

A CLASSIC OF SITUATEDNESS: THE SECOND SEX AND ITS FEMINIST EFFECTS

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The Second Sex is a two-volume study of modern women's physical, psychological, intellectual, and spiritual situatedness, which provides a perspective on twentieth-century philosophy about both the human condition and gender. The work was written in the late 1940s by the French writer and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, who is often associated with her companion Jean-Paul Sartre, a writer and philosopher in his own right (Simons 1999, 41-55). It was published in France in 1949, with its first, and not quite complete, English translation appearing in 1953 (Simons 1999, 61-72). Its first volume gives the general coordinates that determine women's position in the secular, Western societies of the first half of the twentieth century. Accordingly, the volume focuses on facts, namely the biological, psychological, and historical data that have determined this position, and on myths, or literary representations that in some way confirm it. The second volume analyzes the experience of women's life in de Beauvoir's day and age. The focus is on women whose background is similar to de Beauvoir's, and consists of a middle-class upbringing in a European type of societal and family organization like the French one, still quite heavily dominated by Catholicism (Simons 1995, 1-25). The book had a central role in the development of an international women's movement in the second half of the twentieth century, and in the personal and intellectual development of its author. In the process of writing *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir made her gendered subject position the center of her existentialist discourse (Mahon 1997, 96-122). In managing the variety of responses this work's publication caused, she learned to honor and accept the strength of her independent, feminist, philosophical voice (Bair 1990, 379-95). However, she did not quite manage to rescue female embodiment from the misogynist discursiveness in which it was immersed.

Upon its original publication, the work sold surprisingly well and

attracted a generous amount of negative attention from French intellectuals, who were mostly male and fairly misogynist (Bair 1990, 407 and 396-411; Moi 1993, 312). Its first English translation was made by a male zoologist, who was more preoccupied with women's biology than with our history, and amputated the text accordingly (Simons 1999, 61-72). Even so, this translation inspired Betty Friedan's pioneering *The Feminine Mystique*, among other seminal works on women's situation in the 1970s. Friedan's book helped to raise the consciousness of mid-America's unpaid homemakers and the social energy that later converged in the global women's movement of the so-called second wave (Moi 1993, 313). As part of this energy was being absorbed into academic culture, *The Second Sex* became a staple in early North-American women's studies courses (Mahon 1997, x). However, when this movement came into its full sway, women focused on recuperating a positive sense of female embodiment and erotic potential, and so de Beauvoir's work suffered a temporary eclipse (Moi 1993, 315-16). At this time, new generations of women are being raised and educated in a cultural context that, ironically, tends to either take the rights women conquered in the 1970s for granted, or to forget the hardships they cost. In conjunction with this situation, a new major surge of positive attention is investing de Beauvoir's oeuvre, and especially *The Second Sex* (Simons ed. 1999). De Beauvoir's contributions to Sartre's system of thought are being studied, rather than his to hers (Fullbrook 1999; Mahon 68-87), and de Beauvoir herself is presented as the founder of radical feminist philosophy (Simons 1999, 145-166).

In this article I will focus on the ways in which, in the fifty years of its existence, *The Second Sex* has been very successful in contributing to changing women's attitude towards ourselves, and societal attitude towards us. As a result, it has defeated the tenability of its own existentialist thesis, namely that woman is the "other" of humanistic discourse, and that she represents immanence to man's subjectivity and transcendence. I will then proceed to situate the work in its social, philosophical, historical, and biographical context, and I will present a detailed analysis of the sections that are of special significance today.

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De Beauvoir opens her introduction to the two volumes by expressing her embarrassment in taking up the topic of her work, a nondescript "woman," who actually represents middle-class French women of her day and age. She immediately proceeds to disclaim the affinity between the topic of her work and herself, as she begins to talk

about “women” in the third person. “The subject,” she explains, “is irritating, especially to women” (xxxvi). This rhetorical strategy carves a discursive space from which de Beauvoir’s voice can speak about those like herself in a gender-less voice, which, not being connoted as female, acquires the authority of conventional objectiveness. The ambiguity of this choice reflects de Beauvoir’s position on ethics previously articulated in her philosophical work, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. De Beauvoir’s is a female voice speaking in-between two distant feminist upsurges, the first-wave, connected with suffrage in the early twentieth century, and the second-wave, connected with sexual and reproductive rights, in the 1970s. She is not sure that a feminist listening is there for her, but hopes that one will grow from the seams in her ambivalent rhetoric.

The introduction proceeds to explain how “woman” has been constructed as man’s “other” in philosophical and cultural discourse. The discursive construction is so pervasive that most women are not even remotely aware of it. As de Beauvoir explains, “[a] man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man” (xxxviii). However, de Beauvoir continues, in cultural discourse, a woman is often described as an “imperfect man,” and as an “incidental being” with a “natural defectiveness” (xxxix). This can be explained based on Hegel’s claim that human society is not “a *Mitsein* [being-with] or fellowship based on solidarity and friendliness” but rather a clash of consciousnesses (xli). Due to this “fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness... the subject can be posed only in being opposed—he sets himself up as the essential, as opposed to the other, the inessential, the object” (xli). Thus de Beauvoir acknowledges that women of her day and age, herself included, lived in the shadow of men. She also implicitly expresses her desire to step out of that oppressive shelter.

The first chapter of the first volume is on biology. De Beauvoir begins by summarizing prevalent understandings of the relationships between individuals and their species, based on the Darwinian notion that dimorphic species are at the top of the evolutionary scale. According to this logic, individuals in a dimorphic species are organized around the binary opposition male/female, with the first element in a dominant position with respect to the second. As de Beauvoir explains,

[o]ne of the most remarkable features to be noted as we survey the scale of animal life is that as we go up, individuality is seen to be more and more fully developed. At the bottom, life is concerned only with the survival of the species as a whole; at the top, life seeks expression through particular individuals ... in some lower species ... the egg,

and hence the female, is supreme ... but here the female is hardly more than an abdomen [of] giant proportions ... her body a shapeless sac, her organs degenerated in favor of the egg (17).

De Beauvoir goes on to describe more relationships of individuals to their species as binary opposites made of male individual freedom and female collective slavery. Then she proceeds to explain that, due to the evolution of the human species with respect to simpler organisms, in humans more prenatal and postnatal parental care is necessary. Hence, while the human male “recovers his individuality intact” after his sperm fecundates the ovum of the female (23), the female, upon fecundation, “becomes, in part, another than herself” (23). She is therefore “alienated” and “her body is something other than herself” (30). This system is what turns her into the “Other,” and “enslaves [her] to the species” (17), since “the conflict between species and individual, which sometimes assumes dramatic force at childbirth, endows the feminine body with a disturbing frailty” (32).

De Beauvoir argues that the poorly balanced social order around which human life is organized has developed out of the biological order according to which more is demanded of women than it is of men when it comes to keeping our species alive and continuing itself. As a result, then, femininity represents values symbolically related to presence, plenitude, and immanence, while masculinity represents timelessness, desire, and transcendence. This order, de Beauvoir implies, is a mere reflection of nature’s power over human intelligence. As she explains, “Hegel is right in seeing the subjective element in the male, while the female remains wrapped up in the species” (24).

Having established that “woman” is constructed as the “other” with respect to man, who constructs himself as the subject of human freedom, thought, and action, de Beauvoir proceeds to explain that, precisely due to this process of cultural construction, what woman is in a given situation is not “born,” but made, or culturally manufactured. As de Beauvoir says, “[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes a woman” (281). This construction is responsible for the fact that, in the culture of de Beauvoir’s day and age, women represented immanence, namely the perpetuation of the species and its accompanying repetitive acts of childbearing and rearing, while men represented transcendence, namely existing for a project and/or purpose besides the self. In philosophical terms, transcendence is existence *pour-soi* (for oneself), while immanence is existence *en-soi*, or in oneself. Transcendence serves the impulses of the individual, immanence those of the species as a whole. De Beauvoir did not approve of this

situation, and offered a remedy, in the example her lifestyle implicitly modeled, by rejecting both motherhood and marriage as regulated by the sexist conventions of her day.

Having exposed the facts and myths concerning the vexed question of maternity, de Beauvoir's second volume proceeds to describe the experience of being a woman of childbearing age in her day. In the 1940s and '50s, French women did not yet have any parental rights over their children, and married women needed their husband's permission to exercise their professions, change residence, or even open a bank account. Needless to say, abortion was still a crime according to secular laws (Moi 1993, 320-21). De Beauvoir responds to this situation with a fierce defense of a woman's right to choose whether or not to bear a child. Since women had not been consulted about the making of abortion laws, she argues, this situation "expose[s] the hypocrisy of the masculine moral code. Men universally forbid abortion, but individually they accept it as a convenient solution" for the unwanted results of their sexual behavior (517). Hence, de Beauvoir concludes, the laws that make abortion a crime are a prime example of bad faith. They must be eliminated even as abortion should be regarded as an extreme remedy, which inflicts an undue burden on a woman's body and whose incidence can be minimized by contraception (126-27, 509-522).

As she proceeds to describe the situatedness of women who live their lives outside of the institutions of motherhood and marriage, de Beauvoir focuses on lesbians, whom she describes as women whose "sexuality is in no way determined by any anatomical 'fate'" (425). Lesbians are described as neither "superior" nor less developed than other women, but rather women who "at each moment [reappraise] their past, through a new choice, the 'normality' [of which] must be evaluated according to its authenticity" (427). De Beauvoir launches a ferocious attack on the homophobic psychoanalytical practices of her day. As she explains, "[t]he great mistake of psychoanalysis is, through moralistic conformity, to regard [the choice of lesbian love] as never other than an inauthentic attitude" (428). Hence, while she does not view lesbianism as an identity-constituting sexual orientation, she fiercely defends it as a chosen practice whose claims to authenticity are just as valid as any. Furthermore, de Beauvoir suggests that for women who are not prepared to inhabit the social construct that reduces them to the condition of an "other" in the shadow of a man, some expression of lesbian desire is almost necessary. As she explains, "[w]oman is an existent who is called upon to make herself object; as subject she has an aggressive

element in her sensuality which is not satisfied on the male body” (428). Hence, “[her] homosexuality is one attempt among others to reconcile her autonomy with the passivity of her flesh” (428). Along this line of thought, de Beauvoir goes to the extent of claiming that “all women are naturally homosexual” thus anticipating the idea of a “lesbian continuum” that Adrienne Rich would articulate several decades later. For de Beauvoir, what makes all women somewhat lesbians is a residue of their “adolescent fear [of] penetration and masculine domination [...] and [...] a certain repulsion for the male body,” for, in de Beauvoir’s view, “the female body is for [a female], as for the male, an object of desire” (428). De Beauvoir is well aware of the homophobic forces that cause lesbians’ inability to “live naturally in their situation” (444). But she also idealizes erotic relationships between women as those in which there is “exact reciprocity [and] each [partner] is at once subject and object [so that] duality becomes mutuality” (438).

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In the existentialist philosophical context in which de Beauvoir’s thought developed, the positive values of freedom and choice were connected with transcendence. In her perspective, it was impossible to “choose the feminine from a feminist viewpoint,” as did French feminist philosophers of the generation that followed her, like Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous. Nonetheless, in rereading her work today, we can presume that de Beauvoir’s work intended to change this situation, which, as she claims, can be corrected when human intelligence and the power of education are applied to nature. And indeed, thanks to the possibilities that her work opened, many post-modern feminist philosophers claim that a return to feminine values as women see them is desirable to build a social organization based on respect for diversity, a sense of community, and care. Some representatives of this feminine kind of feminism are Carol Gilligan, Mary Daly, and Vandana Shiva. Due to current millennial anxieties and ecological concerns, a woman’s fertility is not necessarily her best asset, while the certainty that a masculine, phallic kind of transcendence is a positive value has considerably eroded. De Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in the aftermath of World War II, at the onset of the baby boom that caused the exponential population growth we experience today. It was a time when the context of a current feminist discourse was simply not available. Hence, it is now possible to determine the extent to which de Beauvoir’s assessment of women’s

situation in her day and age was limited, and at the same time propelled by her participation in existentialism as the only female voice within a philosophical discourse dominated by men. Today, many feminist philosophers concur with ecologists that, with a six-billion global population, a woman's fertility is not even an asset to the species as a whole (Commoner 1994; Merchant 1994; Warren 1997, 3-153).

In her introductory chapter to a recent collection of essays that present de Beauvoir's relationship with feminism in a positive way, Jo Ann Pilardi has argued that *The Second Sex* can certainly be considered a classic. It is a work that has had a significant, though different, impact, on a number of distinctly marked ages, and has established new paradigms in cultural perceptions of sexuality, gender, and relationships between women and men (Pilardi 1995, 29). Indeed, as Joseph Mahon claims in his preface to a recent study of de Beauvoir, feminism and existentialism, "[I]n the United States [...] *The Second Sex* [...] became the bible of feminism" having inspired not only a precursor of the movement like Betty Friedan, but also a moderately progressive leader like Gloria Steinem, and more insurrectionary agitators like Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millett (Mahon 1997, x; Simons 1999, 145). Being a seminal work written when the social transformations it helped to inspire were more than twenty years away, *The Second Sex* focuses on the disadvantages that being a woman entails. More specifically, it focuses on the disadvantages suffered by women of de Beauvoir's background and day and age, with the implied intent of pointing to possible ways to correct these mistakes. But in doing so, the book also tackles central questions in existentialist philosophy, such as the issue of what constitutes good faith, in the context of a relationship between a subject and its "other," and between immanence and transcendence. In accordance with the belief system de Beauvoir and Sartre shared, neither partner in their relationship ever married nor became a biological parent. While maintaining a primary, long-term emotional and intellectual relationship with each other all along, the two did not even set up house together until past middle age.

For both Sartre and de Beauvoir, authentic choices and relationships were based on good faith, rather than on conventional rules of behavior. De Beauvoir certainly influenced Sartre with respect to the limitations posed to individual freedom by a person's specific situation such as that of being "other" by color, culture, or gender (Simmons 1999, 44, 50). However, both philosophers agreed that freedom was the measure of authenticity in their secular, existentialist

philosophical discourse. Indeed, in their view, a person who made decisions based on pre-established moral codes such as those of the Catholic Church surrendered his or her responsibility for making sense of existence on its own terms. As a result, de Beauvoir and Sartre created a special relationship in which the expression of each partner's sexual desire was more highly valued than an artificially enforced monogamy. Both members in the relationship had other lovers, both male and female, about which they wrote in their memoirs. Some of them were close friends of both and became part of the couple's elective, existential "family" (Bair 1990, *passim*). Others were perceived as rivals or threats to their relationship, in particular, these were Sartre's lover Dolores Vanetti, and de Beauvoir's lover, Nelson Algren, both of whom were based in the United States (Bair 1990, 300-304, 333-337, 342, 365-78). In addition, in later life, both de Beauvoir and Sartre became adoptive parents of younger proteges to whom they entrusted the execution and care of their respective literary and intellectual legacies. Both had very close emotional and spiritual relationships with their respective protégés. De Beauvoir's adopted daughter is Sylvie le Bon, Sartre's is Arlette Elkaim (Bair 1990, 509, 592-93, 496). De Beauvoir outlived Sartre by about six years (Bair, 583-86, 613-15). In a recent book, de Beauvoir scholar Margaret Simmons claims that, as "Beauvoir's health was deteriorating,... [her] adoption [of Sylvie] was intended to give Le Bon the legal authority to care for her" (Simmons 1999, 117). The intention of this protective measure is similar to that of ageing female partners who live in cultures that do not recognize lesbian relationships. In life, de Beauvoir never identified as a lesbian or bisexual woman, and thus denied to any of her relationships with women the power to define her sexual identity. But after her death, le Bon declared to de Beauvoir's biographer that their relationship was "love between [us]...[even though] neither one of us was prepared... to love someone who was a woman" (Simmons 1999, 117). So, in a way de Beauvoir lived her choice to become an adoptive parent as a way to create a deep bond of love that bridged the gap between women of two generations, all the while giving the taboo of incest its due respect. The experience of writing *The Second Sex* enabled the personal growth that eventually granted her the ability to live out her philosophical principles in a consistent and socially productive way.

In its author's literary development, the writing of *The Second Sex* followed the publication of several significant works. These were her first three novels, *She Came to Stay*, *The Blood of Others*, and *All*

Men are Mortal, in 1943, 1945, and 1946 respectively, her first and only play, *Useless Mouths*, in 1945, and the mentioned book-length philosophical essay, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, in 1947. In its author's intellectual and emotional development, *The Second Sex* followed her experiments with non-monogamy, bisexuality, and elective parenting, within the emotional and discursive space established by her primary relationship. These experiments were fictionalized in de Beauvoir's first novel *She Came to Stay*, which is dedicated to her beloved spiritual affiliate and protegee, Olga Kosakieviz. The book also and more immediately followed de Beauvoir's cultural cross-fertilization within the context of her lecture tours in the United States. During these tours she established a highly eroticized relationship with the American writer Nelson Algren. She also closely observed racial discrimination as well as women's self-determination, or lack thereof, within a variety of American social contexts. These reflections prompted her interest for the situation of women in France, which she compared to that of another group whose potential was at the time vastly underestimated, people of color in the United States.

In Europe, and, to a lesser extent, in the United States, the late 1940s and early '50s were years devoted to reconstruction and economic development in response to the disasters caused by World War II. Hence, when *The Second Sex* appeared in France and North America, the social impact of organized women's movement was negligible. Nonetheless, the book explained the condition of intellectual, spiritual, and material oppression under which women of de Beauvoir's generation and milieu grew up in much accuracy and detail. This accuracy and incisiveness are the most likely causes of its effectiveness in inspiring second-wave feminist leadership. A result of this impact was the rediscovery of *The Second Sex* in France and Western Europe in general in conjunction with second-wave feminism.

Even though she had written her book about twenty years earlier, de Beauvoir addressed the issues around which the new women's movements organized themselves. As a result of the early-century suffrage movements, women had acquired the right to vote, while all along they were still regarded as the species' "slaves," since they did not own their bodies. Second-wave feminist philosophers were intent in the shared effort of developing a positive view of female embodiment. But they also wondered how women were going to function as full citizens in a modern democratic social organization, as long as their bodily servitude to the species and the state was enforced. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir provided a philosophical justification

for her choice to reject the social institutions of marriage and child-bearing. Indeed, as she claimed, a woman's acceptance of these institutions as they were contributed to making all women slaves. Her rejection was the only possible authentic choice in the context of her existentialism. As a result of her philosophy, de Beauvoir chose to establish emotional, intellectual, spiritual, and erotic relationships with men and women based on a personal pact of friendship rather than on marriage and biological parenting.

But while her advocacy of birth control and decriminalized abortion took place in the context of her existential rejection of an alleged reproductive destiny, her theory of motherhood as a choice significantly influenced some feminist theorists of the new generation. For example, the Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero developed a theory of "concrete essentials," which concerns the organic asymmetry of human dimorphism (1988, 180), and explains why, in the modern world, a woman's reproductive choice must be her inalienable right. Since the material difference of a woman's reproductive potential is the specificity entailed by her gender, Cavarero claims that a woman's reproductive choice simply grants her status as a subject of right equal of man (1995, 74-80). One of the results of the women's movements of the second wave is that parental responsibilities have been redistributed in many families, and for many women reproduction is now a choice rather than a destiny. Hence, a new generation of women can freely choose what de Beauvoir rejected thanks to the cultural change facilitated by her life and philosophy. In this respect, I believe that her teachings are very useful to this day.

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If I imagine de Beauvoir rewriting *The Second Sex* today, I see her speak of women in the plural first person; I hear her acknowledge herself as part of a sisterly "we" that no longer is ambiguously connoted as "them." Beyond her circumstantially chosen rhetoric, her epistemological perspective produces a situated knowledge that derives its validity from its specificity rather than from the presumed universality symbolized by the third person. As a personal experience enabling the growth of a political consciousness, *The Second Sex* corresponds to de Beauvoir's process of freeing herself from her secondary role in her intellectual relationship with Sartre, and finding the signifiers of a lost elective sisterhood again. During her higher education, her relationship with Sartre had been created in

perfect reciprocity as a way to compensate for the loss of a female primary object of affection, Simone's high-school playmate and confidante Elizabeth Lacoïn, who died in her early twenties to escape her reproductive destiny (Bair 1990, 74-87, 151; Simons 1999, 118, 122-25). As de Beauvoir and Sartre's lives and careers developed, she repeatedly found herself in situations in which her independent voice was not heard. Her memory of Elizabeth produced a fictional correlative, the character ZaZa, whose tragic death concludes de Beauvoir's first book of memoirs, *Memories of a Dutiful Daughter*. In this memoir and in de Beauvoir's diaries from 1927 to 1931, ZaZa is presented as de Beauvoir's first love and the memory of her death as symbolic of the loss of self patriarchy exacts of women (Simons 1999, 118; de Beauvoir 1927; 1928-29; 1929-31). In love with existentialist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Elizabeth Lacoïn was reciprocated by him and wanted to marry him. But when her father discovered that he was the biological son of his mother's lover, and not of her legitimate husband, he threatened to expose him, which would have destroyed Merleau-Ponty's career prospects, as well as his possible future with Elizabeth (Bair 1990, 151-53). Elizabeth's mother insisted on an arranged marriage to another man. For ZaZa, death was left as the only authentic choice, and she promptly welcomed it when a serious illness ensued while she was stationed in Germany (Bair 1990, 151). De Beauvoir grieved the death of her female friend and object of affection, and felt guilty about not having been able to help her. While the full story became accessible to her only much later, the "we" formed by ZaZa and her was broken, and the process of writing about women accomplished by *The Second Sex* was a way to find the wholeness of that elective sisterhood again.

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