Introduction: Simone de Beauvoir's Conversions

> We are adopting the perspective of existentialist ethics. [*La perspective que nous adoptons, c'est celle de la morale existentialiste.*]
>
> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

> We can clearly see Simone de Beauvoir's technique, her *métis*, her craftiness with and towards the doctrinal philosophy she has accepted. It is a technique of reintroduction which undermines the structure. [*D'un point de vue méthodologique, on aperçoit bien ici la technique de Simone de Beauvoir, sa* métis *à l'égard de la philosophie doctrinale qu'elle a accepté de recevoir: c'est une technique de réintroduction qui bouleverse la structure.*]
>
> Michèle Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice/L'étude et le rouet*

Unexpectedly, after negligible interest in feminist thought and activism,[1] Simone de Beauvoir wrote in the 1940s a far-reaching work on the condition of women. Two decades later it would prove vital in the upsurge of feminist movements. Though widely considered their watershed text, *The Second Sex* was likely conceived as a *post*-feminist work. In 1949 feminism seemed to Beauvoir to have accomplished its main aim of women's enfranchisement – granted in France five years previously – in addition to access to education and employment. If women were still "the other," Beauvoir concluded that something more was needed: a new kind of analysis.

The writing of *The Second Sex* in 1949 by a French philosopher and novelist has been interpreted from many perspectives: biographical; Beauvoir's

[1] "One question that was causing a lot of spilled ink at the time was female suffrage: during the municipal election Maria Vérone and Louise Weiss were campaigning furiously and were quite right to do so. But as I was apolitical [*comme j'étais apolitique*] and would not have availed myself of my voting privilege had I possessed it [*et que je n'aurais pas usé de mes droits*], it hardly mattered to me whether my rights were acknowledged or not [*il m'était tout à fait égal qu'on me les reconnût ou non*]," Simone de Beauvoir (describing the period 1934–5), *The Prime of Life*, ed. Peter Green (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1962), 257.

personal resistance to the confining conventions of bourgeois femininity; her affiliation with existentialism; her background in the writings of Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, and Sartre. To be added to this list is a further lever Beauvoir used to rethink the making of the sexes: a theoretical approach and methodology she had encountered in analyses of race relations in the United States, including the work of Richard Wright and Gunnar Myrdal.[2] "Just as in America," she repeated a formulation attributed to both Myrdal and Wright, thereby transposing a discussion of race to a discussion of sex, "the problem is not with blacks [*il n'y a pas de problème noir*], rather there is a white problem,[3] just as 'anti-semitism is not a Jewish problem: it is our problem'; so the woman problem has always been a problem for men [*le problème de la femme a toujours été un problème d'hommes*]."[4] When she later analyzed the alterity of aging, she would cite

[2] Margaret Simons was one of the first commentators to discuss the influence of Myrdal and Wright on Beauvoir, in *Beauvoir and The Second Sex: Feminism, Race and the Origins of Existentialism* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), and the connection has also been taken up by Vikki Bell, and by Doris Ruhe. Ursula Tidd notes that, according to an interview between Wright's biographer Michel Fabre and Beauvoir, the latter first became familiar with the work of Wright in 1940, introduced to it by Sylvia Beach (Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999], 187, citing Michel Fabre, "An Interview with Simone de Beauvoir," *The World of Richard Wright* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985], 253–5). Wright traveled to France in 1946, where he met with Léopold Sédar Senghor and Beauvoir, and Beauvoir spent time with Wright and his wife, Ellen, in 1947, during her first visit to the United States. Sartre referred to Wright in 1946 in his *Anti-Semite and Jew*, attributing to him the comment, "There is no Negro problem in the United States, there is only a White problem," which in turn was attributed by Beauvoir to Myrdal in *The Second Sex* (trans. H. M. Parshley [London: Methuen, 1988], 159; [New York: Vintage, 1989], 152). The comment has been attributed to both Wright and James Baldwin, and is foregrounded in Myrdal's 1944 work *American Dilemma*, and cited by Beauvoir in *America Day by Day*, *The Second Sex*, and *Old Age/The Coming of Age* (*La Vieillesse*). See Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper and Bros, 1944); Beauvoir, *America Day by Day*, trans. Carol Cosman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 237; Beauvoir, *Old Age*, trans. Patrick O'Brian (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1977), 100; Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken, 1948), 152; and Vikki Bell, "Owned Suffering: Thinking the Feminist Political Imagination with Simone de Beauvoir and Richard Wright," *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism*, eds. S. Ahmed, J. Kilby, C. Lury, M. McNeil, and B. Skeggs (London: Routledge, 2000), 61–76. See also Doris Ruhe, *Contextualiser le deuxième sexe* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2006).

[3] Here, she adds the note: "cf Myrdall [sic], *American Dilemma*," Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US152, UK159, FrI216.

[4] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US128, UK159, FrI216, tr. mod. (*De même qu'en Amérique il n'y a pas de problème noir mais un problème blanc; de même que «l'anti-sémitisme n'est pas un problème juif: c'est notre problème»; ainsi le problème de la femme a toujours été un problème d'hommes.*). After her reference to "problème blanc," Beauvoir adds the footnote to Myrdal; then after her reference to anti-semitism, she adds a footnote to Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*. Note Sartre's assumption in *Anti-Semite and Jew* that the reader he is addressing is not Jewish, and that he attributes the comment to Richard Wright: "Richard Wright, the Negro writer, said recently: 'There is no Negro problem in the United

the formulation anew, proposing of the aged that "their problem is strictly a problem for active adults [*un problème d'adultes actives*]."[5]

These formulations represented at least two questions in her work. If sex, race, and age are the constituted problem of those who prefer to think of themselves as unsexed, unraced, and unaging, how can that problematic be integrated with elements derived from philosophical problematics of intentionality, ontological difference, and nothingness? Further, what of Beauvoir's transpositions between race, sex, and generational difference? How might a language generated to address race have to be modified in its possible application to class, sex, or age differentials? How do ethical and political formulations change as they modulate between differing forms of alterity?

Beauvoir announced that her perspective was that of an "existentialist ethics" (*la morale existentialiste*) without announcing that the nexus was hardly self-evident. It had been deemed incoherent by Georg Lukács in one of the first serious readings of her work[6] and caused her partner, Jean-Paul Sartre, so much trouble that he had to abandon the sizable manuscript for what was to have been his ethics, the anticipated sequel to *Being and Nothingness*. Beauvoir tended not to draw scrutiny to her *method* – as opposed to her themes – as distinctive or controversial. She enjoyed the prediction that her subject matter would be unpalatable for her reader, introducing both 1949's *The Second Sex* and 1970's *La Vieillesse (Old Age/The Coming of Age)* by foreshadowing, with possible relish, the reader's likely resistance. She begins the latter, a 700-page work, with the explanation that it confronted a "forbidden subject," as she had previously done – "what a furious outcry I caused" (*quel tollé j'ai soulevé!*).[7] The first lines of *The Second Sex* affirm that its subject is irritating. Gladly identifying her topics as unpalatable, she minimized a problematizing discussion of her methodology.

Beauvoir's two most substantial projects, on sexual and generational alterity, were prepared with intensive research. Having decided to write about women, her next step was an attempt to work through everything that

States, there is only a White problem.' In the same way, we must say that anti-Semitism is not a Jewish problem; it is *our* problem," 152.

[5] Simone de Beauvoir, *Old Age,* trans. Patrick O'Brian (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1977), 100, trans. mod.

[6] Georg Lukács, *Existentialisme ou marxisme,* trans. E. Kelemen (Paris: Nagel, 1948), 160–98.

[7] Beauvoir, *Old Age*, 7.

had been written about women,[8] an extravagant approach later repeated for *La Vieillesse*. This saw the philosophy *agregée*[9] immersed in biology,

[8] Letters of 2nd, 9th, and 11th January 1948, Simone de Beauvoir, *A Transatlantic Love Affair: Letters to Nelson Algren* (New York: New Press, 1998), 135, 138, 140.

[9] Beauvoir had passed, coming in second (after Sartre), the *agrégation* in philosophy, this being the most prestigious academic examination in France, and one which guaranteed her a state teaching position. The achievement was considerable in that she was not, like her colleagues Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Nizan, a "*normalien*," i.e., not a student at the *Ecole normale supérieure*, the most elite institution preparing students for the *agrégation*. It was newly possible for women to study at the E.N.S., as did Beauvoir's contemporaries Simone Petrément and Simone Weil. But the Sorbonne appears to have been considered most appropriate for Beauvoir by her family, her mother having rejected an elite training program for girls at Sèvres (see Deirdre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir: A Biography* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1990], 92). Already at a disadvantage, she was also the examination's youngest-ever candidate, and her previous schooling had been inferior (for Sartre the prestigious Lycées Henri IV and Louis-le-Grand, for Beauvoir the mediocre Institut Adeline Désir, a Catholic school for girls, for whose poor training she would have to compensate when later enrolled at the Institut Sainte-Marie and taking classes at the Sorbonne). Also, during the period leading up to her sitting for the *agrégation* she was impatient for her independence and completed a four-year program in three years (Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir,* 121). Once qualified and guaranteed permanent employment in 1929, she seems to have virtually ceased writing and active philosophical research for a number of years, deferring her first teaching position until 1931 to live from private and part-time teaching in Paris, and then relying on her past scholarship to prepare her *lycée* classes. When she did write, she experimented with fiction rather than philosophy. Perplexed commentators have offered various theories, particularly because in 1929 her plan had been to work in ethics and because she had been sufficiently committed to philosophy to resist her family's opposition (Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 92, 140). However, she recounts that Sartre, whose intellectual superiority she never doubted, demolished in three hours the "pluralist ethics" she had formulated in 1929, and she also describes the discovery that the prestige *lycée*- and E.N.S.-trained *normaliens* had a far more solid training and depth of culture (see Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1963), 340–3. Beauvoir's memoirs depict a swift transition from the student's passion for philosophy to the *agregée*'s conviction that Sartre is the real philosopher. The juxtaposition is startling – in 1929 she had happily and confidently prepared for the examinations with her *normalien* friends and triumphed. She describes herself the next year leaving the philosophical conversations to Aron and Sartre "since my mind moved too slowly for them" (Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 32). The countering anecdote is often recounted that her *agrégation* jury hesitated on whether to award Sartre or Beauvoir first prize: they did not want to deny it to Sartre (who, despite views about his promise, had not succeeded in his *agrégation* the previous year), yet believed that Beauvoir might have been the better philosopher (Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 145–6, 269). There followed a long period during which Beauvoir seems to have disconnected from her studies, after her accelerated educational program and the intense efforts needed to compensate for her poor training. One could speculate that a period of "burnout" may have occurred. Also, Beauvoir's teaching qualification was not unrelated to her and her family's expectation that she would find some means of earning her living. Once this had been accomplished, it may have taken considerable time to reinvent her motivations. Sartre had long believed that he would be a gifted writer, an ambition reinforced by his family and colleagues (see, for example, his autobiographical sketch, *Words*) and one which guided his studies. Beauvoir hoped for personal autonomy. Accordingly, Sartre saw his *agrégation* as the beginning of his intellectual promise, while in the short term, Beauvoir seems to have treated hers as a concluding accomplishment. His success was followed by no break in his intellectual work; rather, the achievement provoked a period of vigorous intellectual activity and writing: during his initial military service (1929–30), his teaching at Le Havre (1931–3, during which time he was already working on *Nausea*), applications for overseas

anthropology, psychoanalysis, economics, sociology, politics, history, and the history of literature, as if the two projects would only be that much more robust for their engagement with the diverse extant studies. Beauvoir's drawing on plural disciplines has generally been considered more of an oddity than a strength, particularly where the discussion of data or approaches from one context seems to have the potential to call into question another. She refers to biological facts in *The Second Sex* and also claims, from a different perspective, that there can be no pure biological facts. She presents economically minded solutions to inequality but considers such solutions reductive. With respect to the number of disciplinary approaches she puts into play, she does not make a case for their compatibility, nor does she stress possible incompatibilities.

At first, readers primarily reacted to the themes, and *The Second Sex* in particular provoked a strong public response.[10] Later taken up as an indispensable work with respect to feminist movements dating from the 1960s, *The Second Sex* brought an original descriptive precision to women's lives – as a humdrum of domestic spaces to be maintained and adorned, of repetitive activities pursued in a context of constrained spaces and choices, of dull, predictable patterns of behavior between the sexes, between women, between women and their families. The controversial aspects of the material were first located in its references to sex, and eventually in its politics: Was Beauvoir antagonistic to maternity? What sorts of possible solutions arose in her work? How much store did she set by technological innovations, economic independence, and resistance to capitalism? And how serious was the weak degree of differentiation in Beauvoir's work between women of different races and classes?

work and study, and a research grant in Berlin (1933–4), with his first book, on the imagination, appearing in 1936. During this same period, Beauvoir prepared her classes minimally and earned her living. After passing her *agrégation* in 1929, she tried an aborted three chapters of fiction in 1931, an aborted novel manuscript in 1932, and a collection of stories rejected by publishers (*When Things of the Spiritual Come First,* which as Bair notes was "the first writing she had completed since her university examinations almost ten years earlier," *Simone de Beauvoir,* 206). Only during 1938–9 did she begin her first book, *L'Invitée*, completing it in 1941. Accepted by Gallimard in 1942, it would not be published until 1944, fifteen years after her *agrégation*. *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, her first philosophical work, was written in 1943, and appeared in 1944. These biographical details come from Bair, who notes that Beauvoir spent a good deal of the fallow period intensively correcting Sartre's voluminous manuscripts (notice that during this same period Sartre produced *Nausea*, *The Wall*, his two books on the imagination, *Transcendence of the Ego*, and *Being and Nothingness* all, on Bair's account, heavily edited by Beauvoir).

[10] The public and intellectual controversy surrounding its publication is documented in Ingrid Galster, *Le deuxième sexe de Simone de Beauvoir, textes réunis et présentés par Ingrid Galster* (Paris: Presses de l'université Paris-Sorbonne, 2004).

Her scholarly commentators have more recently directed attention to what was, from the publication of *The Second Sex* onward, just as maverick as the themes: Beauvoir's method. Beauvoir did little to thwart the fact that she was associated from the first with the work of Sartre. She echoed in print the occasional Sartrean formulation, giving some page references to *Being and Nothingness* and later to *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, offering a spirited and lengthy defense in *Les temps modernes* of Sartre's philosophy against Merleau-Ponty's criticisms of him,[11] perhaps even writing some communications signed by Sartre.[12] Sartre's substantial public profile and the 1943 publication of *Being and Nothingness* meant that any theoretical discordances with Beauvoir's subsequent publications would often be evaluated, where attention was paid to them, through the lens of Sartre's work. For these reasons, her method and theory were long overshadowed, not only by her themes and politics, but also by that relationship.

It is not surprising that the coalescing of interest in Beauvoir as a thinker and methodologist first occurred via the task, as many scholars have seen it, of disengaging her from these Sartrean associations. In the ongoing life of Beauvoir's work, a certain degree of resistance or friction between authorial statements about her work, or its most overt appearance, has become intertwined with attempts to extricate it from Sartrean affiliations or otherwise interpret it against the grain.[13] Some have reversed directions of influence,[14] some have significantly broadened the body of figures with whom Beauvoir is understood to have philosophical affiliations (thus the most important recent studies have assessed Beauvoir's engagements with Merleau-Ponty, Hegel, Husserl, Heidegger, Marx, and Bergson, usually arguing that these engagements are far more important than the affiliation

[11] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Sartre and Ultrabolshevism," in *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty,* ed. J. Stewart (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 355–447; and Beauvoir, "Merleau-Ponty and Pseudo-Sartreanism," in Stewart, *The Debate Between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty*, 448–91.

[12] Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 567.

[13] Many of Beauvoir's recent feminist commentators cite her judgment that she was not really a philosopher (on this, see Margaret Simons, "Introduction," *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. M. A. Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 1–12, 2) so as to dispute it. Le Doeuff recounts that Beauvoir considered Le Doeuff's critical thoughts on Sartre's promise to "take Beauvoir in hand" a misinterpretation, and Beauvoir perhaps disliked the fact that Le Doeuff's innovative and constructive readings of her work took the route of criticizing Sartre (see Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc,* trans. Trista Selous [Oxford, U.K. and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1991], 137).

[14] Edward and Kate Fullbrook have argued that some philosophical ideas presented in *Being and Nothingness* originated with Beauvoir and are evident in *She Came to Stay* (*L'invitée*) (see E. Fullbrook and K. Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Remaking of an Intellectual Legend* [New York: Basic Books, 1994]).

with Sartre), whereas others have perceived that there are more ingenious ways of understanding the possible relations with Sartre. For example, ostensive fidelity can operate as tacit critique, undermining, exposure, or reevaluation. Whether consciously intended or not, such surreptitious critique of early Sartreanism could be identified as an intelligent intervention, and it is the similarly innovative Michèle Le Doeuff to whom readers are particularly indebted for this suggestion.[15]

Beauvoir takes a great deal of trouble to "define" woman in a way that literally, as Nancy Bauer has argued, invents this as a philosophical problem.[16] The author is characteristically unwilling to present her method as a point of possible interrogation. Women's alterity, not "*la morale existentialiste*," is presented in the guise of a problem. As a result we find Beauvoir declaring adherence to an existentialist ethics in the early pages of *The Second Sex* without defining it. Nor does she identify it as palpably different from the existentialist ethics she had formulated in previous works, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and *The Blood of Others*. For example, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* concerns the multivalent ambiguity of existence, our state of existing in various divided modes that cannot be reconciled: freedom and thing, being for itself and being for others, historical and negating, fixed and transcendent, isolated and connected, consciousness of the world and being part of the world of which we are conscious,[17] and the fact that, as she later writes in *Prime*

[15] Le Doeuff, *Hipparchia's Choice,* 56, 108, and see Le Doeuff, "Operative Philosophy: Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism," in *Critical Essays on Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. E. Marks (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), 144–54.

[16] "To say that it is a problem *for* philosophy is to propose that insofar as philosophy fails to take account of the being of woman it cannot lay claim to the universality which, by its own lights, it must strive" (Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophy and Feminism* [New York: Columbia University Press, 2001], 1).

[17] For discussions of the nuances of ambiguity in *Ethics of Ambiguity*, see Gail Weiss, "Introduction to an Ethics of Ambiguity," *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings,* ed. Margaret Simons (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 279–88; and Monika Langer, "Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty on Ambiguity," *The Cambridge Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, ed. Claudia Card (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 87–106. Prior to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, the term briefly appears in 1944 in her *Pyrrhus and Cinéas,* trans. Marybeth Timmermann (*Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings,* ed. Simons, 105, 99); in a reference to the ambiguity of ethics in "Moral Idealism and Political Realism" of 1945 (Beauvoir, "Moral Idealism and Political Realism," trans. Anne Deing Cordero, in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 188); in short pieces published in 1946 entitled "Sartre" ("If Sartre's attitude may seem paradoxical, it is because the human condition is ambiguous, and Jean-Paul Sartre is a man who has fully assumed his condition as a man," 233); and in 1946 in "Eye for an Eye." Here the term is used to stress that we are both body and negating consciousness, and "tragic ambiguity" is identified in the fact that we are "at the same time a freedom and a thing, both unified and scattered, isolated by his subjectivity and nonetheless coexisting at the heart of the world with other men" (*Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical*

of Life, "death challenges our existence, [but] it also gives meaning to our lives."[18] *The Blood of Others* concerns the inevitable impingement of our actions on others. Here, some form of possible authenticity seems to be attributed to a responsible subject who painfully recognizes this impingement rather than seeking, impossibly, to avoid it. In *The Second Sex* and *Old Age*, works that presented themselves as indifferent to the problems of theoretical inconsistency that were to preoccupy her late-twentieth-century readers, Beauvoir would establish a network of multiple, interlocking, and auto-resisting concepts of ethics, some of which reinforce each other, some of which undermine each other. In the light of Beauvoir's preoccupation with alterity and freedom, a redirection of focus to the method of her work could be said to amount to its conversion.

Some parallels to the web-like conceptual structure of *The Second Sex* are to be found in the sizable collection of notes and fragments published as Sartre's *Notebooks for an Ethics*,[19] and parallel appeals are made by both authors to notions of generosity, risk, the gift, and a (converted) notion of conversion. In addition, there are multiple notions of ethics in these pages, not all of which are compatible. But this incomplete manuscript remains a collection of notebook fragments, the expression of an intended system that its author could not realize, or so it seems, with the elements at hand. By contrast, Beauvoir was able to realize a viable, historically influential project drawing on philosophical elements many commentators have considered to be highly unstable. The instability turned to her favor, as she addressed a form of existence that she deemed to be accordingly unstable.

Writings, ed. Simons, 258). On this see Kristana Arp, "Introduction to 'An Eye for An Eye,'" in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings,* 239–44.

[18] Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 731, and see her first statement concerning ambiguity in an early version of *Ethics of Ambiguity*: "From the moment he is born, from the instant he is conceived, a man begins to die; the very movement of life is a steady progression toward the decomposition of the tomb. This ambivalence is at the heart of every individualized organism . . . man knows it. For him, this life that makes itself by unmaking itself is not just a natural process; it itself thinks itself [*elle se pense elle-même*]" (Beauvoir, "Introduction to an Ethics of Ambiguity," in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Simons, 289–98, 288).

[19] Lundgren-Gothlin identifies the echoes between *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and the *Cahiers* concerning the term "conversion." As she notes, the latter manifests Sartre's interest in Marxism, seen also in other texts written immediately after the publication of *Being and Nothingness*, and his newfound interest in the possibility of some form of reciprocal recognition (a possibility rejected in *Being and Nothingness*), and in the possibility that the other can prolong rather than negate my freedom (see Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *The Sex of Existence*: *Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex*, trans. Linda Schenck [London: Athlone, 1996], 150). On the importance of conversion in Sartre's ethics, see Thomas Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Chicago and La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1993).

Giving herself the aim of articulating women's situation, the clash between possible conceptions of ethics should not necessarily be understood as the author's impediment. Arguably, Beauvoir could only articulate women's situation, as she saw it, by relying on incompatible definitions of ethics.[20] Such a conclusion could only emerge if one were willing to grant that theoretical incompatibility need not weaken Beauvoir's arguments and proposals. Certainly, her point is that the subjugation of women is itself a paradox. Women are equal, and they are definable in terms of an irrecusable freedom. If they are nonetheless constrained, if there has been a diminishing not only of their material conditions but also of the very freedom of consciousness that, via a definition accepted by Beauvoir, is not diminishable, the paradox would belong to women's situation rather than to a deficiency in her understanding of freedom. It was a paradox with which she intended to startle the reader: women could not – by a definition of freedom to which Beauvoir appealed – be less free. And yet, she persuasively argued, so they were.[21]

Once Beauvoir had established from the first pages of her book that her framework was to be some form of existentialist ethics, it was not inconsistent with the paradox of women's subjugation that the condition be analyzed through concepts of freedom, ethics, politics, and the social that could strike the reader as incompatible. Beauvoir could be associated with a lineage of theorists who have, in different ways, stressed the paradoxical position of those subordinated. Unlike Marx, she credits no dialectical movement with the potential for an inevitable and progressive transformation of the subjugated, and unlike Rousseau she could have no confidence in a guiding voice of nature. Unlike the elegant interpretation by Joan

[20] Although I find it productive as a means for interpreting the contradictions of *The Second Sex*, there is likely disagreement about this suggestion. Consider, for example, Le Doeuff's view that "by saying in a contradictory way that 'we have won the fight,' and that 'no woman has ever had a chance,' Simone de Beauvoir seems to have missed the point that every woman's life is lived in contradiction," a comment to which she adds the endnote in response to an obviously imagined query, "In the last part of *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir says on several occasions 'the independent woman is split.' This is not at all what I am trying to say here. I am thinking of a contradiction set up by institutions, not a 'split' of the psychological type, and I think contradictions affect the lives of all women, not just those of the 'independent' ones" (*Hipparchia's Choice: An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, etc,* 128, 333n).

[21] Sonia Kruks maintains that Beauvoir relies on two concepts of freedom, practical and ontological. This does not necessarily alleviate their possible conflict. If practical freedom provides the air to the dove of ontological freedom, there is no conflict. But if Beauvoir considers, as she often does, that a debate about ontological freedom needs to give its attention to practical freedom, rather than be distracted from it, then there is a different kind of tension (see Kruks, *Situation and Human Existence, Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* [London: Unwin Hyman, 1990], 86–90).

Scott of French women's exclusion from citizenship,[22] Beauvoir analyzes the paradoxes of women's inequality through a methodological form that (intentionally or not) relies on some of the contradictions in question, which she also highlights and discusses. Contradictions are thematized in Beauvoir's work as a crucial heuristic in terms of which to understand women's position; but, in addition to being described, contradictions are operative in the mobile network of theoretical elements in *The Second Sex* and in Beauvoir's work more generally, and they have been the object of reflection in philosophical debate about her work.

Beauvoir might not declare the limitations of existentialist ethics, but it has been said that her texts negotiate with them.[23] Certainly what emerges from her writing is the inadequacy of many of the theoretical models to which she refers to answer questions about women, reproduction, femininity, oppression, subjugation, and inequity. This is a powerful, tacit reading of the theoretical language of some of her philosophical colleagues of the day. According to the rhetorical tone of the work, she confidently supposes the plausibility of moving between, and juxtaposing, their models, but what arises in her work is a simultaneous articulation of fracture points created as she does so. Thus, Engels does not only fail to answer a question about sex subjugation overtly put by Beauvoir, but he also fails to answer to a model concerned with sexuality and embodiment attributable to Merleau-Ponty. Through Beauvoir's appeal to them, a conversation occurs, not just between Beauvoir and Engels, or Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, but indirectly between Engels and Merleau-Ponty on the topic of women. Beauvoir mentions that her framework is informed by the analyses of embodiment by Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, and Heidegger:

> If the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation, as viewed in the perspective I am adopting – that of Heidegger, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. It is our grasp on the world and the outline of our projects. [*Dans la perspective que j'adopte – celle de Heidegger, de Sartre, de Merleau-Ponty – si le corps n'est pas une* chose, *il est une situation: c'est notre prise sur le monde et l'esquisse de nos projets*.][24]

But the reader is familiar with the pointed debate between Sartre and Heidegger, the latter accused by the former, as Heidegger discusses at

[22] Joan Wallach Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), ix.
[23] See note 14. [24] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, US34, UK66, FrI72 trans. mod.