre the subject always constitutes the meaning of a situation, even if its facticities are beyond choice. See, esp., *Being and Nothingness* ([1943] 1956, esp. pt. 4, chap. 1, sec. 2, “Freedom and Facticity: The Situation,” 481–553). For Beauvoir, however, situations can become conditions that impose their meaning on the subject and that, as we will see, may even permeate subjectivity to the point where self-reflection and thus freedom cease to be possible.

Beauvoir said that she lacked originality and was merely Sartre's disciple in matters philosophical. She was willing to claim originality for herself in the field of literature, but in the more hallowed field of philosophy she could not compete but only follow. "On the philosophical level," she insisted, "I adhered completely to *Being and Nothingness* and later to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*."¹³ Too many scholars and commentators have taken Beauvoir at her word. Most assume that, as one author recently put it, she simply uses Sartre's concepts as "coat-hangers" on which to hang her own material, even to the point where it can be said that "Sartre's intellectual history becomes her own" (Okely 1986, 122).¹⁴ Yet such a view, even though embraced by Beauvoir herself, is misleading. For although Beauvoir doubtless tried to work within a Sartrean framework (i.e., the framework of *Being and Nothingness*), she did not wholly succeed. Many of the leaps and inconsistencies one can find in her work reflect, I believe, a tension between her formal adherence to Sartrean categories and the fact that the philosophical implications of her work are in large measure incompatible with Sartreanism.

For Sartre, subjectivity or "being-for-itself" is wholly autonomous and, because unconditioned, free. Man is an "absolute subject." Each subject, although existing "in situation" and thus encountering the facticity of the world of things (or "being-in-itself"), always freely and autonomously constitutes the meaning of its own situation through the capacity for transcendence. Moreover, in relations between human beings, which Sartre characterizes as the fundamentally conflictual relation of Self and Other, this absolute autonomy of the subject always remains intact. Thus, for Sartre, relations of unequal power have no bearing on the autonomy of the subject. "The slave in chains is as free as his master," Sartre tells us ([1943] 1956, 550), because each is equally free to choose

¹³ Beauvoir makes this statement in an interview with Sicard (1979, 325). In Schwarzer (1984), Beauvoir makes a similar point: "In philosophical terms, he was creative and I am not . . . I always recognized his superiority in that area. So where Sartre's philosophy is concerned, it is fair to say that I took my cue from him because I also embraced existentialism myself" (109). The account of Beauvoir's intellectual relationship to Sartre that emerges from Bair's recent biography (1990) also paints her as deferential to Sartre on philosophical matters.

¹⁴ This standard view of the relation of Sartre and Beauvoir has begun to be challenged, most systematically by Margaret A. Simons (1981, 25–42; and 1986, 165–79). See also Butler (1986, 35–49, esp. 48) for the suggestion that Beauvoir sought to "exorcise" Sartre's Cartesianism long before he tried to do so himself. Tong (1989) has also briefly remarked that Beauvoir should be read as philosophically independent of Sartre (196). Le Doeuff ([1989] 1991) is also extensively concerned with the Beauvoir-Sartre philosophic relationship. Even so, much more work remains to be done on this question. While I cannot develop the argument here, it seems to me that many themes in Sartre's *Cahiers pour une morale*, written in the late 1940s and posthumously published in 1983, draw from insights in Beauvoir's earliest ethical writings. A case could also be made that the concept of "destiny" in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* has its roots in Beauvoir's account of "woman's destiny" in pt. 1 of *The Second Sex*.

the meaning he gives his own situation. The question of material or political inequality between master and slave is simply irrelevant to their relation as two freedoms, as two absolute subjects. In the same vein, Sartre is able to write—in the middle of World War II!—that the Jew remains free in the face of the anti-Semite because he can choose his own attitude toward his persecutor.

In his delineation of the absolute subject, Sartre remains within what many feminists have suggested is a typically male conception of the subject. He presents a version of what Nancy Hartsock has characterized as the “walled city” view of the self, which conceives of the self as not only radically separate from others but also as always potentially hostile. As Hartsock has observed, Hegel’s account of the emergence of self-consciousness in the “master-slave dialectic,” the struggle in which each consciousness “seeks the death of the other”—an account that Sartre appropriates as the relation of self and other in *Being and Nothingness*—restates a common masculine experience: “The construction of a self in opposition to another who threatens one’s very being reverberates throughout the construction of both class society and the masculinist world view and results in a deep-going and hierarchical dualism” (Hartsock 1985, 241).¹⁵ Moreover, Sartre’s notion of the subject shares the abstract universalism that others have suggested comes with a specifically male notion of reason (see, e.g., Lloyd [1984] and Harding [1986]). To be master or slave, anti-Semite or Jew—or male or female—has, for Sartre, no bearing on the absolute and inviolable subjectivity of which each of us is the bearer.

Given these arguably masculinist elements of the Sartrean notion of the subject, his philosophy would not seem to provide a hospitable framework within which to develop feminist theory. Insofar as Beauvoir tries to remain within it, she does appeal to a predominantly male notion of abstract, universal freedom as the goal for the liberated woman. Existing in unhappy antagonism with the Sartrean framework, however, is a significantly different notion of the self from which Beauvoir operates. This is a less dualistic and more relational notion of the self, such as Hartsock and others have argued often emerges from the particularities

¹⁵ Hartsock is careful to point out that she is elaborating what Weber called an “ideal type.” This point needs to be emphasized, for it is important to avoid essentializing or dehistoricizing conceptions of “abstract masculinity” or the walled city subject. There is a danger of oversimplistically opposing them to conceptions of the “feminine” as concrete and relational. Few individuals correspond exactly to ideal types, and the Western philosophic tradition itself is far more untidy than some feminist readings of it might suggest. There is, e.g., an ethical socialist tradition, exemplified in the work of William Morris, that cuts across the abstract/relational dichotomy. Or, for a blistering attack on the abstract self, but one that functions as an unapologetic defense of patriarchy, one need look no further than Edmund Burke.

of women's life experience (Hartsock 1985, 242 ff.).¹⁶ It involves, contra the early Sartre, a tacit rejection of the notion of the "absolute subject" for a situated subject: a subject that is intrinsically intersubjective and embodied, thus always "interdependent" and permeable rather than walled.¹⁷

Beauvoir had already begun to develop a notion of the subject different from Sartre's well before she wrote *The Second Sex*. This is apparent in the summary in her autobiographical volume, *The Prime of Life*, of a series of conversations she had with Sartre in the spring of 1940. In these conversations, Sartre set out for her the main lines of the argument of what was to become *Being and Nothingness*. Their discussions, Beauvoir recalled in 1960, centered above all on the problem of "the relation of situation to freedom." On this point they disagreed:

I maintained that, from the point of view of freedom, as Sartre defined it—not as a stoical resignation but as an active transcendence of the given—not every situation is equal: what transcendence is possible for a woman locked up in a harem? Even such a cloistered existence could be lived in several different ways, Sartre said. I clung to my opinion for a long time and then made only a token submission. Basically I was right. But to have been able to defend my position, I would have had to abandon the terrain of individualist, thus idealist, morality, where we stood. [(1960) 1962, 34]

Beauvoir was right that her "submission" was no more than "token." Although she was never willing to challenge head-on Sartre's conception of freedom, or the notion of the impermeable "walled city subject" that it implied, she quietly subverted them. This becomes clearer in two essays

¹⁶ The argument that women experience the self as relational has now been made on a number of different grounds. It has been argued from a psychoanalytic viewpoint by Nancy Chodorow (1978) and others and from the evidence of social psychology by Carol Gilligan (1982). It has also been argued from the specificities of women's daily practical life by, among others, Sara Ruddick (1989). There now seems to be a clear, if minimal, consensus on what we might call the phenomenological evidence: most women in the West today do experience themselves more relationally than most men do. But it is important not to transform such phenomenological evidence into stronger claims for an essentially different female self.

¹⁷ It is one of the paradoxes of Sartre's work in the immediate postwar period that he defends such a radically individualistic and detotalized account of subjectivity while trying also to argue the case for socialist solidarity and a collective revolutionary project. His inability to bring these two dimensions of his thought into adequate relation with each other arguably accounts for his failure to complete the ethics that he attempted to write as a sequel to *Being and Nothingness*. I have argued this more fully in Kruks (1990b).

on ethics she wrote prior to *The Second Sex: Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944) and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* ([1947] 1967). In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, written while *Being and Nothingness* was in press, Beauvoir begins from the Sartrean autonomous subject but ends by putting in question the theory of fundamentally conflictual social relations that Sartre develops from it. Although Beauvoir presents freedoms as separate, she argues that, paradoxically, they are also intrinsically interdependent.¹⁸ If one tries to imagine a world in which one is the only person, the image is horrifying, she insists. For everything one does would be pointless unless there were other subjects to valorize it: “A man [*sic*] alone in the world would be paralysed by the self-evident vanity of all his goals; he could not bear to live” (1944, 65).¹⁹

Moreover, for others to valorize one’s project, Beauvoir argues, it is not enough that they are free merely in Sartre’s sense; it is not sufficient for them to be subjects each of whom constitutes, like the master and the slave, the meaning of his or her own discrete situation. Freedom for Beauvoir, far more than for Sartre, involves a practical subjectivity: the ability of each of us to act in the world so that we can take up each other’s projects and give them a future meaning.²⁰ And for this to be possible, we also require an equal degree of practical freedom:

The other’s freedom can do nothing for me unless my own goals can serve as his point of departure; it is by using the tool which I have invented that the other prolongs its existence; the scholar can only talk with men who have arrived at the same level of knowledge as himself . . . I must therefore endeavour to create for all men situations which will enable them to accompany and surpass my transcendence. I need their freedom to be available to use me, to preserve me in surpassing me. I require for men health, knowledge, well being, leisure, so that their freedom does not consume itself in fighting sickness, ignorance, misery. [1944, 113–14]

¹⁸ Sartre does, of course, discuss what he calls “being-for-others” in *Being and Nothingness*. However, for Sartre, unlike Beauvoir, being-for-others cannot be an ontological structure of the for-itself (see Sartre [1943] 1956, 282).

¹⁹ In all her works, *The Second Sex* included, Beauvoir repeatedly uses “man” to refer to all human beings and lapses into masculine forms for any discussion that does not positively require feminine ones. I have decided to keep such male-oriented language in my text where I either cite or paraphrase her. *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (as well as many of Beauvoir’s early political essays) remains unavailable in English. However, a few extracts have been translated (Miskowicz 1987, 135–42).

²⁰ Sartre also emphasizes practical subjectivity in his later attempt to synthesize Marxism and existentialism, in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* ([1960] 1976); yet again the question of the extent to which Sartre was intellectually influenced by Beauvoir is raised.

Already, then, Beauvoir is aware of the interdependence of subjectivities and, in ways that Sartre is not, of the permeability of the subject. She arguably takes the first step here toward adequately linking Sartre's individualistic existentialism with their shared commitment to the solidaristic and communal values of socialism. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she went a step further. There she suggests that oppression can permeate subjectivity to the point where consciousness itself becomes no more than a product of the oppressive situation. The freedom that Sartre had associated with subjectivity can, in a situation of extreme oppression, be wholly suppressed, even though it cannot be definitively eliminated. In such a situation, the oppressed become incapable of the project of resistance, unable to maintain the reflective distance necessary to be aware that they are oppressed. In such a situation, "living is only not dying, and human existence is indistinguishable from an absurd vegetation" ([1947] 1967, 82–83). The oppressed—and this is a point Beauvoir will later return to in her analysis of woman's situation—live in an "infantile world" of immediacy, with no sense of alternative futures. Freedom is no longer the capacity to choose how to live even the most constrained of situations, which Sartre had claimed it to be. Freedom is here seen as reducible to no more than a suppressed potentiality. It is made "immanent," unrealizable. Yet, for all this, freedom, is still not a "fiction" or an "imaginary" for Beauvoir. For should oppression start to weaken, freedom can always reerupt.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir's break from Sartre's version of the walled city subject becomes even more marked. She begins *The Second Sex* on what appears to be firmly Sartrean ground. "What is a woman?" she asks, and answers initially that woman is defined as that which is not man—as Other: "She is determined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject, he is the Absolute: she is the Other" (xix).²¹

Some commentators have used this and other similar passages to accuse Beauvoir of taking on board the Sartrean (and Hegelian) notion of the self-construction of subjectivity through conflict.²² Very early in the book, however, Beauvoir relativizes the notion of otherness by introducing a distinction not found in *Being and Nothingness*, and whose originality needs emphasizing. We can, she argues, distinguish two significantly different kinds of relations of otherness: those between social equals and

²¹ Translation altered. There are numerous difficulties with the only published translation of *The Second Sex*, by H. M. Parshley. In what follows I have retranslated many passages, although I still give page references to his standard English version.

²² See, e.g., Lloyd (1984, esp. 93–102); also Hartsock (1985, app. 2, 286–92). O'Brien (1981) has an interesting discussion of the ways in which she thinks Beauvoir misapplies Hegel's "master-slave dialectic" to women (69–72).

those that involve social inequality. Where the relation is one of equality, she suggests that otherness is “relativized” by a kind of “reciprocity”: each, as she had said in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, recognizes that the Other is an equal freedom. Where, however, otherness exists through relations of inequality, there reciprocity is to a greater or lesser extent abolished, replaced by relations of oppression and subjection. When one of the two parties in a conflict is privileged by having some material or physical advantage, then, “this one prevails over the other and undertakes to keep it in subjection” (1944, 69). It is not, then, woman’s otherness per se but her subjection—the nonreciprocal objectification of woman by man—that Beauvoir sets out to explain. It is not only that woman is the Other; she is the unequal Other. The question is, if this inequality is not inscribed in nature, how does it occur?

The short answer for Beauvoir is, of course, that “being a woman” is a socially constructed experience; it is to live a social situation that men have, for their own advantage, attempted to impose on women. Beauvoir’s discussion of the varying degrees to which women choose or are forced to accept this imposition suggests a continuum of different possible responses. Some—the “independent” women she describes in the last part of the book—consistently, if unsuccessfully, attempt to resist it. Some choose to accept it in what Sartre termed “bad faith” (a strategy to evade the pain and responsibility that come with freedom) because of the security and privilege it brings. Others, unable to conceive of real alternatives, accept it while engaging in forms of passive resistance and resentment. For yet others, as for the oppressed whom Beauvoir had described in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, freedom is suppressed to the point where they cease to be capable of choice or resistance. What is of interest here is that in describing the most oppressed end of the continuum Beauvoir departs even more sharply from the Sartrean notion of the subject than in her earlier essays. In so doing, she also breaks free of any kind of Enlightenment notion of the subject, although (as we will see) she certainly does not thereby intend to “get rid of the subject itself.”²³

Once again Beauvoir relativizes Sartre’s ideas in ways that significantly transform them. She begins by appearing to agree with Sartre that there

²³ Judith Butler (1986) has argued that for Beauvoir gender is always actively chosen. For Beauvoir, to “become a woman” is, according to Butler, “a purposive and appropriative set of acts, the acquisition of a skill, a ‘project’, to use Sartrian [*sic*] terms, to assume a certain corporeal style and significance” (36). Butler draws from this reading the claim that there is “an absolute difference” between gender and sex and that gender could thus be completely remade. Certainly such a liberatory message could be drawn from Beauvoir’s text, but only by ignoring the other end of the continuum: the point where Beauvoir breaks with Sartre in arguing that, for the oppressed, a “project” can cease to be possible.

is a radical disjuncture between the human and the natural realms, with freedom and subjectivity characterizing the human. Indeed, this claim is the basis for her rejection of deterministic biological explanations of the female condition. However, yet again, Sartre's dualistic ontology rapidly becomes transmuted in her hands. While biology is not itself "destiny," the oppressive situation that men across the ages have imposed on women and justified in large part on the grounds of real biological difference can function analogously to a natural force. Women can have a man-made destiny; indeed, she says at one point, "the whole of feminine history has been man made" (144). If a woman is oppressed to the point where her subjectivity is suppressed, then her situation is *de facto* her "destiny" and she ceases to be an effective or morally responsible agent. "Every subject," she writes,

continually affirms himself through his projects as a transcendence; he realizes his freedom only through his continual transcendence toward other freedoms; there is no other justification for present existence than its expansion towards an endlessly open future. Each time that transcendence falls back into immanence there is a degradation of existence into the 'in-itself,' of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject agrees to it; it takes the form of a frustration and an oppression if it is inflicted upon him. [xxxiii]

Woman, then, is locked in immanence by the situation man inflicts upon her—and she is not necessarily responsible for that condition. Although the language in the passage is Sartrean, the argument is not. A consistent Sartrean position would make woman responsible for herself, no matter how constrained her situation. But for Beauvoir, women are not the primary source of the problem even though some comply with their oppressors in "bad faith." For many, there is no moral fault because there simply is no possibility of choice. In the notion that freedom can "fall back into the 'in-itself,'" that the "for-itself" can be turned through the action of other (i.e., male) freedoms into its very opposite, Beauvoir has radically departed from the Sartrean notion of the absolute subject. For Sartre, there can be no middle ground. Either the for-itself, the uncaused upsurge of freedom, the "absolute subject," exists whatever the facticities of its situation, or else it does not exist at all. In the latter case, one is dealing with the realm of nature or inert being. Insofar as Beauvoir's account of woman's situation as one of immanence involves the claim that freedom, the for-itself, can be penetrated and modified by the in-itself, it implies another notion of the subject than Sartre's. Beauvoir is trying to describe human existence as a synthesis of freedom and con-

straint, of consciousness and materiality that, finally, is incompatible with Sartre's version of the walled city subject.

Indeed, so far has Beauvoir moved that one might even be tempted to formulate her position, albeit only at this extreme end of the spectrum, in Foucault's terms: woman is a historically constituted, not a constituting, subject. For not only does woman fail freely to choose her situation, according to Beauvoir, she is in the most extreme situation its product: "When . . . a group of individuals is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is they are inferior . . . yes, women on the whole *are* today inferior to men, which is to say that their situation gives them less possibilities" (xxviii).

Yet unlike Sartre's postmodern critics, Beauvoir never wholly discards a notion of free subjectivity. Even when it is suppressed, reduced to immanence, subjectivity remains a distinctly human potentiality. Thus, for example, while much of her painstaking and detailed account of the young girl's *formation*²⁴ could be retold in the Foucauldian mode of "the political technology of the body" and of "discipline," Beauvoir would never have agreed to abandon the notion of a repression of freedom. However suppressed, however disciplined, it is still freedom-made-immanent that distinguishes even the most constituted human subject from a trained animal. For Beauvoir, a real repression or oppression of this subject is also always possible, unlike for Foucault. However socially constructed its identities may be, for Beauvoir the subject is still something other than the "effect" of its conditionings. Although she avoids the essentialism of the subject as, for example, a Cartesian cogito, she also rejects the hyperconstructivism of the Foucauldian account, which presents the subject as discursively produced, to be "stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse" (Foucault [1969] 1977a, 138).

* * *

How then does Beauvoir develop this account of a situated subject that can be characterized neither as an autonomous walled city nor as uniquely a construct of discursive practices? Two fundamental insights orient the development of her account of situated subjectivity. The first is her recognition of what I will call the intersubjectivity of the subject. By this is meant something more than the interconnectedness of subjects. What is meant is the impossibility of a subjective self-constitution that is not always socially and culturally permeated. If all that took place be-

²⁴ Among numerous other problems of translation, Parshley renders Beauvoir's chapter heading *Formation* as "The Formative Years," thus weakening the notion of an active production of the self implied by the French term.

tween an individual man and woman was a struggle of consciousnesses between two human beings, one of whom happened to be male and one female, then we could not anticipate in advance which of them would objectify the other. If, however, we examine the relations of a husband and a wife, then it is very different. For the social institution of marriage in all its aspects—legal, economic, sexual, cultural, etc.—has formed in advance for the protagonists their own relation of inequality. As Beauvoir points out in a strikingly unSartrean passage, “*It is not as single individuals that human beings are to be defined in the first place; men and women have never stood opposed to each other in single combat; the couple is an original *Mitsein*; and as such it always appears as a permanent element in a larger collectivity*” (39, emphasis added).

Although subjectivity is individually lived, it is never, then, simply an individual constitution of existence. Rather, according to Beauvoir, it is both constituting and constituted. It is, to use Sartre’s later terminology, “singular universal” (Sartre [1972] 1983, 141–69). Thus it follows (as Beauvoir had already made clear in her ethical essays) that oppression of any kind affects more than its immediate victims and that liberatory struggles cannot be other than collective. That Beauvoir herself did not apparently see at the time she wrote *The Second Sex* that she should explicitly apply these conclusions to women (as she was already doing in the late 1940s to colonial peoples) is an indication of the isolation in which she wrote her book and of the limits to her own political imagination.²⁵ But this failure should not blind us to the implications of her argument.

Beauvoir’s later assessment of *The Second Sex* was that it was not a “militant” book (1972, 623). Insofar as it presents no call for a concerted resistance by women to their oppression, she was justified in this judgment. But if not militant, the book is in its implications deeply political—and it is here that much of its continuing relevance lies. For in her insistence that freedoms are interdependent and that freedom, however suppressed, however immanent, is an enduring potentiality, Beauvoir affirms that women’s oppression is real and that political struggle is indeed possible. While eschewing the naive assumptions of individual free agency and responsibility that are central to the Enlightenment conception of subjectivity, she also insists that subjectivity cannot be accounted for solely in terms of the effect of the apparently autonomous power of structures, technologies, or discourses.

²⁵ It should be noted, however, that it would have called for remarkable powers of imagination to envision an active women’s movement in postwar France. France was still a primarily agrarian, Catholic country, in which women had only just obtained the vote. The early defeat and occupation of France by the Germans meant that, unlike in the United States or Britain, few women were pushed out of their traditional domestic roles by the war.

I turn now to Beauvoir's second insight. This concerns the inherence of subjectivity in the body: the idea, which she borrows from Merleau-Ponty, that the subject is always properly called a "body-subject."²⁶ It is toward the specificities of embodied subjectivities that Beauvoir orients us to grasp the oppression of women. If the couple is an "original *Mitsein*" (Heidegger's term, meaning a fundamental "being with"),²⁷ this is because of its reproductive significance. By stressing that reproduction and sexuality are socially and culturally constituted phenomena, Beauvoir avoids the essentialism of biological reductionism. But she also avoids hyperconstructivism by arguing that reproduction is ontologically fundamental. If (as she had argued in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*) we need others to take up our projects and overcome our finitude, then each individual freedom requires "the perpetuation of the species." Thus, she now argues, "we can regard the phenomenon of reproduction as ontologically founded" (8).²⁸ In an argument that is neither realist nor constructivist but dialectical, Beauvoir insists that although biological "facts" have no significance outside the values that human beings give them, they do still have an objective reality: there are real limits to the significations we can choose. It is helpful to contrast Beauvoir with Foucault here. According to Foucault, "nothing in man—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for . . . self-recognition" ([1971] 1977b, 153). For Beauvoir, however, although the body is not a stable essence, it still is encountered by the self as an objective given. And whether or not a woman decides to procreate, it is an inescapable fact that of the two biological sexes her physiology is geared to the more extended and physiologically demanding role in perpetuating the species. Although a woman's body "is not itself sufficient to define her as woman," it is, Beauvoir argues, "an essential element of the situation she occupies in the world" (41).²⁹

²⁶ "Woman, like man, *is* her body," she writes, and then cites Merleau-Ponty in a note: "So I am my body, in so far, at least, as my experience goes, and conversely my body is as a life model, or as a preliminary sketch for my total being" (33).

²⁷ In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre had explicitly rejected the concept, arguing against Heidegger that there can be no fundamental ground of shared being and that all human relations are intrinsically conflictual ([1943] 1956, 300 ff.). Beauvoir's use of Heidegger's concept here represents a startling departure from Sartre's thinking.

²⁸ There is a certain privileging of heterosexual relations implicit in this claim insofar as they are the only sexual relations that permit the continuance of the human species. However, given Beauvoir's insistence that biology is not destiny, that "the facts of biology take on the values the existent bestows upon them" (41), this privileging is in no way definitive. In her chapter on lesbianism Beauvoir suggests that, although not guaranteed, greater reciprocity may in fact be more possible in lesbian relations than in heterosexual ones: "Between women . . . there is no struggle, no victory, no defeat; in exact reciprocity each is at once subject and object, sovereign and slave; duality becomes mutuality" (465).

²⁹ Thus I do not think that Beauvoir would have accepted the argument for the possibility of totally delinking sex and gender that Judith Butler claims to find implied in

Beauvoir has been criticized, with considerable justification, for her horror of the female body and its functions. There are indeed many passages in *The Second Sex* where women's bodily functions are identified with animality, passivity, and lack of freedom and are denigrated from the masculinist standpoint of an apparently disembodied reason and freedom. There is, however, another reading of woman's body to be found in Beauvoir's text as well. This reading, which I intend to pursue here as the more fruitful one for feminism, tells us that it is as body that human subjectivity both encounters and gives meaning to its own inescapable rootedness in objective reality. In Beauvoir's account, women encounter this in a particularly intense form, one whose alienating aspects she most emphasizes: "Woman, like man, is her body," she says, but immediately adds, "but her body is something other than herself" (33).

The important point that is lodged here against Enlightenment or walled city conceptions of the subject is that subjectivity is not given in closed contradistinction to a realm of objective entities that it oversees or contemplates in detachment. Rather, it is through the body that we each inhere in one and the same world. Moreover, this common inherence may form the basis for an overlapping or for an even fuller sharing of experience on which common action may be based.³⁰ Beauvoir's woman is not, then, a Sartrean for-itself for whom the body is merely a facticity. But neither, contra Foucault, is she merely a "soul . . . produced permanently around, on, the body, by the functioning of a power that is exercised on . . . those one supervises, trains, corrects" ([1975] 1977c, 30). Rather, for Beauvoir, we need to explore what she calls "the strange ambiguity of existence made body" (810). For "to be present in the world

her work (see Butler 1986, esp. 45–46; and 1987). Although anatomy is not destiny for Beauvoir, its connection to gender cannot be viewed as wholly contingent, either. If, as Monique Wittig observed (cited in Butler 1987, 135), we do not ask about the shape of the earlobes of a newborn baby whereas we do ask about its sex, this is surely because sex is, as Beauvoir argues, ontologically significant in a way that earlobes are not. To be born of a particular sex is to be born with or without the capacity to bear and to nourish the next generation of our species: i.e., to be born with or without significantly different options (however we may choose, or be forced, to use them) with regard to an activity that is intrinsic to human existence as we know it.

³⁰ It is intriguing to note that in "Situated Knowledges" (1988) Donna Haraway also stresses the connection between the existence of embodied selves and the possibility of an objective (or sharable) knowledge. Calling for "a doctrine of embodied objectivity," she observes that "objectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibilities. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision" (582–83). While I doubt whether Haraway would want to identify her own work with the phenomenological tradition, there are striking resonances between what she is saying and the views of both Beauvoir and, above all, Merleau-Ponty, on whose critique of "high-altitude thinking" Beauvoir drew.

implies strictly that there exists a body which is *at the same time* a thing in the world and a point of view on this world" (7, emphasis added).

For Beauvoir, subjectivity is corporally constituted; it is coextensive with the body, while being simultaneously "a point of view." This account is significantly different from Sartre's, for whom "my body for-me" and "my body for-others"—that is, the body as object—are on "different and incommunicable levels of being" ([1943] 1956, 374). She holds that biological difference itself, as well as the socially constructed significations that adhere to that difference, permeates subjectivity, but it is not reducible to their effect. Thus, rather than accepting either a realism of the kind that posits an inevitable feminine essence grounded in the body and in mothering or the position of much postmodern theory in which the body itself becomes no more than a discursive construct, Beauvoir suggests a less dichotomized account of subjectivity. Such an account allows us to acknowledge the sameness of women as biologically sexed and socially constructed females without pinning an immutable essence of womanhood onto "real historical women" whose lives may also be radically divergent, shaped also by class, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, and many other factors. Biological sex is always present as a given in the "lived experience" of the body.³¹ Yet our lived experience of the body is never "natural." It is, for Beauvoir, one of the always socially mediated experiences we have of the objective givens of our lives. Thus Beauvoir would, I think, approve of postmodern feminist projects to contest the discursive constructions of gender, even though she would reject the hyperconstructivist epistemology upon which they generally rest.

Thus, against the hyperconstructivism incipient in postmodernism, in which subjectivity itself can become but a fiction and everything, including the category of woman, can cease to be real, Beauvoir sketches an account of the gendering of subjectivity that can best be characterized as a dialectical realism. By this I mean an account in which not only discourse but also a discursively mediated "beyond" of discourse is acknowledged. This "beyond" of discourse includes, on the one hand, the existence of objective parameters to human life, such as sex, birth, disease, malnutrition, and death and, on the other hand, an always-present potentiality for that margin of autonomous thought and action in situation that Beauvoir calls "freedom." For unless we grant that real historical women live and die, that they do decide and act, and that they can in varying degrees be oppressed or free, we risk becoming our own grave diggers. If we need to seek a way between hyperconstructivism and es-

³¹ *L'expérience vécue* is the title Beauvoir gave to the second volume of *The Second Sex*. It is unfortunately rendered in the English translation as "Woman's Life Today," which fails to capture Beauvoir's phenomenological intent.

sentialism, Beauvoir's work remains richly suggestive as to how we might set about it.

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