CLAUDIA CARD

Introduction: Beauvoir and the ambiguity of "ambiguity" in ethics

BACKGROUNDS AND BASICS

During the 1950s, an era when feminism was at a particularly low ebb, American college students encountered translations of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in courses on French existentialism.[1] The popularity of these courses was due in no small part to the French existentialists' addition of sexuality to the philosophical agenda. Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* was the centerpiece, and Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* was introduced to show how, contrary to Sartre's early view, existentialism might indeed provide a ground for ethics. *The Second Sex*, however, was presented as though it simply applied Sartre's philosophy to women's situations, a view later to be challenged by feminist scholarship, as many chapters in this Companion show in detail. Yet readers were astonished even then by perspectives *The Second Sex* offered on female sexuality. Raising ethical and political issues, Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* nicely complemented Alfred Kinsey's "scandalous" but coldly scientific report on sexual behavior in the human female, which appeared in the same year as the paperback edition of the English translation of Beauvoir's treatise on women.[2]

Beauvoir's most widely read philosophical works are still *The Second Sex* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. But her later work as well is philosophically deep and often original. It offers mature perspectives on such topics as torture and old age in addition to new perspectives on her earlier work. Beauvoir's total output (still being translated into English) is prodigious. The chronology and bibliography in this Companion show how highly varied in form her published writings are,

ranging from letters, diaries, memoirs, and novels to prefaces, book reviews, philosophical essays and treatises. The scope of her philosophical interests is impressive. Many of her topics are standard in the philosophical repertoire: ethics, politics, evil, relationships between selves (articulated as relationships between self and Other). Others were not conventional among philosophers when she took them up, some unconventional for women writers in most fields: psychoanalysis, biology, sexuality, gender, women, lesbians, prostitution, marriage, love.

Equally popular with philosophers and nonphilosophers are Beauvoir's stories and novels, especially *She Came to Stay* (explored by Margaret Simons in chapter 5 and Mary Sirridge in chapter 6) and *The Mandarins*, which won the prestigious Goncourt Prize in 1954. Her short memoir, *A Very Easy Death*, reflecting on the death of her mother, and the longer treatise, *Old Age* (interpreted by Penelope Deutscher in chapter 14 and known as *The Coming of Age* in the American edition), belong in anyone's list of classics on aging and dying. The four volumes chronicling her life and intellectual development, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, *The Prime of Life*, *The Force of Circumstance*, and *All Said and Done*, revisit many of her earlier ideas and together construct what Miranda Fricker in chapter 10 calls a "life-story." Less well known are Beauvoir's travel diaries from her visits to the United States for four months in 1947 (*America Day by Day*) and to China in 1955 (*The Long March*). The *America* diary includes wonderful descriptions of life in Beauvoir's favorite city, New York, as well as detailed and painful observations of racial segregation in the South (noted by Robin Schott in chapter 11). Also noteworthy are Beauvoir's prefaces (cited by Schott as well) to such works as Gisèle Halimi's *Djamila Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl Which Shocked Liberal French Opinion*, Claude Lanzmann's filmscript *Shoah*, and Jean-François Steiner's *Treblinka*. And there is more, much more, including letters, book reviews, and such essays as "Must We Burn Sade?" (analyzed by Judith Butler in chapter 8) and "Brigitte Bardot and the Lolita Syndrome." This Companion covers the full span of Beauvoir's work, not just *The Second Sex* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Nevertheless, ethics forms a persistent core of Beauvoir's philosophical concerns. Hence it is appropriate to make it the eventual focus of this introduction. It was Beauvoir's view, in fact, that *only* existentialism could provide the basis for ethics. Yet her conception

of ethics would have puzzled most British and American philosophers of that era, trained as they were in traditions of analytic philosophy. For although she rejected the search for universal principles to distinguish right from wrong, and she took emotion seriously, she was no "emotivist" in the sense of the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle.[3] Logical positivists held that the meaning of a proposition is given by its method of verification. Finding no method of verification for moral principles, they concluded that such principles and judgments based on them were literally meaningless, "pseudo-propositions." Moral pseudo-propositions, they insisted, had only "emotive meaning," not "literal meaning." Yet with a noncognitive understanding of emotions, positivists were at a loss to clarify, beyond crude notions of approval and disapproval, what moral emotions meant. Beauvoir, in contrast, is articulate about the meanings of moral philosophies, traditions, sentiments, and choices. Today her agent-centered, relational, and situational approach to ethics finds natural homes not only in continental European philosophy, but also in fairly analytical character ethics, feminist ethics, and conversations about moral luck. Her concerns lie with the complexities of situations, their impact on how we develop character, and with liberation from oppression, taking responsibility for ourselves, and negotiating human relationships.

Beauvoir's major contributions to philosophical thought, to ethics in particular, lie in her development and employment of the concepts of ambiguity, freedom, the Other, embodiment, disclosure, temporality, and situation. These concepts have roots in the traditions of French and German phenomenology. English-speaking readers of the 1950s tended to lack the training and philosophical background to read Beauvoir in the context of German phenomenology, or even contemporary French philosophy (with the exception of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*), not to mention earlier French philosophy other than Descartes'. Divisions between Anglo-American and continental European philosophies are less severe today than then. Still, training in post-Kantian continental European philosophy remains a continuing weakness in the philosophical education offered by many American universities. Hence, this volume offers several chapters on how to read Beauvoir in relation to post-Kantian German and post-Cartesian French traditions of philosophical thought, introducing readers to important features of some of those traditions at the same time.

Many groupings of chapters in this Companion are natural for study purposes. The next section highlights continuities and overlaps not always evident from chapter titles, as a prelude to reflecting, in the concluding section, on an ambiguity of "ambiguity" in Beauvoir's ethics.

OVERVIEW OF CHAPTERS

The opening chapter by Barbara Andrew introduces Beauvoir as an existential phenomenologist and explains what that means. Andrew sketches Beauvoir's education and early intellectual development and then places her mature writings in the context of four areas of contemporary philosophy where her ideas remain influential today: social philosophy, existentialism, phenomenology, and feminist theory. Andrew also takes up similarities and differences between Beauvoir's work and that of her lifelong companion, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80). The themes of Beauvoir's relationship with Sartre and his work recur in other chapters as well (chapters 2, 4, 10, and 14, by Eva Gothlin, Monika Langer, Miranda Fricker, and Penelope Deutscher, for example). Andrew organizes most of her discussion around Beauvoir's ideas of freedom, ambiguity, and situation, concepts also further explored in other chapters.

Taking the phenomenological strand as central, chapter 2 by Eva Gothlin and chapter 3 by Sara Heinämaa present key elements of Beauvoir's thought as having developed in the context of the German phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1976) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), whom Beauvoir and Sartre began reading in the late 1930s. Chapter 3 by Heinämaa and chapter 4 by Monika Langer take up in detail the influence of Beauvoir's engagement with the philosophy of her friend, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–61).

In chapter 2, on reading Beauvoir in relation to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, Eva Gothlin finds that Beauvoir's phenomenology differs from Sartre's (at least, in *Being and Nothingness*) in being closer to Heidegger's break with the classic Cartesian dualism of mind and body. She notes that the Heideggerian concept of disclosure occurs in Beauvoir's writings more often than the Sartrean concepts of in-itself (the being of things) and for-itself (conscious existence). Gothlin's discussion is organized around the concepts of disclosure, corporeality, "Being-with," and authenticity. These concepts enable her to

clarify differences between Beauvoir's philosophy and Sartre's and also to clarify Beauvoir's own emphases or uses of these concepts as distinct from Heidegger's. She notes, for example, that for both Beauvoir and Heidegger, *Mitsein* (Being-with) is real, contrary to Sartre's denial in *Being and Nothingness* of intersubjective reality, but that, unlike Heidegger, Beauvoir emphasizes the possibility of conflict as well as harmony in *Mitsein*.

In chapter 3 Sara Heinämaa agrees with Gothlin in situating Beauvoir's work in relation to the phenomenological tradition. But she builds a case for going further back in that tradition to the work of Husserl in order to appreciate Beauvoir's concept of embodiment. Beauvoir's discussions of female embodiment have been widely misunderstood by readers who take her negative portrayals of the female body as though they represented her own final view rather than a social construction of which she was profoundly critical. Heinämaa argues that Beauvoir's notion of embodiment is a critical elaboration of Merleau-Ponty's description of the living body and that through Merleau-Ponty, Beauvoir was influenced by Husserl's work in *Thing and Space, Ideas volume II*, and the *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.

Monika Langer, who has authored a book on Merleau-Ponty,[4] argues in chapter 4 that Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity is much closer to that of Merleau-Ponty than to Sartre's. It is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, not Sartre's, she finds, that provides the basis for Beauvoir's ethics of ambiguity. "Ambiguity," Langer reminds us, "comes from the Latin *ambiguitas*, meaning doubt, uncertainty, or paradox," and "the adjective *ambiguus* means ambiguous, obscure, dark, wavering, changeable, doubtful, uncertain, disputed, unreliable, and untrustworthy." The negative approach conveyed in such adjectives draws on Descartes' project of achieving certainty through clarity and distinctness. For Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, however, Langer finds that ambiguity is neither equivocation nor dualism nor ambivalence. (An interesting discussion of the relationships between ambiguity and ambivalence in Beauvoir's work on evil is found, however, in chapter 11 by Robin Schott, discussed below.) Rather, Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity involves irreducible indeterminacy and "multiple, inseparable significations and aspects." Exploring many uses of ambiguity by Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, Langer considers how, in different ways, the thought of each illuminates or

supplements that of the other. We should celebrate Beauvoir, she concludes, not just Merleau-Ponty, as a philosopher of ambiguity.

Precisely because she was educated in France from early childhood, Beauvoir may not always be conscious of earlier French philosophy's influences on her own. Yet in correspondance and diaries she mentions several philosophers she has read. Chapter 5 by Margaret Simons and chapter 7 by Susan James explore continuities and possible influences of Henri Bergson (1859–1941) and Nicolas Malebranche (1638–1715) in relation to Beauvoir's thought. Together with chapter 8 by Judith Butler on Beauvoir's long essay on the Marquis de Sade (1749–1814), who is not often appreciated as a philosopher, these chapters provide for Beauvoir's philosophy a context in French philosophy earlier than that of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.

Margaret Simons made a powerful case in her book on Beauvoir for an African American influence on Beauvoir's views regarding oppression, especially through Richard Wright and his work.[5] In chapter 5 of this Companion she presents and develops the new hypothesis that Bergson was a significant early influence on Beauvoir's methodology. Examining Beauvoir's early diaries, she discovers that the young Beauvoir read and was excited by the work of Bergson. In his early books, *Time and Free Will*, *Matter and Memory*, and *Creative Evolution*, Simons finds sources of at least three aspects of Beauvoir's methodology. They are, first, the use of novels as a vehicle for doing philosophy; second, an interest in exposing distortions of reality in perception and thought; and third, the turn to immediate experience. Although Beauvoir and Bergson were both interested in the problem of self in relation to the Other, Simons finds diary evidence that Beauvoir began to focus on this topic prior to Bergson's published work on it and concludes that we cannot infer an influence there. But in *Time and Free Will* Bergson celebrated the idea of doing philosophy in writing novels, an idea that Beauvoir – unlike Bergson – then carried out. Chapter 5 by Simons and chapter 6 by Mary Sirridge examine how Beauvoir did that in her first novel, *She Came to Stay*.

In chapter 6 Mary Sirridge also discusses some of Beauvoir's other fictional works. Pursuing the question of what literature can contribute to our understanding that mere factual information cannot, Sirridge argues that literature, perhaps especially the novel, acquaints us intimately with other points of view by allowing us

to enter imaginatively into the situations of others, albeit without losing the awareness that we are not those others and that their situations are not our own. She considers how well Beauvoir succeeds in that endeavor in *She Came to Stay* and reaches a different, more positive evaluation from that reached by Beauvoir herself when she reflected in her memoirs on the writing of that novel.

In chapter 7 Susan James examines Beauvoir's treatment of women's apparently voluntary participation in and maintenance of their own oppression, a sensitive phenomenon for feminists that is known as the problem of women's complicity. James, who has written a book on emotions in seventeenth-century philosophy,[6] looks at Beauvoir's treatment of this problem in relation to the thought of Malebranche, whose philosophical writings no doubt formed part of Beauvoir's education. Beauvoir appears to offer more than one answer to the question of why men have been so very successful in dominating women. An interesting and, to many, disturbing part of her answer is that women have been complicit in their own domination by embracing patriarchal marriage. Without discussing marriage specifically, James argues that Beauvoir seems at times to appreciate that it is too reductive to understand women's complicity in their own domination in relationships with men simply in terms of choices women make in bad faith. She finds Malebranche's account of the interpersonal structure of hierarchical social relations closer to, and a better explanation of, Beauvoir's own account of women's subordination than the Hegelian master–slave account to which Beauvoir actually appeals. James finds Beauvoir, in tune with Malebranche, conceiving of complicity "as a condition of an embodied self whose abilities, and therefore options, have been formed by its social circumstances," a view that goes beyond Hegel's interpretation of the relations between master and slave.

Feminists are often embarrassed and puzzled by Beauvoir's respectful and substantial attention to the writings of the notorious Marquis de Sade, whose unashamed eroticism in inflicting pain on women has given us the concept of sadism. Beauvoir's surprisingly sympathetic "Must We Burn Sade?" neither condemns him nor protests the pornography of sadism. In chapter 8 Judith Butler briefly reviews the career of Sade (who was in prison at the Bastille during the French Revolution where, Butler reports, "he is said to have helped incite the crowd on the street from his prison window")

and then develops the idea that Beauvoir's essay attempts to understand Sade's aim in his writings and in his life as making sexuality into an ethic. It was not an ethic Beauvoir could endorse, nor did she find Sade entirely successful in his own project. Yet she thought we could learn from understanding what he made, or tried to make, of his situation.

As these chapters and others show, Beauvoir scholarship has broken free of the model of viewing Beauvoir's philosophical work as an appendix to Sartre's (a view she often encouraged). Today Beauvoir is studied as an important philosopher in her own right, despite her disclaimers. One of the most prolific and influential female thinkers of the twentieth century, she is widely acknowledged as in many ways the leading philosophical grandparent of women's studies and contemporary feminist theory. Although she did not explicitly and publicly identify herself as a feminist or with a women's movement until later, her sympathies definitely moved in that direction in *The Second Sex*, which is sprinkled throughout with criticisms of "antifeminists." Beauvoir's critics sometimes read that book's concluding section, "Toward Liberation" (Vers la libération), as encouraging simply liberation from sexual mores, and point out that such freedom is arguably more advantageous for men than for women. The impression of a focus on sexual liberation may stem from Beauvoir's extraordinarily frank, unromantic discussions of female sexuality in earlier chapters – unusual (to say the least) for an intellectual woman writing in the 1940s. Yet in the work as a whole, freedom from restrictions on female sexuality is only part of a larger vision of women liberated from oppressive social constructions of femininity. The liberation that Beauvoir appears to find most fundamental in this work is economic.

Beauvoir's relationship to feminism, a recurrent theme in many chapters of this volume, is explored in detail by Susan Brison in chapter 9, which consists of Brison's 1976 interview in Rome with Beauvoir on that topic (translated and published here for the first time), followed by Brison's essay reflecting twenty-five years later on that interview. Brison explores Beauvoir's connections with French feminist activism and theory and her positions in relation to controversies in French feminism, including controversies about *The Second Sex*. Feminists in the 1970s often criticized Beauvoir as valorizing "masculine" values and disparaging "feminine"ones. At

the Second Sex conference in New York City in 1979, Audre Lorde quoted Beauvoir favorably as having said: "It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our lives that we must draw our strength to live and our reasons for acting." But Lorde is remembered more for having argued at that conference that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."[7] Brison's interview makes it clear that Beauvoir's position was complex regarding the values women should espouse. We can and should, she thought, use some of what Lorde might later have called "the master's tools," but we should not be prevented from changing them while we use them. Beauvoir also clarifies her position on the role of sexuality in women's lives. She observes that although of course women should have sexual pleasure, if sex becomes more important for women than for men, that is not because of biology but because women are deprived of so much else. Brison finds a model in the ways that Beauvoir's life integrated concrete political action with feminist theory.

Although Beauvoir gradually came to identify herself as a feminist, she consistently refused the label, philosopher (although she taught philosophy), on the grounds that she did not offer a systematic comprehensive theory or worldview. Rather, she explored interconnected philosophical issues, and she did so not only in essays, prefaces, and treatises but in novels and travel diaries – not then, nor even now, standard formats for academic philosophy. If unsystematic, Beauvoir's approach to issues is nevertheless reliably philosophical, focused on meanings and values, and her ideas evolve and mature over time. This Companion frequently cites her diaries as well as her novels and memoirs in tracking the development of her philosophical thought.

In chapter 10 Miranda Fricker presents Beauvoir's memoirs as "a project of intrapersonal alignment, both psychological and ethical." The memoirs became a way for Beauvoir to establish lines of solidarity with her past selves, to align the mature author with the younger women with whom she shared a single life, and to restore unity to what she at one point described as the "scattered, broken" object that was her life. Fricker explores Beauvoir's techniques for doing this, showing how the memoirs took shape as a life-story. A highlight is Fricker's feminist reading of Beauvoir's recounting (in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*) of her youthful encounter with Sartre at the Medici Fountain in the Luxembourg Garden, where Sartre rapidly

convinced her of the worthlessness of her thoughts favoring a pluralist ethics. Reflecting on the pathos of the older Beauvoir's account of this incident (in which Beauvoir remains convinced of Sartre's intellectual superiority), Fricker's reading presents this event as a likely significant influence on Beauvoir's decision to own the identity simply of a writer and not that of a philosopher. Ironically, it is largely thanks to Beauvoir's pioneering work as a feminist, Fricker notes, that today's reader finds this passage in the memoir so very poignant. In *The Prime of Life*, however, Fricker also finds an independent philosophical reason why Beauvoir rejected the identity of philosopher: philosophical systematizations of the world seemed to Beauvoir to be incapable of making adequate room for ambiguity, whereas more literary forms could do that better, and Beauvoir remained convinced of the fundamental, irreducible ambiguity of the world.

In her memoirs Beauvoir integrates discussions of her philosophical development with reflections on her relationships with such well-known figures as Sartre, Nelson Algren, and Claude Lanzmann. She also discusses her relationships with women but does not write about their erotic elements. Yet her chapter on the lesbian in *The Second Sex* is probably the first published sympathetic and respectful philosophical treatment of that subject in modern times. In an era when "coming out" as a lesbian was for middle-class women nearly unthinkable and could cost one one's job, Beauvoir boldly wrote about such relationships from the points of view of insiders.[8] The contrast is stark between the then prevailing psychiatric and criminal law views of "homosexuality" as sick or immoral (if not both) and Beauvoir's account of the lesbian as making rational choices in relation to a situation.

Beauvoir's memoirs also track the development of her political consciousness and her involvement in resisting major evils. In chapter 11 Robin Schott explores different levels of analysis of the concept of evil to which the idea of ambiguity provides a key, thus continuing the discussion of Beauvoir on ambiguity begun in chapters 1 and 4 by Andrew and Langer. The levels of analysis Schott explores are first, an ontological level, fundamental structures of human existence that include facticity and the risk of evil; second, a social and political level, where we find the evils of oppression, injustice, and misery; and third, a cultural symbolic level, linking evil