

Beauvoir's Transdisciplinarity: From Philosophy to Gender Theory

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Beauvoir's relation to both feminist philosophy and gender theory is far from straightforward, although the intellectual traditions of both seem to spring, at least in part, from the articulation of their bases in *The Second Sex*. Deeply embedded in the European traditions of philosophy, especially phenomenology and existentialism, *The Second Sex* rests on two connected, specifically feminist, philosophical innovations: first, the generating of phenomenological experience; and second, the positing of a novel question (albeit in a classical philosophical form) for existential ontology: What is a woman? This question prepared the ground for contemporary discussions of the status and meaning of the category "woman," both in the French materialist and in the Anglo-American traditions.

The first innovation inspired the tradition of feminist phenomenology, one of the richest seams of feminist philosophy in the twentieth- and twenty-first century. Arguably, coupled with a Marxian influence, it also provided the model for the gender critique of an array of philosophical discourses (for example in epistemology, philosophy of science, ethics and aesthetics). In exposing the lie of the universalism of "Man" and insisting on a real, and not merely formal duality, Beauvoir seems, as well (although not uncontroversially) to have opened the question of "sexual difference" that would become so important for the psychoanalytically oriented francophone and Francophile feminist philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century. From an anglophone perspective, Beauvoir's posing of the novel philosophical problem of "Woman" in *The Second Sex* also seemed to crack open the distinction between sex and gender, thus positing a non-essentialist and non-biological account of gendered existence that provided the feminist impetus for the gender, queer and trans theories of later decades.

In the reception of *The Second Sex* in feminist philosophy and gender theory (broadly understood), these various strands have never been reconciled in a single theory or a single interpretation; indeed, they have often been pitted against each other. Beyond the

obvious claim, then, that *The Second Sex* was influential in many different directions, what is its critical place today in articulating the relation between feminist philosophy and gender theory?

Any answer to this question requires an account of Beauvoir's relation to philosophy. After a brief survey of recent attempts to identify the specificity of Beauvoir's philosophical contribution, I look at the transition from Beauvoir's early, more conventionally philosophical essays to the strikingly unconventional work that is *The Second Sex*. I argue that the philosophical innovations of *The Second Sex*, upon which the gender theory of the later twentieth century depends, were themselves dependent on Beauvoir's relations to other disciplines and other forms of intellectual production (especially anthropology, sociology and literature), such that Beauvoir's *philosophical* originality had multi- and interdisciplinary conditions of possibility. This aligns it more obviously with the twentieth-century tradition of critical theory rather than any "disciplinary" conception of philosophy. The trajectory from philosophy to gender theory is thus not necessarily a journey from one discipline to another but, as Beauvoir's example demonstrates, the possibility of a critical redefinition of the conception of philosophy such that it is able to take gender theory into account.

1. Beauvoir's Philosophy

Clearly, *The Second Sex* is not a conventionally philosophical work, and nor has it ever been received as such. But it was primarily in relation to studies of *The Second Sex* that the question of Beauvoir's philosophy – and Beauvoir's status as a philosopher – first arose. This was, of course, in the context of a discipline that was and remains – in both the continental and analytical traditions – defensive about its own definition and intellectual boundaries and, historically, inhospitable to women and "masculinist" (Le Doeuff 1991, 42). When explicitly feminist work in philosophy began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s, the mainstream reaction was largely hostile and the legitimacy of this work, *qua* philosophy, was denied. Feminist philosophers responded, in part, by criticizing the narrowness of the definition of philosophy that this involved. This criticism was just and right; but it does not mean that anything should now count as philosophy, or that philosophy is just whatever we want it to be. If, for example, we are to make claims about the philosophical significance or legacy of Beauvoir's work, we still need to be able to say something about the specificity of the discipline of philosophy to make those claims intelligible.

What is philosophy? This question is difficult to answer because there is no empirical unity of practice or of self-understanding among the diverse array of practices and texts that are gathered today under its name. Philosophy exists in the form of particular intellectual and institutional regimes of discourse, in particular, social and political and indeed geopolitical contexts. Recognizing this, we do not necessarily identify our own context and regime, exclusively, with philosophy. The diversity of these regimes means that the unity of philosophy (which makes the use of the word meaningful) lies not in any method, nor even in any common themes or questions; on the contrary, these precisely constitute its internal plurality. So where is it?

One answer is that the unity of philosophy is in its relation to its history. This does not contradict its de facto internal plurality, nor does it imply that there can be no contestation in our understanding of that history, or even in what constitutes it. Indeed, philosophy's critical relation to its own history, its self-renewal through interpretations of its history, is partly what gives rise to its internal plurality and to disagreements. At the same time there is a paradoxical unity-in-disunity of philosophy in relation to what we might loosely call its practice of abstraction. Within this, the scope of its field is unlimited (hence its quasi meta-disciplinary aspirations). Philosophy continually extends itself beyond its own historically defined areas to philosophize about new objects or about established objects in new ways. Any "unity" of philosophy is thus more than the empirical totality of its disciplinary practices in the present and certainly more than the hegemony of any particular form of practice.

The signal importance for philosophy of its own history accounts for the fact that many of the attempts to explain Beauvoir's philosophical significance have taken the form of accounts of her relations to her philosophical predecessors and contemporaries and her divergences from them. So, for example, central concepts in *The Second Sex* are said to be indebted to the late seventeenth-century French philosophy of the passions represented by Malebranche and Descartes (James 2003), to Rousseau (Scholz 2012), Hegel (Lundgren-Gothlin 1996; Bauer 2001; Sandford 2006), Heidegger (Gothlin 2003), Sartre (Vintges 1996) and Merleau-Ponty (Langer 2003; Weiss 2012). Beauvoir is said to be indebted to Descartes' methodological skepticism (Bauer 2001), Sartre's ontology (Arp 2001), and to the phenomenological tradition inaugurated by Husserl more generally (Vintges 1995, 1996; Bergoffen 1997; Heinämaa 2003). These accounts situate Beauvoir in the history of philosophy, explaining something of what one needs to know in order to appreciate the originality or interest of Beauvoir's use or understanding of specific concepts in relation to that tradition. In other words, they account for Beauvoir as a philosopher in terms of her critical, transformative relation to the history of philosophy.¹

On this basis, there have also been some attempts to construct "Beauvoir's philosophy," a distinctive philosophical oeuvre. In the philosophical monographs on Beauvoir in the last twenty years or so, these attempts have mainly focused on her development of an existentialist ethics, via readings of some of her early essays. Some of these accounts are based on claims about Beauvoir's peculiar philosophical method in relation to the history of philosophy (Bauer 2001, 4).² In a slightly different vein, Michel Kail (2006) argues that any attempt to understand Beauvoir's philosophy must begin from the recognition of her anti-naturalist or anaturalist phenomenological-existential concept of world. Justifying his reading, Kail contends that reading Beauvoir philosophically is a task of reconstruction, making explicit the founding concepts and problems in the absence of any programmatic statements about "her philosophy" from Beauvoir herself. This means that any claim about what constitutes "Beauvoir's philosophy" must be based on a strong interpretative, even speculative, reading. This helps explain why there is no consensus as to what constitutes Beauvoir's philosophy and as to which should be considered its main source texts. Some locate the most important moves firmly in the early essays on ethics (Arp 1995; Vintges 1996) or even earlier, in *She Came to Stay* and in Beauvoir's juvenilia (Simons 1999), while for others *The Second Sex* is the first decisive text (Bauer 2001).

2. The Shock of the New

Revisiting the question of Beauvoir's philosophy and her relation to philosophy from the point of view of literary genre, it is clear that Beauvoir's most conventionally philosophical works are her early essays and short books on predominantly ethical and political issues (Beauvoir later referred to this, somewhat disparagingly, as her "moral period" – Beauvoir 1965, 547). These include "Pyrrhus and Cineas" (1944), "Moral Idealism and Political Realism" and "Existentialism and Popular Wisdom" (both published in *Les temps modernes* in 1945), "An Eye for an Eye" (*Les temps modernes*, 1946), and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947). Why do we identify these as her most "conventionally" philosophical works? The answer lies, in part, in their form or genre, and in part in their subject matter and terms of reference. Existentialism was, at this time, a relatively recent phenomenon, but in a period of philosophical innovation in France (including, not least, the reception of Hegel and of German phenomenology) its novelty did not seem to count against it or preclude its claim to be philosophy. Beauvoir's early works are recognizable contributions to this new philosophical approach. The subheadings of "Pyrrhus and Cineas" make up a catalogue of common early twentieth-century philosophical concerns: "The Instant," "Infinity," "God," "Humanity," "Situation," "Others," "Devotion," "Communication," and "Action." All of these works deal with "classic" philosophical problems: freedom and action; the relation between ethics and politics; "subjective" and "objective" approaches to morality, value and meaning; the relation between the individual and the universal; death; evil; and the specificity of human being, which for Beauvoir, in this period, often refers to the "metaphysical fact" of the separation of consciousness (*EPW*, 212). The content, vocabulary, and references (notably Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger) in these essays all locate them firmly in a philosophical context, even if their existentialist positions are unconventional – even radical.

These works are, further, recognizable examples of a certain philosophical genre: the philosophical essay, in the French sense – in the tradition of Pascal.³ And while they bear witness to the breadth of Beauvoir's reading and knowledge, well beyond the confines of philosophy, they are sewn onto a philosophical canvas.⁴ We see this in library classifications of the work. Libraries using the Dewey Decimal Classification Scheme, for example, are highly likely to shelve *The Ethics of Ambiguity* at 194 (French philosophy) or 171 (ethics); one is most unlikely to find *The Second Sex* in either of those sections.⁵

Since the 1990s, which witnessed a resurgence of interest in Beauvoir's work in the anglophone academy from philosophers, scholarly emphasis on the early philosophical works has grown. Further, there is some consensus (always surprising in philosophy) concerning what is philosophically innovative in them, in relation to existentialism specifically, but also more broadly. Two major themes stand out. First, there is the attempt to make the Other or others necessary to the meaningfulness of my freedom, which thus leads to the centrality of ethical and political questions *within* existentialism and to the privileging of the other's freedom. Second, there is the growing insistence on the claims of facticity or the claims of the situation on the subject. This leads to the reconceptualization of the subject *through* the idea of the situation and most particularly

through the body, and problematizes the intelligibility of a metaphysical or ontological concept of freedom divorced from political and social contexts. These and related themes led Beauvoir to the central philosophical concept of this early work: *ambiguity*. The idea of the fundamental ambiguity of human existence and the shift of emphasis from freedom to situatedness are most characteristic of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, but the various paradoxes of freedom and existence and the centrality of the situation are already beginning to be recognized in the most compelling of the other early works (PC, 113, 129; EE).

Fittingly, the relation of Beauvoir's subsequent writings to this early work is decidedly ambiguous. On the one hand, we can no doubt trace the vicissitudes of the early, innovative themes into *The Second Sex*⁶ and *Old Age*; we can see the preoccupation with the ethical and metaphysical "problem" of the other as the red thread running through all of Beauvoir's published work, of all genres, beginning in the works of fiction that either predate or are contemporary with the philosophical writings of the "moral period." The interpretation of Beauvoir's philosophical originality as the construction of a consistently anti-Cartesian account of the subject throughout her essays, plays, novels, and major works is indeed compelling. On the other hand, the intellectual scope and ambition of *The Second Sex*, and the sheer unexpectedness of its literary form, mark a new beginning in Beauvoir's work. In the third volume of her autobiography especially, Beauvoir's own criticisms of the idealism of her early work partly encompasses *The Second Sex*, but we can also see the bulk of *The Second Sex* as the result of a first tearing away from the particular forms of abstraction that, in her view, so compromise the earlier works. As these are *specifically philosophical* forms of abstraction we can see that the ambiguity of the relation of *The Second Sex* to Beauvoir's early philosophical essays is also an ambiguity in relation to philosophy itself – or, rather, a critique of philosophy *in its traditional forms*, beyond the implicit critique of specific philosophers. This critique is manifested, in part, by a move away from traditional philosophical genres. It seems paradoxical to say that we can best understand this critique of traditional philosophy by looking at the major philosophical innovation of *The Second Sex*, but it is not. It is, rather, the demonstration of the dialectical nature of Beauvoir's relation to philosophy.

If we judge the importance of an author's contribution to the discipline of philosophy by their influence – even granted that "influence" may wax and wane, and that we may judge this differently at different periods – we may identify Beauvoir's most important contribution as the articulation of a novel philosophical problem, the consequences of which then ripple backwards into our understanding of canonical texts in the history of philosophy. This problem is the guiding question of *The Second Sex*: What is a woman? And although, as we all now know, one is not born, but becomes, a woman, Beauvoir's legacy is not in her specific answer to the newly minted philosophical problem of "woman" – it is in posing the question itself. Beauvoir *left us with the problem*, and thus inaugurated a new area of philosophy: philosophy of sex and gender.⁷

As I have said, much of the interpretative, reconstructive work on Beauvoir's relation to the history of philosophy has demonstrated the philosophical background of Beauvoir's thought. But the emergence of "woman" as a philosophical problem in

The Second Sex is not the result of a path traced in the history of philosophy; it is more of a philosophical event than that. It is the first result of a philosophical interrogation of the intellectual grounds for the social, cultural, and political status of women – grounds that will turn out to be incoherent, contradictory, and confusing. Of course, the problem of woman is articulated in the Introduction to *The Second Sex* with philosophical vocabulary; much of Book II is clearly indebted to Hegelian, existentialist, and phenomenological philosophies; more specific claims can and have been made, such that the book performs a kind of phenomenological reduction to reveal the object “woman” with our naturalistic, everyday assumptions suspended. But the overarching philosophical achievement of *The Second Sex* is the transformation of the empirical datum “woman” into a philosophical object, an act of extraordinary philosophical imagination.

This is not to say that no one had before spoken of “woman” in a philosophical text, nor even that “woman” had never before functioned as a philosophical category. “Woman” was one of Rousseau’s favorite topics, for example, and the category of “woman” performs an important function in Hegel’s philosophy. *The Second Sex*, however, postulates “woman” as the central philosophical problem, not an element in a philosophy, and to this extent makes possible critical reflection on this aspect of the philosophies of Rousseau, Hegel, and so on. Within a broad ethical frame, “woman” becomes the object of an ontological study (what is a woman?), the object of an existentialist analysis (what is it *to be*, that is *to exist as*, a woman?) and the object – in the widest sense – of a phenomenological account (what is the lived experience of being a woman?).⁸ Beauvoir’s legacy, in this respect, is not a series of answers, but the opening of the conceptual space within which it has been possible to pose further questions and make attempts to answer them. This is demonstrated by the different, and indeed often incompatible positions of those who might legitimately claim to be the heirs of this legacy: Shulamith Firestone, Luce Irigaray, Monique Wittig, Christine Delphy, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, among others.

3. From Philosophy ...

However, Beauvoir did not just introduce a new object for philosophical scrutiny, adding another possible topic to the considerable list of already existing topics. *The Second Sex* stands not just as a contribution to philosophy, but also – and perhaps more importantly – as a performative critique of its traditional forms. If *The Second Sex* only offered philosophy a novel conceptual object or puzzle that it could store in its historical repository alongside all the other ones (beauty, the good, truth, justice, evil, morality, value, consciousness, freedom, and so on) the contribution would have been merely additive; instead, the contribution was transformative.

To understand this we need to take seriously Beauvoir’s own criticisms of her early work, and to see how these inform the critical and theoretical work of *The Second Sex*. In *The Prime of Life*, the second volume of her autobiography, Beauvoir characterizes “Pyrrhus and Cineas” as individualistic, subjectivist, and tinged with a streak of idealism (PL, 549–50). In *Force of Circumstance* (the third volume) she is even harsher with her assessment of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Her main criticism is that the moral types of

The Ethics of Ambiguity (the nihilist, the aesthete, the adventurer, and so on) and its moral analyses more generally are too abstract:

the attitudes I examine are [in fact] explained by objective conditions; I limited myself to isolating their moral significance to such an extent that my portraits are not situated on any level of reality. I was in error when I thought I could define a morality independent of a social context. (FC, 76)

This tendency to a certain kind of abstraction is also described as “the idealism that blemishes these essays” (FC, 76). Perhaps confusingly, the same criticism is leveled at particular aspects of *The Second Sex*. Looking back on its content Beauvoir writes:

I should take a more materialist position today in the first volume. I should base the notion of woman as *other* and the Manichean argument it entails not on an idealistic and a priori struggle of consciousnesses, but on the facts of supply and demand. (FC, 202, translation modified)

What does Beauvoir mean by “idealism” in these criticisms? Although she is not attributing to her former self any explicit attachment to a position that would deny the existence of mind-independent entities, the accusation is related to this sense of idealism. For the problem with the earlier work, her criticisms imply, was its tendency to proceed as if the fact of individual consciousness and its strivings was primary, and that the salience of social relations and ways of being in the world could be deduced from this alone.⁹ One aspect of *The Second Sex* is singled out for the same criticism: the implicit claim, in the Introduction, that the explanation for the existence of the social relation of patriarchy rests, in the last instance, on an a priori feature of consciousness: “a fundamental hostility to any other consciousness is found in consciousness itself; the subject posits itself only in opposition; it asserts itself as the essential and sets up the other as inessential, as the object” (TSS 7/LDS I:17). In fact, the rest of the analyses of *The Second Sex* do not depend at all on this claim; indeed, they refute it by piling up the evidence for the case that the existence of woman is socially, politically, culturally, and ideologically constructed, such that no satisfactory answer to the question “What is a woman?” could possibly follow from an a priori axiom of consciousness.

In *Force of Circumstance* Beauvoir remembers a different starting point for *The Second Sex*, deciding to “give all my attention to finding out about the condition of woman in its broadest terms” (FC, 103). Obviously, she was never going to find out about “the condition of woman in general” (FC, 195) by studying only philosophy (which, to all intents and purposes falls under the category of “mythology” as far as “woman” is concerned). Her data comes from, among other sources, studies in physiology, anthropology, history and historiography, religious and mystical texts, law, literature, psychology, and biography. In *Force of Circumstance* Beauvoir says that she “tried to establish some order in the picture which at first appeared to me completely incoherent; in every case, man put himself forward as the Subject and considered the woman as an Object, the Other” (FC, 195). Thus Beauvoir structures the otherwise incoherent picture with philosophical categories that, although they may have a metaphysical lineage, function non-metaphysically in *The Second Sex* to describe the unequal and hierarchical

positions of men and women in the social relation. At the same time, the political charge that inevitably attaches to the “metaphysical” categories, and something of their ideological deployment, is revealed. It is in this context, in which the appearance of naturalness concerning “woman’s general condition” and the appearance of celestial objectivity concerning metaphysical categories have fallen away, that the philosophical question “What is a woman?” is able to be posed.

Luce Irigaray objected to this question, posed in this form: “there is no way I would ‘answer’ that question. The question ‘what is ...?’ is the question – the metaphysical question – to which the feminine does not allow itself to submit” (Irigaray 1985, 122). But for Beauvoir it was not a metaphysical question, although it mimicked the traditional form of one. The question emerges not from, or in the service of, a philosophical search after essences; it is the form in which Beauvoir expresses her critical approach to the mytho-ideology of “woman”. Rather than soliciting an answer it addresses itself critically to the discourses that think that they already know. And it does so not primarily out of philosophical interest, but as part of a project of social criticism with an emancipatory aim. To this extent we may see *The Second Sex* as part of that tradition now known as “critical theory.”

What is “critical theory”? Historically, the name is mainly attached to the thinkers of the “Frankfurt School,” notably Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Herbert Marcuse. The two features that are relevant here may be gleaned via Horkheimer’s essay “Traditional and Critical Theory.” First, “critical theory” examines and aims to explain social forms and phenomena (or “society itself”: Horkheimer 1972, 207) with an explicitly transformative and emancipatory agenda. Second, in positing itself as critical, it opposes itself to “traditional” theory, which includes both speculative philosophy and the empirical social sciences. Whereas critical theory works from the presupposition that the activity of intellectual production is part of the social-historical totality, traditional theory (or the thinking that produces it) conceives of itself as external to that totality. In this traditional theory is, for Horkheimer, inevitably idealist. If it posits a set of categories that bear no relation to things “as they are interpreted in the existing order” it tacitly condones “the existing order,” whereas critical theory tries to look at how things actually are (at what, for example, capitalism actually makes of the laborer) in order, precisely, to condemn it. Traditional theory unwittingly and uncritically reflects the social structure from whence it spawns. Thus the disciplinary division of intellectual labor, with its knowledge production related to discrete fields of entities, reflects the division of industrial labor – which means that the appearance of isolated spheres of inquiry (the illusion of their self-sufficiency and independence) masks the fact that they are “moments in the social process of production, even if they be almost or entirely unproductive in the narrower sense” (Horkheimer 1972, 197). The *soi-disant* “self-sufficient” and “independent” discipline par excellence is, of course, philosophy.

The Second Sex is a work of critical theory in this sense. *The Second Sex* is a critique of the society that produces woman as Other. It presents “woman” as she “is interpreted in the existing order,” as what society actually makes of her precisely in order to question this state of affairs (*TSS* 13/*LDS* I:25). Seen in this way the phenomenological approach in Volume II concerns the lived experience of alienation and might be compared to Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844) quite as much

as anything from Merleau-Ponty or Sartre. It is obvious that Beauvoir's criticisms of her early work (and of the a priori philosophical abstractions of *The Second Sex*) can be seen as an example of the critique of the idealism of "traditional" philosophy by critical theory. It is less obvious, but nevertheless the case, that the same is true of *The Second Sex* itself, to the extent that it attempts to conduct its analyses from the same standpoint as its "object" ("woman"), immersed in the same concrete social forms, rather than from the external standpoint of a "traditional" theory. Or, to the extent that existentialist ethics is a "traditional" theory, its a priori abstractions are at odds with the concrete analyses of *The Second Sex* – which was, indeed, Beauvoir's later view of things.

4. ... To Gender Theory

We can think of the transition from Beauvoir's earlier works to *The Second Sex* as the transition from traditional philosophy to a philosophical transdisciplinarity. What do we mean by this?

All readers of *The Second Sex* can see that its range of reference and the diversity of its intellectual sources mean that it demonstrates what is usually called "interdisciplinarity" – indeed, that it is exemplary in this respect. Further, even when it is argued that gender studies constitutes a discipline in its own right (Pullkinen 2015), feminist theorists can usually agree on at least one thing – that the history and practice of feminist theorizing is unusually interdisciplinary. As Margaret Whitford argued in 1996, interdisciplinarity is an obligation in feminist research, including feminist research in philosophy. With any use of the category of "gender" for example,

one is more or less obliged to see what has happened to the concept in adjacent disciplines. And once one posits a structure as systemic, the supporting evidence cannot be confined to one discipline only, but gains in weight and plausibility from making links with evidence or arguments in other disciplines. (Whitford 1996, 33–4)

Writing from the standpoint of feminist philosophy, Whitford implies that anyone who does not do this is in danger of either reinventing the wheel or making claims that, from the standpoint of the knowledge of other disciplines, may seem naive or outdated. This is surely correct. Many readers of *The Second Sex* see Beauvoir's interdisciplinarity in these terms, and see it, further, leading to a synthetic result.

But there is more to it than this. For when interdisciplinary research yields a new concept, or redefines an existing concept in a way that was not previously seen in any of the disciplines on which it draws, that work becomes *transdisciplinary*.¹⁰ If we call this *philosophical* transdisciplinarity that is because the construction of the concept in question still involves a practice of abstraction associated with a claim to universality hitherto associated with philosophy. If we call it philosophical *transdisciplinarity* that is because, in positing the concept and the thought that thinks it as socially and historically conditioned it takes up a critical relation to philosophy traditionally understood and its tendency to idealism (in Beauvoir's sense). In *The Second Sex* "woman" is a concept like this.

If the most important theoretical legacy of *The Second Sex* is not Beauvoir's answer to the question "What is a woman?" but her posing of it, and the opening of the conceptual space for further questions, we must expect her successors to effect their own theoretical transformations. It may be true that, strictly speaking, there is no sex/gender distinction in *The Second Sex* (Sandford 1999; Gatens 2003), but the move from "woman" to "gender" in feminist theory was an extraordinarily productive development of Beauvoir's work. "Gender," as a critical or analytical (rather than descriptive or categorical) concept (Scott 1986) belongs to no discipline but troubles them all. "Gender theory," as in its still-powerful articulation in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), is just that critique of society and of idealist thinking (which Butler calls "metaphysics"), from the standpoint of the thinker embedded in it, which we call "critical theory." *The Second Sex* is the historical meeting point of critical theory and feminism, via philosophy. Gender theory, taking advantage of later developments (in psychoanalytic psychology and sociology especially) is one of its results.

Notes

- 1 Deutscher (2008, 14–15) puts this in a different way: Beauvoir "worked by means of alchemic conversion."
- 2 See also Bauer (2001, 17), Arp (1995), and Vintges (1996, 5).
- 3 Although as late as 1979 Beauvoir *contrasted* the "essay" genre – to which she assigned *The Ethics of Ambiguity* – with philosophy. See Simons's interview with Beauvoir (Simons 1999, 11).
- 4 Indeed, these are the essays collected together in the volume of Beauvoir's *Philosophical Writings* in the University of Illinois Press series of her works.
- 5 *The Second Sex* is normally found at 305.42 – 305 being the subsection of the Social Sciences for "Groups of People," .4 the part of that for "People by gender or sex." Using the Library of Congress Classification System *The Second Sex* is often shelved at HQ – the "Family, Marriage, Women" subclass of the social sciences. Elsewhere we see it under Literature, or Languages. My thanks to Cheryl Clark in the Kingston University library for help with this.
- 6 See, in particular, Arp (2001), chapter 7.
- 7 See Sandford (2006), chapter 5, "Woman."
- 8 There are, of course, more sympathetic attempts to think about the status of women philosophically, notably that of John Stuart Mill (influenced by Harriet Taylor Mill) in his essay "The Subjection of Women." But while Mill undoubtedly played an important role in demonstrating the inadequacy and incoherence of claims about women's natural inferiority and their natural capacities (or incapacities), he did not interrogate the category of 'woman' itself, as Beauvoir does. I have argued elsewhere that Plato's discussion of female guardians in *The Republic* does, effectively, raise ontological questions about 'woman' (Sandford 2010); but this interpretation of Plato has as its condition of possibility Beauvoir's conceptual distinction between "female" and "woman" and her attempt to specify the latter ontologically.
- 9 "I do not disapprove of my anxiety to provide existentialist morals with a material content [in 'Pyrrhus and Cineas']; the annoying thing was to be enmeshed with individualism still, at the very moment I thought I had escaped it. An individual, I thought, only receives a human dimension by recognizing the existence of others. Yet, in my essay, coexistence appears as a sort of accident that each individual should somehow surmount; he should begin by hammering out his 'project' in solitary state, and only then ask the mass of mankind to endorse its validity" (Beauvoir 1965, 549–50).

- 10 For a more detailed discussion of philosophy, gender theory and transdisciplinarity (in distinction from multi- and interdisciplinarity) see Sandford (2015). On transdisciplinarity more generally see Osborne (2015).

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Further Reading

- Bauer, Nancy. 2001. *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy & Feminism*. New York: Columbia University Press. Perhaps the best overall introduction to Beauvoir and philosophy, this argues for an understanding of Beauvoir's philosophical originality in terms of her method of appropriation of philosophical abstractions through the concrete experience of sexed embodiment.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge. Now the classic work of philosophical gender studies.
- Deutscher, Penelope. 2008. *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. A sophisticated philosophical reading of Beauvoir's work as transformative appropriation of aspects of the philosophical tradition.
- Moi, Toril. 1994. *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*. Oxford: Blackwell. Moi is one of the very best writers on Beauvoir and feminist theory. This book includes chapters on Beauvoir's relation to materialist feminist theory.
- Sandford, Stella. 2006. *How to Read Beauvoir*. London: Granta (also New York: Norton). A short and accessible guide to reading Beauvoir philosophically, each chapter based on an extracts from Beauvoir's works.