



Femininity, love, and alienation: the genius of *The Second Sex*

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ABSTRACT

This article presents an axiological reading of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, reframing its most famous sentence 'one is not born, but becomes, a woman' as a claim about femininity, love, and alienation under particular conditions of sexual hierarchy. Because this sentence is often taken to express the thesis of *The Second Sex* on social constructionist readings, Section 1 rejects the aptness of this approach on three grounds. Section 2 outlines an alternative, axiological reading, which better attends to all of the work's parts, and to Beauvoir's emphasis on the concrete inseparability of the physiological, sexual, economic, legal, religious, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of women's situations. Section 3 turns to the sister 'one is not born' clause, in Volume I—'one is not born, but becomes, a genius'—to show that Beauvoir's account of frustrated freedom in *The Second Sex* concerns not only alienated labour, sex, and love, but also aesthetic creativity and moral invention. The article arises from a British Academy Lecture delivered on 17 October 2023.

Keywords Simone de Beauvoir, genealogy, sexual hierarchy, freedom, recognition, reciprocity, myth, values

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Introduction

In a Buddhist parable a group of blind men hear that a strange animal has been brought to their town. It is called an 'elephant', they are told, but they do not know its shape. A name alone does not satisfy their curiosity so they want to feel it, to learn by touch what they cannot by sight. When they do:

The first person, whose hand landed on the trunk, said, 'This being is like a thick snake.' For another one whose hand reached its ear, it seemed like a kind of fan. As for another person, whose hand was upon its leg, said, the elephant is a pillar like a tree-trunk. The blind man who placed his hand upon its side said the elephant, 'is a wall.' Another who felt its tail, described it as a rope. The last felt its tusk, stating the elephant is that which is hard, smooth and like a spear.¹

I begin here because—although I am no stranger to the philosophical traditions with which Simone de Beauvoir is normally associated, phenomenology and existentialism especially—reading the philosophical secondary scholarship on *The Second Sex* regularly reminds me of it: If you

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¹Tittha sutta (Udāna 6.4, Khuddaka Nikaya).

touch one part of the book, some philosophers will tell you Beauvoir is Husserlian; another, Sartrean, Heideggerian, or Merleau-Pontian; another again, a student and teacher of Lévi-Strauss, critic of Marx and Engels, Freud and Lacan—not to mention Hegel, Kierkegaard, or Nietzsche. In the part philosophers usually neglect to discuss in detail—the extensive discussion of five literary authors at the end of Volume I, in the Part entitled ‘Myths’—she is the mother of feminist literary criticism. (This part, I think, must be something like the elephant’s nostril; philosophers don’t seem to want to touch it.) Throughout Volume II, in the volume frequently described as ‘phenomenological’, Beauvoir’s argumentative interlocutors and textual sources come primarily from what we might call ‘philosophy’s others’: psychoanalysis, literature, mysticism. This polyphony raises the questions: what kind of animal is *the whole book*? Is it one animal?

The conclusion I have come to is yes: it is an axiological animal, concerning the source and transmission of values, and the conditions of realising human freedom in its concrete, sensuous forms. Moreover, its literary form expresses its content. Each part plays an important role in the whole, and the whole illuminates the parts. It is not merely descriptive, but normative. Read axiologically, Beauvoir offers a genealogy of the morality of sexual hierarchy, condemning the oppressive effects of this hierarchy as ‘absolute evil’ (SS 17).

Given the book’s size and complexity, my aim here is relatively modest: to reframe its most famous sentence, from the beginning of Volume II—that ‘one is not born, but becomes a woman’—as a claim about femininity, love, and alienation under particular conditions of sexual hierarchy. Because this sentence is often taken to express the thesis of *The Second Sex* on social constructionist readings, I begin in Section 1 by rejecting the aptness of this approach on three grounds. In Section 2, I outline an alternative, axiological reading, which better attends to all of the work’s parts, and to Beauvoir’s emphasis on the concrete inseparability of the physiological, sexual, economic, legal, religious, moral, and aesthetic dimensions of women’s situations.² Finally, in Section 3, I turn to consider its sister clause, in Volume I—‘one is not born, but becomes, a genius’ (SS 154)—to show that Beauvoir’s account of frustrated freedom in *The Second Sex*, concerns not only alienated labour, sex, and love, but the aesthetic creativity and moral invention at the heart of this axiological reading.

1. One is not born, but becomes ... what?

If there is one thing most people know about *The Second Sex*, it is the sentence that opens the ‘Childhood’ chapter, at the beginning of Volume II: ‘One is not born, but becomes, a woman’ (SS 293). On one influential social constructionist reading of it by Judith Butler, the work’s ‘distinguished contribution’ is to introduce a ‘radical heteronomy of natural bodies and constructed genders’, such that being female and being a woman are two very different sorts of being. This,

²For the purposes of this paper I sketch this reading; it is developed and defended in greater detail in Kirkpatrick (forthcoming).

Butler claims, is the meaning of the text's most famous 'one is not born' sentence (Butler 1986: 35).³

Since then Beauvoir scholars have shown that Beauvoir did not employ the sex/gender distinction,⁴ and that Beauvoir's 'actual views about sexual difference are more complex than this binary distinction allows' (Gatens 2003: 267). This history bears repeating since Beauvoir, like many of her contemporaries, rejected dualisms as abstractions that failed to do justice to concrete reality. Before them, in the 19th century, Kierkegaard coined the term 'spiritlessness' to describe human attempts at self-understanding that relied solely on the categories of nature and culture—since however nuanced these categories may be, human experience is not merely natural or cultural, but 'spiritual'—characterised by the openness and possibility of each individual's freedom as well as the limits of necessity and the given (Kierkegaard 1980).

Since parts of *The Second Sex* are often assigned reading in university courses on feminism or the philosophy of sex and gender, and often set alongside Butler's work as though they are part of a continuous story, it is important to begin by identifying some of the gaps between more recent feminist paradigms and Beauvoir's philosophical and political commitments in 1949. I will briefly outline three, before presenting Beauvoir's axiological definition of 'woman' and the genius of *The Second Sex*: (i) Beauvoir's language and concepts; (ii) normative commitments; and (iii) knowledge of the history of philosophy and feminism.

i. Language and concepts

As Moira Gatens points out, Beauvoir's terms of analysis include at least the three terms 'woman', 'feminine', and 'female', and these are combined in the text in many variations, as the following table illustrates (adapted from Gatens 2003: 278–9).

	female	feminine	woman
1	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Yes	No	Yes
3	Yes	No	No
4	No	Yes	Yes
5	No	No	Yes

This does not include all logically possible combinations, but their precise number is more difficult to identify than it suggests, since considerations of

³Textually speaking, Butler's interpretation of *The Second Sex* is supported almost exclusively by citation from the biology chapter (Volume I) and the 'One is not born' sentence from Volume II. There is one further reference—to Beauvoir's discussion of alienation in psychoanalysis.

⁴The term 'gender' did not exist in French in 1949, except in its grammatical sense. See, for example, Altman (2020), Bergoffen (2009), Card (2003), Gatens (2003), Heinämaa (1997), Leboeuf (2016), Lennon (2019), and Moi (1999).

translation and capitalisation make the matter even more complex.⁵ In claiming that Beauvoir introduces a ‘radical heteronomy’ of natural bodies and ‘constructed genders’, Butler downplays the complexity of Beauvoir’s account, mistaking Beauvoir’s rejection of natural function arguments for a complete rejection of the relevance of nature. Moreover, in doing so her reading obscures Beauvoir’s ontology of human ambiguity.⁶

ii. Normative perspective

In the introduction of *The Second Sex* Beauvoir tells her reader that the evaluative perspective she adopts is existentialist morality (SS 17)—a morality of ambiguity which, as she explains it in ‘What is Existentialism?’, understands human beings to be a synthesis of consciousness and body, subject and object, uniting Christianity’s emphasis on individual interiority with Marxist attention to the objective conditions of collective existence.⁷ Beauvoir’s existentialist philosophy rejects the idea that human beings have an essence or ‘identity’ prior to existence, or that during existence they are ever fully ‘constructed’, because we are not merely products of nature and culture, but embodied freedoms perpetually negotiating this dialectic. Indeed, she sees the desire to have a fixed identity—what she calls ‘the desire for being’—as particularly susceptible to bad faith (EA 12).

Bad faith is tempting because human beings do not always feel at home with ourselves—with the trajectory of our becoming in time, or the ways we are seen (or not) by others. Beauvoir claimed that the temporality of being human involves the perpetual temptation to self-reification, to make ourselves something fixed so that we can say with reassuring certainty ‘I am what I am’ instead of admitting that we are perpetually in the process of becoming, and that this process is restless, dependent, and vulnerable. But on Beauvoir’s view there is no self in the sense of a pre-existent essence or persistent personal identity, or in the sense, on some theological pictures, that each human being is called to a predestined vocation by God. Rather, there is flowing spontaneity of consciousness that desires, loves, and projects itself toward the future through action (PC 93). An individual’s essence is acquired over time through her actions and interactions with others, but it is never experienced from a first-person point of view as fully determinate. The experience of not being ‘installed ahead of time waiting for myself’, however, involves ‘constant tension’—the answer to the question ‘who am I?’ is always partly open (EPW 212). The restless tension of freedom’s possibility is not always assumed authentically; some prefer to flee it

⁵The French ‘féminin’ can be used as a ‘sex’ term, to refer to a particular anatomy (for example, in *le corps féminin, le sexe féminin*); ‘femme’ means ‘wife’ as well as ‘woman’; and ‘femelle’ does not directly translate into the English word ‘female’—at the time it was a term usually reserved for animals such as livestock, and when Beauvoir does use it to describe human beings she knew it would ring strangely in readers’ ears to hear ‘*la femelle humaine*’. Beauvoir also uses the term ‘woman’ (with a lower case w) and ‘Woman’ (with an upper case W), to refer to concrete, real women, and Myths or imaginary idealisations, respectively.

⁶Since Beauvoir had a phenomenological understanding of the relation between the body and consciousness as an internal relation, the body and its meanings cannot be ‘radically heteronomous’. Indeed, Sara Heinämaa argues that Butler replaces Beauvoir’s alleged biological determinism with a social determinism (Heinämaa 1997).

⁷WIE 325; see also EA 156.

in what she calls bad faith, alibis, or philosophies of immanence, where values are fixed and ‘the outcome of actions is given’ (EPW 212).⁸

A shared assumption of several early anglophone philosophical readings of *The Second Sex* is that Beauvoir should be read through a particular French reception of the philosophy of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, which downplays or ignores the Marxist dimension of her existentialist ethics, the relevance of her economic analysis, and the roots of her approach in those of other philosophical traditions in the second quarter of the 20th century.⁹ The missing materialism of such readings, however, is not very surprising: thanks to the work of Margaret Simons and Toril Moi,¹⁰ it is now widely known that the first English translation of *The Second Sex* was a Cold War translation, published in the United States in 1953, which cut nearly 15% of Beauvoir’s words, including all of Beauvoir’s references to socialist feminisms; inconsistently rendered terms of art including ‘alienation’;¹¹ and excluded or distorted long passages of discussion of women’s work, as well as Beauvoir’s treatments of alienated sexuality and domesticity.¹² Moreover, as Sonia Kruks has shown, Beauvoir’s rejection of the so-called ‘Orthodox Marxism’ of 1940s France was often mistaken for a rejection of Marxism *tout court*. And this suited the politics of some of her—especially American—anglophone feminist readers, who regarded Marxism with suspicion or hostility (Kruks 2017: 238).

iii. The history of feminism and philosophy

If the thesis that “‘being” female and “being” a woman are two very different sorts of being’ (Butler 1986: 35) were the distinguishing contribution of *The Second Sex*, it would be a rather unoriginal work, the point of which could have been made in a small fraction of the words Beauvoir employed. The idea that ‘femininity’ or the social inferiority of women is the result of context-specific social formation has been advanced at least since the 17th-century Cartesian Poullain de la Barre. Beauvoir knew this; Poullain was not only the source of one of *The Second Sex*’s epigraphs, he provoked a famous and influential reaction from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The many men who wrote about how ‘females’ should be educated in order to become ‘women’ also knew this—in 1721, for example, Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* treated the ‘great question among men’: namely, whether it was more advantageous to remove women’s freedom or let them keep it.¹³ For Rousseau only men should be educated to the genius of their freedom; women, by contrast, were to be educated to ‘please and serve’ them. As we read in *Émile*: ‘the whole education of women ought to be relative to men’ (Rousseau 2003: 263).

⁸See also EA 13 on ‘tension’.

⁹Butler (1986), Lundgren-Gothlin (1996), and Bauer (2001) interpret Beauvoir through Alexandre Kojève’s ‘French Hegel’, which I argue is historically and conceptually mistaken (see Kirkpatrick forthcoming: chapters 5, 6).

¹⁰Simons (1983), Moi (2002).

¹¹As Toril Moi notes, Parshley (1997 [1953]) rendered this term inconsistently as ‘projection’ (mostly), ‘alienation’, ‘identification’, ‘being beside itself’ (Moi 2008: 177).

¹²For more on the text’s Cold War reception, see Chaperon & Rouch (2023).

¹³Montesquieu 2003: 114; Lettre XXXVIII.

Beauvoir's question wasn't *whether* women were 'socially constructed', but *how* her contemporaries were (to use her own term) constituted, and why, for many of them, becoming a woman involved alienation from their bodies, their labour, or their love for others and themselves. 'How,' she asks, 'in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself?' (SS 17)

2. The shape of the elephant

'Woman', on the axiological definition Beauvoir introduces early in Volume I of *The Second Sex*, is a 'human being in search of values within a world of values' (SS 62).¹⁴ On her view, all human beings are axiological animals: our attention to the world is inherently evaluative, and the ways we direct it are shaped by the evaluative attention of others. In France in 1949, however, Beauvoir argued that those born female were discouraged from or even punished for becoming evaluative individuals, represented as inferior in economic, aesthetic, religious, and moral spheres of value, and often experienced female bodies—whether their own or others'—as devalued or depersonalised.

In the decade of *The Second Sex's* publication, France executed its last woman by guillotine (for conducting abortions), gave women the right to vote, and emerged from Occupation with a new declaration of human rights. As Beauvoir saw it, however, the rights of French women not to be beheaded, to vote, or not to 'be held in servitude' (as Article 4 of the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights put it) were not enough to transform women's concrete situation because of the gap between law and custom. Whatever abstract rights women had on paper (and in France in 1949 they still lacked many), in their daily lives conceptions of 'the natural', customs of 'femininity', and asymmetrical ideals of love and self-love contributed to the perpetuation of an oppressive sexual hierarchy Beauvoir condemned as 'absolute evil' (SS 17). *The Second Sex*, as Beauvoir introduced it, was an attempt 'to take stock of the current state' of women in France after 'an era of muddled controversy'.¹⁵ Although methodological statements are rare in *The Second Sex*, here and elsewhere she restricts the scope of her project to a particular place (France) and time ('the current state'). Lest the reader forget, she regularly roots her analysis in her present, using the word 'today' over 150 times in the pages that follow.¹⁶

In order to understand any individual's attitude to freedom, Beauvoir claimed in her earlier work *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, one must understand the 'natural history of the individual' (EA 39), their particular *situation* in nature and history. While no living person is ever fully determined by his past, 'it is always on the basis of what he has been that a man decides upon what he wants to be' (EA 40).

¹⁴This definition is offered after saying that each human existent is a sexed body (SS 56) and that 'biological givens [*données biologiques*]' play 'a leading role in woman's story and are an essential element of her situation' (SS 44).

¹⁵SS 16; Marie-Louise Giraud (whose story was fictionalised under the name Marie-Jeanne Latour) was a laundress executed under the 300 Law (see Watson 1952: 286).

¹⁶This number only includes uses of '*aujourd'hui*'; other temporal locators such as '*de nos jours*' would make it even larger.

In the Introduction to *The Second Sex* Beauvoir writes that it is ‘difficult for men to measure the enormous extent of social discrimination that seems insignificant from the outside and whose moral and intellectual repercussions are so deep in woman that they appear to spring from an original nature’ (SS 15). In describing the contents of her two volumes, she claims that Volume I demonstrates how “‘feminine reality’” has been constituted, why woman has been defined as the Other, and what the consequences have been from men’s point of view’ (SS 17).

Central to this constitution, as Beauvoir saw it, is the fact that for centuries of the history of Western philosophy—and its legacies in legal and social institutions—women were defined as defective men, and female bodies as incapable of labour, genius, creativity, invention, or even of individuality itself.¹⁷ This conceptual history plays an important role in Beauvoir’s genealogy of the morality of sexual hierarchy and in her rejection of the adequacy of Hegel’s theory of recognition to account for relations between men and women. Aristotle’s ideas—that females were defective males, characterised by passivity—‘have not lost all credibility’,¹⁸ she writes; ‘Hegel thought the two sexes must be different: one is active and the other passive, and it goes without saying that passivity will be the female’s lot’ (SS 25).¹⁹

In her earlier works ‘Pyrrhus and Cineas’ and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, which lay some of the ethical foundations of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir rejects Hegel’s account of recognition on the Kierkegaardian grounds that it is not qua abstract universal that human beings desire to be recognised by others. While she agreed that all human beings depend on others to become ourselves—that recognition constitutes ‘a vital human need’, as Charles Taylor put it (1992: 26)—Beauvoir claimed that respect for the person in general does not satisfy it. What does meet this need is a particular recognitive gaze, a ‘witness’ who sees your present projects as expressions of your freedom and envisions your future in ways you recognise as your own (PC 133; EA 117).²⁰ But the gaze of a witness is a kind of *moral* vision, which requires friendship or generosity, ‘virtues’ that are not easy and cannot be achieved once and for all (SS 163).

Moreover, Beauvoir rejected Hegel’s understanding of the source of values, claiming that it is not ‘impersonal universal man who is the source of values, but the plurality of concrete, particular men projecting themselves toward their ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical and as irreducible as subjectivity itself’ (EA 17).²¹ In *The Second Sex*, after acknowledging that the

¹⁷In Aristotle’s *De Generatione* woman is defined as a defective male, an accident. The Scholastic reviver of Aristotelianism Thomas Aquinas attempted to reconcile this definition and the existence of sexual hierarchy with the Christian doctrines that all God created is good and that in just social relations ‘where there is no sin there is no inequality’. He did so by claiming that God made man to help woman—not in the domain of labour, where another man’s help is better, but in the domain of generation. Since woman played a necessary role in generation her human nature was not ‘defective’. But in her *individual* nature she was ‘defective and misbegotten’, with merely a passive generative power. *De Generatione* ii.3, *Summa Theologiae* Prima Pars Q 92. See SS 23ff. for Beauvoir’s discussion of aspects of this legacy, especially in later natural function arguments and in Hegel.

¹⁸Note that SS 25 misleadingly translates the French *credit* here as ‘validity’ (see LDS i.44).

¹⁹See Hegel’s *Philosophy of Nature*, Part III, §368 (§369 in 3rd edition of *Encyclopaedia*), Hegel (2004: 413).

²⁰PC 133; EA 17; see also Manon Garcia (forthcoming).

²¹In this her view resembles Marx’s 6th thesis on Feuerbach, that values arise from ‘the ensemble of social relations’ (Marx with Engels 1998).

‘synthesis of becoming’ was not ‘realized in the same way’ (SS 38) in male and female bodies, Beauvoir argued that this did not entail that ‘a woman’s individual life is not as rich as man’s’ (SS 47), justify sexual hierarchy, or determine that woman’s ‘substantive destiny’ was fixed—or that she could only (as Hegel saw it) lead an ethical life in the family.²²

For Beauvoir, Nature ‘has reality ... in so far as it is taken on in action’ (SS 47). It is impossible to measure ‘in the abstract’ woman’s grasp on the world or the burden of their ‘generative function’ because in the case of human females the relation of maternity to the life of an individual is ‘indefinite’.²³ Society determines many features of this relation, and in concrete reality, individual ‘possibilities’ depend on their economic and social situation (SS 47). Concretely speaking, the balance of productive and reproductive forces is different depending on economic history and social values, the developmental stages of gestation, infancy, and childhood; and customs of childcare and contraception. Many needs and values combine to constitute the relations of males and females to each other and to children. Consequently, attempting to provide abstract and universal answers concerning the relative importance or the respective roles of ‘the sexes’ on physiological grounds alone is a mistake (SS 48).

This discussion of the relation of female individuals to the human species appears in the broader context of Volume I Part 1 of *The Second Sex*, entitled ‘Destiny’. In the first of its three chapters, ‘The Givens of Biology’, Beauvoir acknowledges that physiology plays a significant role in the genealogy of sexual hierarchy.²⁴ However she rejects the idea that it is its source or ground, and claims that biology qua abstract science is methodologically unfit to account for the meaning of the living body.²⁵ Second, she argues that psychoanalysis makes a valuable and complementary contribution to discussions of sexuality by posing the question of meaning, but claims that it does so only to pervert it by introducing a further determinist abstraction Beauvoir calls ‘sexual monism’—psychoanalysis too abstracts the existent away from the world of values in which she is in search of values. Finally, Beauvoir claims that human life is illuminated by historical materialism’s attention to the economic and social dimensions of existence. However, Engels’ ‘economic monism’ also fails to see the human individual in her axiological complexity, and a woman’s sexual and gestational labour as an expression of her individual values.²⁶ It is bad faith

²²For Hegel on women’s destiny, see §166 of *Philosophy of Right*: ‘Woman, on the other hand, has her substantive destiny in the family, and to be imbued with family piety is her ethical frame of mind.’

²³Borde and Malovany-Chevalier translate the French *indéfini* ‘undefined’. I have altered this translation because Beauvoir’s meaning here appears to be close to the concept of indeterminacy in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of the sexed body in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (2003: 193), on which she draws heavily.

²⁴Both English translations obscure the phenomenological language of Beauvoir’s chapter title. In Parshley’s (1997 [1953]) translation, ‘The Data of Biology’; in Borde and Malovany-Chevalier ‘Biological Data’. Neither retains the phenomenological collocation of ‘the given [*le donnée*]’ and ‘the lived [*le vécu*]’ which begin volumes I and II of *The Second Sex*.

²⁵‘Because the body is the instrument of our hold on the world, the world appears different to us depending on how it is grasped, which explains why we have studied these givens so deeply; they are one of the keys to enable us to understand woman. But what we refuse is the idea that they form a fixed destiny for her. They do not suffice to constitute the basis for a sexual hierarchy; they do not explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her for ever after to this subordinate [*subordonné*] role’ (SS 44-45/LDS i.73; translation mine). See Heinämaa (2003) for a discussion of Beauvoir’s phenomenology of the living body and sexual difference.

²⁶For the relation of Beauvoir’s rejection of Engels here to her enthusiastic endorsement of regulative ideals from the early Marx, see Kruks (2017).

to consider a woman solely as a worker, since her sexual and reproductive capacities are *as important* as her productive capacities not only in the social economy but in her individual life (SS 67).²⁷ On Beauvoir's view 'the problem of woman' cannot be reduced to what men have called labour, to woman as economic entity. She is also, for man, 'a sexual partner, a reproducer, an erotic object, an Other in whom he seeks himself' (SS 68). Marxists understand part of the truth when they claim that 'the ontological ambition of the existent takes a concrete shape according to the material possibilities afforded to him, particularly those opened up by technology'.²⁸ But the explanatory power of technology, too—like that of the biological body, or sexuality—is partial: 'the tool can only be defined in a world of values'.²⁹

Each 'destiny' Beauvoir considers imposes value judgements under the guise of Nature or necessity. Parts of each explanans do illuminate the explanandum, Beauvoir argues; however, these abstractions are inadequate to the task of revealing any individual's 'destiny'—or singly sufficient to explain 'what humanity has made of the human female' (SS 49). 'Woman is not a fixed reality but a becoming; she has to be compared with man in her becoming, that is, her *possibilities* have to be defined' (SS 46).

In Volume I, Part 1 ('History'), Beauvoir moves from competing conceptions of destiny to the contingency of history—a powerful tool in patriarchy's ideological armament. As historians of French feminisms have pointed out, 'the seemingly constant nature of the subjugation of the female sex' was the best argument 19th-century patriarchalists could make in its defence (Moses 1984: 1). But in the history Beauvoir offers, sexual hierarchy was neither inevitable nor constant. Again, her concerns are axiological: what history shows is not that women are by nature inferior to men, or incapable of genius, but that women's role has, until recently, predominantly been defined by men in such a way as to be excluded from the processes of defining and creating values—whether economic values, aesthetic values, social values of respect and prestige, or moral and spiritual values concerning what is good or evil, worthy of admiration or condemnation, reverence or revulsion.

Here, together with the next Part—'Myths'—Beauvoir outlines her genealogy of the morality of sexual hierarchy. While Engels' utopian socialism failed to provide a convincing account of how it was possible for society to move from communitarianism to private property, Beauvoir claims that her existentialist moral analysis fills this theoretical lacuna: it is men's will to domination—an imperialistic consciousness—that accounts for the emergence of private property, human slavery, and sexual hierarchy (SS 89). Unlike the accounts she accuses of monism, the account she offers is 'existential, economic, and moral'

²⁷Here the Borde and Malovany-Chevalier translation is misleading: 'woman cannot in good faith be regarded merely as a worker' (SS 67) makes the assumption that good faith is bad faith's antithesis, which in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre 2003) and Beauvoir's usage, it is not. In sex, pregnancy, and maternity, Beauvoir claims, woman does not only engage her body and her strength, but her 'living spontaneity', the 'essential values [*des valeurs essentielles*]' (LDS i.105) that make her, through her taking up of Nature, who she is.

²⁸LDS i. 107/SS 69; translation mine.

²⁹LDS i.108/SS 69; translation mine.

since the relation between concrete possibilities, material conditions, and moral values, is not static.³⁰

Few philosophers comment on the way the scope of the ‘History’ Part narrows both temporally and geographically, from prehistory to the France of her present, indexing Beauvoir’s project to a particular time and culture.³¹ This form—and its content—matters because feminist critics since Judith Okely have objected to *The Second Sex* on the grounds that it is ‘an anthropological village study’ where her village is mid-20th-century Paris and its inhabitants ‘mainly middle-class’ (Okely 1986: 71). If Beauvoir’s aim was not to offer a universal account of ‘woman’ and her alienation (an ambition which she explicitly denounces as impossible³²), but rather to understand the past in such a way as to unmask patterns of alienation under bourgeois values in her own society, then such criticisms miss their mark, and her point.

Her point in this part, as she summarises it at the end of ‘History’, is to reject two contradictory arguments anti-feminists made on historical grounds, namely: that (1) women have never created anything great; and (2) woman’s situation has never prevented great women’s personalities from blossoming. It is in these sections that Beauvoir introduces the notion of ‘genius’—which features importantly in Beauvoir’s claim that masculinist ideologies constrain women’s action by limiting their concrete possibilities and punishing those who contest the limits, as we will see in Section 3. Even where women had legal rights, custom often prevented women from exercising or claiming these rights. ‘Law and custom [*les droits et les mœurs*] do not always coincide: and a balance was set up between them so that woman was never concretely free’ (SS 151; LDS i.224; translation mine). In freer times, ‘she has nothing but a negative freedom that is expressed only in licence and dissipation’ (SS 152). When facing both abstract and concrete constraints, the ‘inner freedom’ that is a condition of a ‘feminine personality’ realising herself concretely takes exceptional circumstances, and the women who achieved the realisation of their freedom were often ‘exalted beyond any sexual differentiation’ by the force of social institutions: Isabella the Catholic, Elizabeth of England, Catherine of Russia, Catherine of Siena, and Saint Teresa (SS 152).

³⁰Bremner (2022) offers the most sustained discussion of Beauvoir’s use of genealogy in *The Second Sex* to date, bringing it into illuminating discussion with contemporary taxonomies of genealogy and theories of complicity in oppression. However, Bremner claims (i) that the ‘morality’ Beauvoir critiques is ‘the patriarchal system of values that maintains a moral distinction between men and women’, which functions to render women’s situations morally unintelligible to themselves, and that in so doing (ii) Beauvoir ‘does not appeal to a given normative framework in order to ground practices of moral criticism’ (2022: 532). By contrast, on my reading, the target of Beauvoir’s genealogical critique is (i) the morality of ‘sexual hierarchy’ (SS 44–45), which is economic, aesthetic, and religious, as well as moral; and (ii) Beauvoir criticises this hierarchy as unjust and alienating on the grounds of her ‘existentialist morality’ (SS 17).

³¹An exception is Nancy Bauer (2001: 2), who observes that this Part’s structure partly mimics that of Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (Rousseau 2019). Given the significance of Rousseauian ideas in Beauvoir’s own bourgeois society, it is surprising that Rousseau’s influence on *The Second Sex* has not been studied in greater depth. Both the ‘History’ part (I.2) and the ‘Childhood’ chapter (II.1.1) can be understood as instances of ‘writing back’ to the philosophical canon, where the literary form of a text is mimicked from a perspective that the canonical voice excluded—with the former writing back to Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* and the latter to his chapter on the education of Sophie in *Emile*. (To my knowledge the most extensive study of Beauvoir and Rousseau to date is Scholz (2010).)

³²In Beauvoir’s discussion of the relation of individuals to ‘social forms’ she explicitly disclaims that the explanatory scope of her approach will be *universal*—it ‘is not the basis of a rigorous universality’, but rather ‘can account for finding general types in individual cases’ (SS 57).

Two overarching conclusions are drawn from Beauvoir's survey of 'History': First, that men wrote women's history and created the values, customs, and religions that shaped their lives (SS 150). Because they held the concrete power, they decided what the conditions of women's lives would be, and they did not decide these conditions on the basis of women's interests. Rather 'it is their own projects, fears, and needs that counted' (SS 151). In the absence of coalitions and collective action (SS 137), Beauvoir claims, two factors converged to create the conditions of possibility of women's emancipation: technological revolutions leading to their participation in production and greater control of reproduction.

Second, history also shows that women have not always been defined as the absolute Other (SS 82n), and that laws and customs have varied dramatically over time. These variations demonstrate that abstract rights were insufficient to define the situation of woman (SS 103, 117), and rarely created the conditions of possibility for concrete freedom: 'very often, abstract freedom and concrete powers vary inversely' (SS 103). As her history progresses to her present, Beauvoir rejects the Hegelian view that existing social and political relations (for example, the family, the state) guarantee freedom. Like the Marx of the 1844 manuscripts, Beauvoir understands these relations to be alienating. Famously, the institution that features centrally in Marx's critique of Hegel's view is private property, leading him to the well-known conclusion that humans are alienated in four respects: from the products of their work, from their activity, from their own humanity, and from other human beings.

Beauvoir turns to women's alienation—in all four of Marx's senses, though not only in these senses—in Volume II.³³ But first, she shows that the 'Myth' of women's absolute alterity has not only excluded women from the domain of labour, and structured the state and social institutions, but that it continues to constitute men and women mythologically, populating their imaginations with the remnants of past values, limiting possibilities of who they might become. In bourgeois marriage cultures, especially after the industrial revolution, the dominant imaginative constitution of men and women shifted shape, such that the primary (if not sole) domain in which women could hope to be valued in their singularity were domains in which they were *for-men*—in marriage and the family (or its illicit corollaries) where her destiny was to love and to give.³⁴ Beauvoir substantiates this claim—and the ways women were expected to love and give—in the section I called earlier 'the elephant's nostril', to which we will return in Section 3.

Already in 1949 it was not novel to claim, as Beauvoir does, that the word 'Woman' embodies no set concept (SS 167) but rather a set of men's incompatible projections. As Sara Heinämaa points out, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche had already said this. In a passage in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, a young man is taken to a wiser, older one out of concern that he is being corrupted by women. The wise man's response is that 'One has to raise men

³³ Beauvoir shared Marx's concern that alienation involves unrealised or frustrated freedom. But where Marx identifies production as the site of this alienation (such that what is alienated is the product), Beauvoir's conception encompasses the invention and expression of values and meaning beyond the domain of 'labour'.

³⁴ See note 22, above, for the relevant passage from Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.

better!': 'the failings of women should be atoned for and set right in men—for man makes for himself the image (*Bild*) of woman, and woman shapes herself (*bildet sich*) according to this image (*Bild*)' (Nietzsche 2001: 73).³⁵

But men alone cannot eradicate the 'evil' of oppression, Beauvoir claimed; men and women were both—though not equally or identically, since responsibility must be proportionate to an individual's situation—implicated in the suffering it perpetuates. Virtue, she writes, 'is defined at the level of "what depends on us"' (SS 779–80). Like the exploitative economic hierarchy with which it intersected, the hierarchy of the sexes was not inevitable, not justified by God, Nature, or 'Man'. And to claim, in 1949, that it depended on men alone was, in Beauvoir's view, to deny its pervasiveness in everyday life, that women, too, were in search of values in a world of values, and that the values men and women inherited needed to be revalued together.

In turning to literature and everyday life her method is similar to that of Norbert Guterman and Henri Lefebvre in *La Conscience Mystifiée* (1999 [1936]). They argued that speculative philosophy was not properly related to the real—since its focus was not on transforming 'the things themselves' in everyday life. Philosophy, they wrote, in 'disdaining the mass of men, ... disdains also the mass of quotidian moments of this life to which it pretends to bring meaning'.³⁶ Their proposed 'science of ideology' included analysing literature as an expression of the consciousness of modern man and bourgeois illusions, to illuminate 'the gap between life and the ideas that man makes of life' (Guterman & Lefebvre 1999: 149).

Literature, as they read it, provides examples of multiple 'crises' in men's lives—crises of youth, adolescence, middle age, showing a process of becoming resigned to being workers, as well as the development of spiritual and sexual dissatisfaction. Men wanted to be loved for themselves, they wrote, but 'one' much more easily loves a man who has prestige, power, and money. In both its public and private dimensions, they argued, everyday life was 'a vast mystification' that masked the contradictions of bourgeois capitalist society. Marxists, they claimed—despite the theoretical resources in the early writings of Marx—had abandoned the analysis of social mystifications and mutilating 'human relations' between men, occupying themselves above all with economic questions. It is Freud, 'almost alone—and from an equivocal, idealist, and bourgeois point of view', who investigated these domains (Guterman & Lefebvre 1999: 80).

In Volume I of *The Second Sex*—drawing on authors discussed by Guterman and Lefebvre, including Montherlant, Lawrence, Stendhal, and Nietzsche—Beauvoir explores a multiplicity of incompatible myths of woman—to illuminate the gap between the ideas that man makes of 'Woman' and the lives women live. She claimed that to understand 'inhuman relations' between men and women, economic analysis, the immanent critique of religion, and the revaluing of men's values were not enough—philosophers must also

³⁵ See Heinämaa (2003: 127–8).

³⁶ Guterman & Lefebvre (1999: 49–56, here 56).

acknowledge that it is not only by projecting gods that men have sought to flee the hardship and injustice of this world but also through the splitting and projection of men's ambiguity and ambivalence onto 'Woman'.³⁷ And while both men and women may seek to flee the human condition—the reality of suffering, the restlessness of temporality, the possibility of freedom, and the ambiguity of being both spirit and flesh—philosophers have constituted the world and philosophy itself in ways that give men alibis—making human misery and sexual hierarchy 'natural' instead of situations for which we are responsible and could transform.

On this axiological reading of *The Second Sex*, Volume II—*lived experience*—rejects Freudian models of psychosexual development, arguing against them that it is not female anatomy that causes feelings of inferiority in some women, or the passivity, alienation, and shame that so many throughout history of philosophy and sexuality have associated with female bodies. Rather, it is the discovery of 'the hierarchy of the sexes' that 'modifies her consciousness of herself' (SS 312). Instead of an 'apprenticeship to freedom' (EA 37), for many girlhood and adolescence offer an apprenticeship to alienation, during which they feel torn between their own autonomy and the expectation to conform to myths of 'femininity' that depersonalise their bodies, devalue their labour, and valorise alienated sex and 'love'. In doing so, she brings together two 19th- and 20th-century discourses of alienation: Marxist accounts focusing on objective conditions, and psychological and psychoanalytic accounts of mental illness and feminine pathology, especially that *aliénation mentale* widely discussed by Freudians under the name of 'feminine narcissism'.³⁸

Running throughout this volume is attention to the variation of ways the female body can be lived—and the importance of considering variations in women's economic and axiological dependence on men, since many, in 1949, had been apprenticed to dependence on men for both their livelihoods and the meaning of their lives. In claiming that female anatomy does not *cause* feelings of inferiority or unhealthy self-love, Beauvoir responded directly to an interwar debate between psychoanalysts in London and Vienna about Freud's theory of sexuality, which concerned whether woman should be called, as Aristotle and Aquinas called her, '*un homme manqué*' (a defective man), 'a permanently disappointed creature' who struggled against her true nature. As Ernest Jones

³⁷In Beauvoir's critique of the immanent critique of religion, she argues that the way past men assumed their ambivalence towards the limits of the given and the possibilities of freedom was such that, with the arrival of patriarchy, Nature and life took on a 'dual aspect', characterised by these polarities:

Consciousness	Matter
Will	Passivity
Transcendence	Immanence
Spirit [<i>esprit</i>]	Flesh

After identifying patriarchy as the source of this dual aspect, and denial of human ontological ambiguity, she traces the projection of the devalorised pole of the duality onto women (LDS i.245/ SS 167, translation mine).

³⁸In 19th-century France, a new 'medicine of the mind' emerged concerning what we now call mental illness. One of its first, influential treatises, by Philippe Pinel, *Traité medico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale*, was published in 1801—and the specialty went by many other names including *aliénisme*.

put it (on behalf of London): The ultimate question dividing Freud's interwar interpreters was '*whether a woman is born or made*' (Jones 1935: 273).

For the (Viennese) Hélène Deutsch—on whose case work Beauvoir relies extensively in Volume II for descriptions of women's experiences—there is a 'feminine nature' characterised by passivity, narcissism, and masochism, which are *caused* by female anatomy: one is born woman. Feminine narcissism, Deutsch claimed, was an antidote to feminine masochism—a particularly feminine form of self-love required to counteract a particularly feminine form of self-hatred. To this Beauvoir says: No! It is not against 'her true nature' that women struggle, but against situations in which to become a 'woman' is to be seen as inferior, passive, and worthy of shame; against the legacy of a history in which those like her have been devalued as weak or passive, defined as defective in their humanity or individuality, incapable of creativity or genius.

Each girl, Beauvoir believes, experiences her body in childhood as 'the *radiation of a subjectivity*, the *instrument* that effects the comprehension of the world';³⁹ 'she is a human being before becoming a woman' (SS 319). But then, usually first in her family, she discovers sexual hierarchy. Her 'education' confirms it—literature, history, songs, mythology, tales, and legends, all exalt men (SS 313). In one sense of the term, the human tendency towards alienation, Beauvoir wrote in Volume I, is an existential fact for everyone: 'the anxiety of his freedom leads the subject to search for himself in things, which is a way to flee from himself' (SS 58). But for girls who are educated to aspire to the bourgeois institutions of marriage and motherhood, childhood and adolescence are too often an apprenticeship to alienation.

Like some of her Marxist and personalist contemporaries, Beauvoir condemned the inhumane bourgeois logic of possession, according to which one 'has' women as one has property (SS 454), sex is a service, and a woman's body as 'an object to be purchased', 'capital she has the right to exploit' (SS 456) in a market where she her value is comparative and competitive. In a childhood where such values dominate, a girl may be mystified to depersonalise her body and devalue her freedom in the name of mystified love. The 'traditional' woman, unable to realise her freedom in the world, may search for herself through alienation in her exteriority (in an objectified image of her body Beauvoir calls her 'she-object'); in her interiority (in an objectified image of her subjectivity which she takes to be her 'real self'); or in her social or economic standing, in the pursuit of prestige or possessions. Discussions of these forms of alienation are dispersed throughout Volume II, since they may occur or recur at different developmental stages of life, in different situations.

In describing the material metamorphoses of female embodiment—puberty, menstruation, sexual initiation, pregnancy, care work, menopause—Beauvoir illustrates a variety of women's experiences, demonstrating the anxiety that each new situation presents as an apprehension of their freedom's possibility, and relevance of both material and moral conditions to the ease with which women subjectively experience their bodily becoming. For most, puberty and

³⁹LDS ii.13; SS 293, translation mine; italics added.

adolescence involved being exposed to the jarring expectation that their body was encountered in the world no longer (or not only) as a ‘radiation of a subjectivity’, but an object or servant of men’s pleasure. Alongside distressing descriptions of girls’ reproductive and sexual ignorance and alienation from their bodies, Beauvoir presents a vision of reciprocal sexuality, in which women enjoy sex as subjects, not objects. Instead of submitting to non-reciprocal male desire, Beauvoir claimed, it was possible for women to establish, ‘in love, tenderness, and sensuality’, ‘a relationship of reciprocity with her partner. The asymmetry of male and female eroticism creates insoluble problems as long as there is a battle of the sexes; they can easily be settled when a woman feels both desire and respect in a man’ (SS 475, 476). Although critics would accuse her of being against marriage and motherhood, they often fail to attend to the scope and nuances of Beauvoir’s claims, and her rejection of bourgeois conceptions of ‘conjugal love’ and ‘maternal instinct’ as illusions that set women up for disappointment and feelings of failure.

Men, Beauvoir claims, were at an advantage in a society that ‘Others’ women, not only for economic but moral reasons. They were educated to see no conflict between pursuing a fulfilling vocation and fulfilling loves; their professional goals and gains were not seen to be against their nature, or threaten to lessen their lovability. Women, by contrast, often felt divided, becoming ‘split subjects’ torn between the desire for ‘sovereignty’—to live out her own vision for her life, to pursue her own projects—and the desire for love.

‘Freedom’, Beauvoir writes, is entire in each human being (SS 680), such that ‘the traps of bad faith and the mystifications of seriousness’ await men and women alike. But while it is ‘absurd’ to speak of women in general, it is equally absurd to claim that women’s situations have afforded the same concrete opportunity as men’s to project and realise their freedom (SS 679) or to assume it morally.⁴⁰ What is needed, Beauvoir claims, is collective liberation and the ‘economic evolution of the feminine condition’. Instead, many women pursue paths that promise ‘individual salvation’ (680)—seeking to ‘justify’ their lives through alienated love of herself or others. In Volume II, Part 3, the figures of the narcissist, ‘the woman in love’, and the mystic, illustrate (mostly) failed attempts to meet the human need to be ‘recognized in their singularity’ (SS 683 ff.).

Beauvoir’s emphasis on collective liberation and criticisms of individual ‘justifications’ have led many readers to agree with Julia Kristeva that Beauvoir was uninterested in *haecceity*—that is, what makes each particular individual *this* woman (Kristeva 2004: 117). But this interpretation relies on a misunderstanding of Beauvoir’s conception of the relation of individuals to collectives, and of individuality to moral freedom. Her ethics accords to the individual ‘an absolute value’ (EA 56) since ‘if the individual is nothing, society cannot be something’ (EA 106). This commitment is reiterated in *The Second Sex*, where she affirms the regulative ideal of a ‘socialist ethic’, which ‘seeks justice without restraining liberty’, imposing responsibilities without abolishing individual freedom (SS 68). In her analysis of the diverse ‘situations’ of women

⁴⁰On Beauvoir’s conception of moral freedom, see Kirkpatrick (2023a).

in her society, she found many lacking futurity, isolated from meaningful collectives outside the family. While it is bleak as an analysis of the condition of ‘woman’ in general, Beauvoir’s aim was not merely to ‘pull away the veils of illusions and lies’ (SS 763), or make her readers’ hearts ‘sick for the future that started growing in such a past’ (Felstiner 1980: 271). For a work of genius does not merely unmask alienation and consider its job done, concealing that even once the veil is removed ‘truth itself is ambiguity’ (SS 763): it must be an invitation to re-cognise the ambiguity of the world and each other, to invent.

The ambiguous truth about women’s situation is that it is difficult to discern what distress is caused by the alienation of oppression, the facts of life, the anxiety of freedom, or individuals’ moral failure. But this ambiguity should not stand in the way of aesthetic creativity and moral invention; in fact, Beauvoir’s axiological vision depends on it. For if women are to become less alienated from themselves, moral and imaginary conditions must be met, conditions she develops through the concept ‘genius’.

3. Becoming a genius

It is striking that few commentators discuss the sister clause ‘one is not born, but becomes, a genius’. Julia Kristeva claims that Beauvoir’s talk of genius is ‘provocative hyperbole’,⁴¹ and given how little it is discussed by philosophers they could be seen to be tacitly in agreement. But in interwar, wartime, and post-war France personal and national ‘genius’ were debated with heated intensity—and in the context of post-war labour market changes and pronatalism the role of women was part of the debate. As Ann Jefferson’s study, *Genius in France*, shows, ‘genius’ is a semantically imprecise concept, with two Latin etymologies relating to biological begetting, on the one hand, and character or capacity, on the other. Around the turn of the 18th century these two senses converged to make ‘genius’ an amalgam of distinctiveness and superiority, an ‘exceptional creative capacity distinguished by originality’ or, especially during the French enlightenment, ‘invention’ (Jefferson 2015: 3, 20).

The Second Sex alludes to or directly cites discussions of genius in both of these senses—and in a further sense where genius concerns neither biological reproduction, nor aesthetic or intellectual creation, but *moral* invention. Saint Augustine, whose views on the soul Beauvoir discusses due to their centuries-long legacy in legislation on abortion, discusses Roman conceptions of genius as ‘the rational, individuated soul possessed by each individual’.⁴² In Jean de Meun’s *Roman de La Rose* (a significant text in the *querelle des femmes*, to which Christine de Pizan’s *The City of Ladies*, in part, responded) the figure of Genius represents the relation between sexual reproduction and artistic production, nature and artifice, a male analogue of female Nature.⁴³ And in

⁴¹See Kristeva (2004: 117).

⁴²*De civitate Dei*, VII.13.

⁴³See SS 119–120 for Beauvoir’s discussion of this text—and SS 11 for her acknowledgement of its legacy in French literature.

Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* he distinguishes between true and false greatness by differentiating the admiration for 'so-called grandeur' and 'the real greatness of freedom', the 'genius' that escaped the comparative and competitive paradigm of amour-propre.⁴⁴ In each of these cases, genius is a property or possibility of male humans. For woman, Rousseau writes, 'works of genius are beyond her reach' (Rousseau 2003: 281).⁴⁵ Whether or not one was born, or became, a genius—and how—depends on the conception in question. 'Genius' could be conceived as universal to all men or rare among them; and, if rare, as innate or acquired. In Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, genius is rare and innate: Descartes and Newton, we read, could not have been led by any teacher or guide 'where their vast genius led them' (Rousseau 2019: 27).

Understanding genius as a creative capacity that must be acquired, by contrast, required accounting for the means by which someone could acquire it. One such developmental account of genius, which Beauvoir encountered as a philosophy student, can be found in Nietzsche's essay *Schopenhauer as Educator*, in which he famously describes human beings' 'immeasurable longing to become whole' (Nietzsche 1997: 163), to find our own *genius*, or (as he put it elsewhere) 'become who you are'. Like many readers of this paradoxical provocation Beauvoir asked of it—in her 1928 'Notes for a Novel'—*How* do you become who you are? 'Do you know yourself? Do you see yourself?' (NN 367)

Against Ralph Waldo Emerson's claim that 'imitation is suicide' (Emerson 1990: 132), Nietzsche claims that a certain kind of admiration and imitation is central to becoming oneself.⁴⁶ Far from stifling your freedom, learning from exemplars can be a process of liberation that reveals the 'true basic material of your being' (Nietzsche 1997: 129). Genius, Nietzsche suggests, can 'perhaps justify life as such', so that if asked the question 'Do you affirm this existence in the depths of your heart?' the respondent can look at their own life and answer 'a single, heartfelt Yes!'

Existence, Nietzsche claims, is like treading water in a stream, where the flow of the current makes it difficult to lift ourselves very high above the surface. 'We have to be lifted up', he writes, and the people who do this are 'true men': philosophers, artists, and saints (Nietzsche 1997: 159). Such exemplars are not ideals to imitate exactly but spurs that lead an individual to feel a fruitful discontentment with himself, revealing a gap between what he is and what he would like to be. With neither shame nor envy, this discontentment motivates a desire to surpass his present state, resetting the bar of his aspirations at a new height.

To understand 'genius', Nietzsche tells us, it is important not to conflate exemplars with heroes. A 'hero', on his characterisation, implies an otherness

⁴⁴Rousseau (2019: 124; translation mine). Rousseau associated 'genius' or the 'original spirit' with Geneva and small towns, since unlike city-dwellers their occupants escaped having the 'relative self' characteristic of amour-propre and compared themselves to no one.

⁴⁵In *Émile* Rousseau writes that 'Woman has more spirit and man more genius; woman observes and man reasons' (2003: 282). For more on the history of women's exclusion from conceptions of 'genius' see Battersby (1989).

⁴⁶For more on existentialism and exemplars, see Kirkpatrick (2023b); the discussion of Nietzsche here is indebted to this earlier work.

that encourages ethically impotent admiration. Classifying another person as a hero may serve as an alibi, since placing another in a superhuman category—or seeing their genius as innate—can be a way of avoiding the discontentment that generates self-transformation. Inspiration by exemplars, by contrast, requires only ‘the seriousness of the efficient workman’:

Do not talk about being gifted, or possessing innate talent! One can name great men of all kinds who were not very gifted. They acquired greatness, became ‘geniuses’ (as we put it), through making the most of qualities which no one would care to admit he did not have: they all possessed the seriousness of the efficient workman. (Nietzsche 1996: 86 [I.163]).

Exemplars play an important role in moral formation, on Nietzsche’s account, because in the wake of the death of God a ‘revaluation of values’ is necessary. But we can’t think of values without reference to values we inherit: values are not created *ex nihilo*, and admiration does not arise *in vacuo*. In these passages and others in Nietzsche’s late works, *genius* is linked to moral invention and the capacity to revalue values.⁴⁷

In the late 1920s, like many of her generation of philosophy students in France, Beauvoir was asking questions about value nihilism—that is, the view that all values are baseless—not as an abstract philosophical exercise, but as an interrogation of how she should conceive of her life, and live it. She wrote in her student notebooks: ‘Maybe I have value, but then values must exist’ (CJ 255). In 1940, she read Max Scheler’s *Ressentiment*, an analysis of Nietzsche’s revaluation of values in the *Genealogy of Morality* (Nietzsche 2017), remarking that its discussion of ‘genius’ reminded her of herself, since for the ‘genius’ he discusses, ‘apprehension of values is initially not comparative’.⁴⁸ In the relevant passage, Scheler describes the ‘genius’ as having a ‘naïve and non-reflective awareness of his own value and of his fullness of being’, as being ‘rooted in the universe’. The rootedness of genius is not to be confused with pride, but consists in being secure enough in one’s own value that when the merits of others come into view they are not threatening or comparative. ‘On the contrary’, Scheler writes, when seeing the astonishing capacities of others the genius ‘rejoices in their virtues and feels that they make the world more worthy of love’ (Scheler 1998: 37).

Before writing *The Second Sex*, in her moral essays of the 1940s, Beauvoir argued that value-creation is not a solitary enterprise: although each human being’s freedom is a source of value, not all human beings are free from material need, or educated to value their own and others’ freedom. The ‘seriousness of the efficient workman’ is not all one needs to become a genius—there are material and moral conditions that must be met, such as food, health, and security, the freedom to communicate with others, and others who are capable of hearing you (PC 136–7). In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir argues that instead of

⁴⁷ See, e.g., Nietzsche (2002: 206 (pp. 96–7), 248 (p. 140)).

⁴⁸ WD 321, 21 January 1941.

accepting ‘a battle of the sexes’ both men and women would benefit from understanding that ideological and technological revolutions required a reevaluation of their values and their relations to each other in new ways. She agreed with Nietzsche that better understanding of the past can unmask alienation. But she also called for coalitional politics and collective action (SS 137), and articulated a new conception of ‘genius’ which required an apprenticeship to freedom, as a condition of moral freedom and its material realisation.

The precept of Beauvoir’s ethics is that the other should be treated ‘as a freedom so that his end may be freedom’ (EA 142). In the absence of God or a transcendent source of value, no individual’s good can be decided *a priori*, from without. To value freedom rightly, Beauvoir claims, is to reject ‘all previous justifications which might be drawn from the civilisation, the age, and the culture; ... every principle of authority’ (EA 142). This does not mean anything goes, however: valuing freedom in practice involves appropriately acknowledging the limits imposed by the freedoms of others and by nature.⁴⁹ To will to be free and to will to be moral, for Beauvoir, are one and the same decision. It is not, as Emerson said, ‘imitation’ that is moral suicide, but the twin perils of failing to value the freedoms of others or oneself.

But valuing freedom is difficult. In childhood we are thrust into a world that is not of our making: ‘thrown into a universe which she has not contributed to constituting, which was fashioned without her and which appears as an absolute to which she cannot but submit’. In the child’s eyes, human inventions—customs and values [*les moeurs, les valeurs*]—‘are given facts, ineluctable like the sky and the trees.’⁵⁰ The child lives in ‘a serious world’ where these values appear to be ready-made. For many childhood is a metaphysically privileged situation, Beauvoir says, in which the child escapes the anxiety of freedom, feeling ‘himself protected from the risk of existence by the ceiling which human generations have built over his head’ (EA 36).

Beauvoir agrees with Rousseau’s claim in *Émile* that it can be developmentally appropriate for children to be habituated to accept others’ opinions, to rely on others for their knowledge of the world and themselves. However, this reliance can outlive its developmental appropriateness, such that I take ‘the sentiment of my own existence’ from others instead of becoming an evaluative individual in my own right. When freedom comes of age and an adolescent recognises the evaluative power of their freedom, it can be seen as a deliverance. The collapse of childhood seriousness can be a joyful liberation. But even when joyful, Beauvoir claims, it is confusing. The world is populated by many conflicting values, and this plurality can provoke the dizzy possibility of realising that all of the ‘customs and values’ preached at you cannot be true at once, and you’re going to choose what is valuable for yourself. The world of values is not ready-made, and, like it or not, you *contribute to making it*. She writes:

⁴⁹ See EA 156. For disambiguation of Beauvoir’s conceptions of freedom see Kirkpatrick (2023a).

⁵⁰ EA 35; translation mine.

This is the moment when he decides. If what might be called the natural history of an individual, his affective complexes, etcetera [p. 40] depend above all upon his childhood, it is adolescence which appears as the moment of moral choice. Freedom is then revealed and he must decide upon his attitude in the face of it. (EA 39–40)

Beauvoir's account in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* goes on to give several sketches of exemplars or 'models' of common existential stances that are adopted in order to deny freedom: the serious man, the sub-man, the nihilist, the adventurer. They served to illustrate that in some conditions—fresh in the memories of those who had witnessed the rise of fascism in Europe and, in France, the Nazi occupation—exemplars served an ideological function, whether to serve the idols of the nation or the family, or to provide alibis for inaction. Where Nietzsche could speak of 'true men', exemplars who inspired ethical admiration, when Beauvoir considered the prominent female exemplars of her time and culture, she found few 'true women' whose lives met her conditions of moral freedom, let alone moral genius.

In what I called earlier 'the elephant's nostril'—the part of *The Second Sex* philosophers rarely discuss, Beauvoir's discussion of myths in five literary authors—she cites at length from passages of novels which she takes to express the 'feminine myth' that woman is the Other in diverse forms. Unlike Rousseau's *Émile*, who is given *Robinson Crusoe* to read to encourage his understanding of freedom as the greatest good, in Beauvoir's discussion of literary exemplars of woman each author presents the only domain in which she can hope for mutual recognition, and be valued in her singularity, as 'love'. While Beauvoir does not object to love itself—as an expression of the spontaneity of freedom, it can be one of its most satisfying realisations⁵¹—she objects to the asymmetrical myths of love which perpetuate the values of sexual hierarchy, and of femininity as alienation in love's name.

The first author Beauvoir discusses, Henry de Montherlant—a prominent writer then, later elected to the Académie française—was the author of the bestselling anti-feminist tetralogy *Les Jeunes Filles (The Girls)* (1936–9). Beauvoir objects to Montherlant's literature because he provides no exemplars of women as conscious persons in their own right. His male protagonists desire domination; their 'heroic' status is always achieved through dominating others in value hierarchies—whether hierarchies of sex, region, or race.⁵² In the erotic domain, Beauvoir charges Montherlant with being 'afraid to be tested by the real' (SS 223), since his heroes do not face encounters with equals:

He systematically avoids granting [women] a consciousness: he finds traces of one, he balks, he leaves; there is never question of setting up any inter-subjective relationship with woman: she has to

⁵¹In 'Pyrrhus and Cineas' the 'forward movement' of transcendence is defined as 'freedom itself' (PC 138) and as 'a project of self toward the other' (PC 93). Each human being is not a thing, but *a* singular freedom, 'a spontaneity that desires, that loves, that wants, that acts'.

⁵²As Meryl Altman rightly emphasises in her recent book *Beauvoir in Time*, Beauvoir's discussion catalogues not only his sexist but also his orientalist, racist, and Nazi sympathies (Altman 2020: 421–6).

be a simple animated object in man's kingdom; she can never be envisaged as a subject; her point of view can never be taken into account. (SS 226)

Beauvoir's D.H. Lawrence, too, 'passionately believes in male supremacy' (SS 239) and 'detests modern women ... who claim a consciousness' (SS 241); for Lawrence, women are 'made to give, not to take' (SS 242). The Catholic writer Paul Claudel presents woman as a risk taken by God in creation, a kind of cosmic wild card; a risk redeemed when she loves and gives (SS 246). Only one of the literary writers Beauvoir considers commands her (qualified) moral respect: Stendhal was scandalised by the condition imposed on women, and he found the source of the faults blamed on women in that condition rather than their nature. Stendhal was explicitly interested in the question of women's genius, writing that: 'All the geniuses who are born women are lost for the public good; when chance offers them the means to prove themselves, watch them attain the most difficult skills.'⁵³ In his literature, as Beauvoir read it, women are subjects and heroines are never described 'as a function of his heroes: he provides them with their own destinies' (SS 269). While acknowledging that literary myths of 'Woman' are 'differently orchestrated for each individual', depending on the axiological history—and the material conditions, the entire situation—of the reader, Beauvoir claims that for each author she considers here—whether Fascist, surrealist, romantic, atheist, or Catholic—the 'true woman' is a woman whose destiny is to love a man: 'In any case, what is demanded of her is self-forgetting and love' (SS 273).

Beauvoir does not object to self-forgetting or love in themselves; in her ethics, the practice of valuing freedom requires generosity.⁵⁴ Rather, she objects to these exemplars on the grounds that they are indicative of men's historical failure to understand reciprocity (SS 278). In order to forget oneself, one must have become an evaluative individual capable of self-forgetting (SS 757); in order for love to be generous, it must be free. And in contexts where women were not educated to their own freedom, but expected to give unreciprocally, exemplars of 'great women' often served an ideological function for both men and women, leading to disappointment and alienation for both. In such mythologised conditions, many women's freedom was frustrated; their futures were not open; their love could not be communicated and received as a gift.

Dominant bourgeois exemplars of 'woman' defined and described them (like Rousseau's education said they should) 'in relation to men', 'to please and serve' them, and promised women their desires for rest and recognition would be met in lives as wives and mothers—instead of encouraging them to pursue the kinds of projects that tend to be given the moniker 'genius'. But, Beauvoir pointed out: '*to be* is to have become' (SS 13). Whereas Nietzsche dismissed talk of genius, innate talent, and virtue as counterproductive to human flourishing, Beauvoir turned to the conceptions of femininity and love to subject them to a similar scrutiny, asking why some took sexual hierarchy and asymmetrical self-sacrifice

⁵³ Stendhal, cited in SS 262.

⁵⁴ See EPW 206; PC 121; SS 163, 385, 422–23, 570, 679, 748, 750.

to be a matter of nature rather than habituation under alienating objective conditions. Beauvoir's concern with genius does not disappear from the book after Volume I; she returns to it at the end of Volume II, in claiming that to explain woman's limits 'we must refer to her situation and not to a mysterious essence. The idea that woman has no "creative genius" has been defended *ad nauseam*' (SS 767).

Beauvoir's discussion of women writers here has perplexed many readers; why does she, of all people, claim that no women have the 'madness in talent that is genius' only to say a few lines later that they put their 'bizarre genius' into their lives (SS 762), or that it has so far been impossible to put it in works (SS 767)? Here Beauvoir claims that 'femininity' is an apprenticeship to alienation not only from women's bodies, their labour, and their loves, but from the kind of self-forgetting attention that is a condition of both mutually generous love and genius, whether in aesthetic creativity or moral invention. Most women writers, Beauvoir claims, are axiologically 'serious' (SS 764); they do not question the order of the world, even when they protest against it. It is rare for women to feel rooted enough in their own value to unselfconsciously realise themselves as creators, capable of moral invention, able to assume the 'agonising tête-à-tête with the given world' (SS 766). But the idea of a creative 'instinct' must be rejected with the 'eternal feminine' (SS 767); one is not born, but becomes, a genius.

Although much of Beauvoir's analysis describes women's alienation, woven throughout the book is a call to remember that each individual woman is a radiation of a subjectivity, a point of view on the world, who can not only see it, but—in her genius—transform it.

Coda: The genius of *The Second Sex*

On Beauvoir's view the existentialist precept—to treat others as a freedom so that their end may be freedom—applied no less to writing than it did to other actions in the world: to write ethically is to *appeal to the freedom of others*, and one does not do that by telling the reader to accept on authority the truth according to yours truly. Rather, one invites the reader into axiologically complex terrain—where conflicts of interpretation are not resolved and answers are not ready-made. Like many philosophers before her, Beauvoir explicitly reflected on the power of texts with multiple, ambiguous voices (what we might call, following Kierkegaard, indirect communication, or following Bakhtin, polyphony) to elicit axiological engagement in ways that were educative to freedom—provoking the reader, whether through irony or incredulity, anger or laughter—to ask: is this really how things are? is this what I value?

Beauvoir's literary methods and the form of *The Second Sex*—including her extensive use of free indirect discourse, irony, black humour, parataxis, paraphrasis, and citation—have confused and irritated many readers, leaving her open to charges of internalised misogyny, contradiction, and more. But when read axiologically—such that its qualitative dialectical aim is to engage with an

individual's own existence in a way that is not possible from 'a mere speculative vantage point'⁵⁵—this risky strategy proved very successful. *The Second Sex* is a work of genius in two senses—in the inventiveness of its form and the invitation of its content. Attending to the ambiguity of Beauvoirian alienation in this text with multiple generations of readers has made me a witness to the way that, despite the passage of time, it still invites many to call the world and themselves into question. Her exemplars may not be ours, but Beauvoir's appeal to reject the spiritless determinisms of nature and culture—to keep asking 'what has humanity made of the human female?' and 'How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself?' as open questions—still has the power to awaken the restlessness that is midwife to freedom's possibility, and with it an apprenticeship in resisting alienation.

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Abbreviations for texts by Beauvoir

- CJ *Cahiers de jeunesse, 1926–1930* (Paris, Gallimard), coll. «nrf», 2008.
- EA *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York, Citadel Press), 1976.
- EPW 'Existentialism and Popular Wisdom' [*L'existentialisme et la sagesse des nations*], in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret Simons with Mary Beth Timmerman & Mary Beth Mader (Chicago, IL, University of Illinois Press), 2004.
- LDS *Le Deuxième sexe* (Paris, Gallimard), coll. «Folio essais», 1976. 2 volumes.
- NN 'Notes for a Novel', in *Useless Mouths and Other Literary Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons & Marybeth Timmerman (Chicago, IL, University of Illinois Press), 2011.
- PC 'Pyrrhus and Cineas', in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret A. Simons with Marybeth Timmerman & Mary Beth Mader (Chicago, IL, University of Illinois Press).
- PMA *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (Paris, Gallimard), coll. «Folio essais», 2017.
- SS *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde & Sheila Malovany-Chevalier (London, Vintage), 2015.
- WD *Wartime Diary*, trans. Anne Deing Cordero, Eds Margaret A. Simons & Sylvie Le Bon de Beauvoir (Chicago, IL, University of Illinois Press), 2009.

⁵⁵As Kierkegaard puts it, 'Qualitative dialectic belongs to existence' (Kierkegaard *JP* 1, 759, cited in Aylat-Yaguri 2011: 264).

WIE 'What is Existentialism?' in *Simone de Beauvoir: Philosophical Writings*, ed. Margaret Simons with Mary Beth Timmerman & Mary Beth Mader (Chicago, IL, University of Illinois Press), 2004.

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