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AROUND THE GLOBE WITH SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR

THIS VOLUME
IS RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED
TO THE MEMORY OF
ELIZABETH ANNE FALLAIZE (1950-2009)

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ORIGINS OF OTHERNESS: NON-CONCEPTUAL ETHICAL ENCOUNTERS IN BEAUVOIR AND LEVINAS

JENNIFER MC WEENY

The theme of “the Other” is one that occupies a central place in Simone de Beauvoir’s early diaries and later autobiographical writings as well as in her novels and philosophical essays. In *The Second Sex*, in particular, Beauvoir develops a philosophical account of the Other that serves as the foundation for her theory of gender. She links these two concepts in her famous claim that woman is the Other in relation to man, who is “the Subject” and “the Absolute” (SS xxii).

Beauvoir is not the only philosopher, however, who places the Other at the center of her thinking. One of her contemporaries and compatriots, Emmanuel Levinas, is perhaps more readily associated with the theme of the Other than any other philosopher. His best known philosophical contribution is articulating an ethics that is based in and motivated by the infinity of the Other. To hear the destitution of the Other, according to Levinas, is to “posit oneself as responsible” (TI 215).

Despite their shared emphases on the philosophical importance of the Other, juxtapositions of Beauvoir’s and Levinas’ views of Otherness are few and far between. This failure to treat the two philosophies simultaneously could be due to a tendency on the part of Beauvoir scholars to interpret her as espousing a “dialectical” notion of Otherness wherein the relation between self and Other is conceived in terms of opposition: the Other is all that the self is not. Such an interpretation stands in stark contrast to Levinas’ account of the Other, which sees the Other as a “radical alterity” that exceeds the comprehension of the self and exists independently of any relation to that self.

My aim in this essay is to show that the distance between Beauvoir’s and Levinas’ accounts is not as great as it may seem. It is my contention that Beauvoir, like Levinas, thinks of the Other as a radical alterity – a singular, separate presence that can neither be reduced to a negation of the self nor adequately represented with words and concepts. Moreover, I argue that it is precisely this notion of the Other as a radical alterity that grounds Beauvoir’s ethics and fuels her feminism. What is at stake politically in uncovering commonalities between Beauvoir and Levinas is the formation of a coalitional ethical philosophy that begins in the experiences of the oppressed and that is capable of resisting multiple oppressions, including sexism, anti-Semitism, and many others.

Levinas: The Infinite Other

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas writes that the Other has an alterity that is not “reabsorbed into my own identity as a thinker or possessor” (TI 33). Alternatively, our desire for the Other “tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*” (TI 33; original emphasis). For Levinas, the particularity of the Other is not something that fits into a larger whole or totality that includes the self. The Other is not simply the opposite of the self: “The alterity of the Other does not depend on any quality that would distinguish him from me, for a distinction of this nature would precisely imply between us that community of genus which already nullifies alterity” (TI 194). The

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otherness of the Other thus consists in all that exceeds the self. In this sense, the Other is infinity. As Bernard Waldenfels writes, the Other “manifests itself as the extraordinary *par excellence*: not as something given or intended, but as a certain disquietude, as a *dérangement* which puts us out of our common tracks” (Waldenfels 63). The Other puts us out of our common tracks because who the Other is does not readily accommodate our own structures of being and understanding.

Levinas claims that the Other “escapes my grasp by an essential dimension” (TI 39) and that “the invoked is not what I comprehend: *he is not under a category*” (TI 69; original emphasis). Conceptual understanding entails ignoring the individuality and separateness of the Other by subsuming that Other under a category that we recognize as valid and with which we are already familiar. To represent the Other through our concepts is therefore to appropriate the Other to our own modes of comprehension; it is to make the Other the same. For this reason, Levinas refers to the processes of categorizing and comprehending the Other as “the egological work of representation” (DR 100, 101).

Levinas believes that the egological work of representing the Other constitutes an act of violence against that Other because it forcefully rejects all parts of the Other that are not reflected in the self. Placing the Other in terms of the self’s categories is thus an assertion and an accomplishment of the self’s power over that Other. More importantly, relying on representations and concepts shifts our attention away from the bodily vulnerability of the Other. Levinas maintains that it is the bodily vulnerability, neediness, and mortality of the Other that calls us to ethical action. This is why he frequently associates the Other with particularly vulnerable individuals, such as the stranger, the widow, the orphan, and the infant (TI 215).

As an alternative to the egological work of representation, Levinas calls for an interaction between self and Other that is based not in the self, but rather in the infinite depth of the Other. Levinas terms this mode of interaction “moral consciousness” and claims that it takes place in the concrete encounter with the face of the Other (IOF 10). This is a mode of consciousness that remembers that “infinity overflows the thought that thinks it” (TI 25).

While the distance between concepts and particular existents is always there, it is most obvious in regard to the face of another in that the face is present precisely through its “refusal to be contained” (TI 194). No amount of words will suffice to evoke the face of an Other whom one has not met before. Because the face resists our capacity to grasp it conceptually, Levinas believes that in our encounters with the face of Other we find both “the temptation and the impossibility of murder” (IOF 10).

We want to kill the alterity of the Other, reduce the Other to our own concepts, and abuse the Other’s human mortality and vulnerability because we encounter it *as* alterity. But, in this encounter, we are also intrigued and brought to the exterior of our own conceptual schemes. Levinas writes: “In [the face], the infinite resistance of a being to our power affirms itself precisely against the murderous will that it defies; because, completely naked (and the nakedness of the face is not a figure of style), the face signifies itself” (IOF 10).

The face speaks its importance and calls forth our responsibilities to the Other without reference to the distorting and assimilating conceptual landscapes of the self. The face of the Other is a meaning that reverses the call to know and instead puts our own being “in question” by demanding that I not leave the other alone in the face of death (NC 130-31). As Levinas writes, in the very heart of

the face “a surplus of significance signifies [...] the glory that challenges and commands me” (NC 131). Moral consciousness is thus a consciousness that awakens us to the recalcitrant meanings that remain outside of the scope of those languages, concepts, and thoughts that are constantly trying to appropriate the Other.

Levinas’ account of the Other builds on the commonplace intuition that human relationships will not be ethical insofar as they are one-sided, that is, insofar as they are determined solely by the thoughts, self-interests, and parameters of one person. In order to avoid this egoism, we must open ourselves to all that is beyond us—we must give ourselves over to the infinity of the Other. To open ourselves to the depth of the Other, we must move away from conceptual thinking and instead place ourselves in face-to-face relations.

This idea is an unusual one for a philosopher to hold, since the very methodology of philosophy is based in conceptual analysis. Nonetheless, Levinas is critical of those kinds of philosophy that seek to totalize and universalize the world through the creation of theories. He writes: “Reflection offers only the tale of a personal adventure, of a private soul, which returns incessantly to itself, even when it seems to flee itself” (IOF 10). Viewed thus, “reflective” thought, both in the sense of conceptual thought and in the sense of thought that mirrors the self, is largely unethical, since it enacts “the art of foreseeing war and of winning it by every means” (TI 21). Ethics, by contrast, emerges out of a recognition that “the human only lends itself to a relation that *is not power*” (IOF 10; emphasis added). We find this ethical relation in hearing the call of the Other and in responding to the Other’s needs. We find this ethical relation in the infinite face of the Other.

Beauvoir: The Concrete Other

In order to assess the affinities between Beauvoir’s and Levinas’ accounts of the Other more accurately, we should first turn our attention to a claim that Beauvoir returns to again and again throughout the corpus of her work, namely, that there is an insurmountable gap between words and lived reality. In *The Prime of Life*, Beauvoir tells us that she had always maintained that “reality extends beyond anything that can be said about it; that instead of reducing it to symbols capable of verbal expression, we should face it as it is — full of ambiguities, baffling, and impenetrable” (PL 173).

Beauvoir’s view on the discrepancy between reality and language fueled one of her more substantial philosophical disagreements with Sartre, which the two discussed often during the early 1930s. She explains that during that time Sartre often asserted that the phenomena of the world “coincided exactly with man’s knowledge of them” (PL 46). Toril Moi thus conveys how this claim later surfaces in Sartre’s philosophy: “The Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* not only assumes that everything can be expressed, but that it is morally inferior (a case of bad faith) not to do so” (Moi 157).

Although Beauvoir could sometimes sympathize with Sartre’s position, she nonetheless believed that “words have to murder reality before they can hold it captive,” and that “the most important aspect of reality — its here-and-now presence — *always* eludes them” (PL 44; emphasis added). Beauvoir’s insistence on the limits of language places her more in line with classical phenomenology than Sartre in this regard, which is unsurprising, given the fact that she was reading Edmund Husserl’s work at the time and given her professed affinities with phenomenological philosophy.

Beauvoir was especially impacted by Husserl's idea that whereas the truth of thoughts and other mental states needed to be justified by external affairs "the *Erlebnis* [experience] contained its own evidence [*sa propre évidence*]" (PL 310; translation modified). She seemed to understand this phenomenological principle better than Sartre, because she was always criticizing him for leaping to generalizations and theories rather than staying with the particularity of the experienced phenomenon (PL 310).

Just as Beauvoir believes that life exceeds language, she also believes that the reality of other people cannot be reduced to words or concepts. Not only do words fail to capture the "here-and-now presence" of the Other, but any generalizations made about the Other will distort the unique particularity of that Other. As she writes in *The Second Sex*, "The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual" (SS xx).

The singularity of the Other is precisely that which resists conceptualization. To conceive of the Other in terms of opposition or unification is to reduce the singularity of the Other to the terms of the self; it is ultimately to render the Other "the same." Beauvoir believes that originally — before individuals create coalitions and conflict with one another through their projects — "freedoms are neither unified nor opposed but separated" (PC 108). In naming the Other and placing that Other under a concept such as "woman," we distort the Other's very particularity. Friedrich Nietzsche aptly describes this process when he writes, "We obtain the concept, as we do the form, by overlooking what is individual and actual; whereas nature is acquainted with no forms and no concepts, and likewise with no species, but only with an X which remains inaccessible and undefinable for us" (Nietzsche 83). For Beauvoir as for Levinas, the Other is this inaccessible and undefinable presence; "the Other is there, before me, closed upon himself, open onto infinity" (PC 116).

This notion of the Other as a concrete person who will always remain in excess of words and concepts accords well with Beauvoir's idea that ambiguity is the ultimate ground of ethics. At the start of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir claims that the history of philosophy displays a tendency ambiguity (EA 7). Human existence is essentially ambiguous because to be human is to be both mind and body, transcendent and immanent, temporal and infinite, free and determined, and subject-for-oneself and object-for-others.

Beauvoir observes that instead of looking this ambiguity in the face, philosophical theories often strive for its elimination by either affirming one side of these contradictory pairs or by reconciling them into a single substance through hierarchy or optimism (EA 7-8). The ethical theories and ethical practices that emerge from these eliminative metaphysical narratives likewise attempt to resolve the ambiguity inherent in human existence. Beauvoir thinks that such ethics are consoling because they give clear and determinate directives about how to live.

However, in fleeing ambiguity, we are also deprived of the possibilities of genuine responsibility and ethical action. Beauvoir points out that it is the living, ambiguous world that is the basis for ethics, because it is only in this world where notions of choice, action, and responsibility have meaning. In keeping with her existentialism, Beauvoir recognizes that human life has no inherent meaning. However, a human life can give itself meaning by undertaking a project. A person can only undertake a project that will give meaning to her existence if that project can influence and be influenced by Others.

Beauvoir thus likens the person who is unconcerned about how her actions affect Others to a child, because, just as a child is not held responsible for her actions in the same way an adult is, a solitary individual cannot be held responsible for the meanings that she creates (PC 116; EA 35-37). Without the Other, who holds a person accountable to his actions, success and failure have no meaning. This is why Beauvoir tells us that “Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity” (EA 71). It is only in being poised in the face of ambiguity — in the face of that which is unpredictable and separate from us — that we have genuine decisions to make and that we can act ethically. The ethical relation happens, not in our adherence to a principle, nor at the end of our own chains of reflection, but in encountering the concrete being of the Other, where nothing has been pinned down in advance by theories or ethical directives.

Beauvoir believes that in order to encounter the singularity and ambiguity of the Other, we must be in the proximity of the Other, experiencing the Other’s bodily presence within our shared relationships. As she writes, “In the real world, the meaning of an object is not a concept graspable by pure understanding. Its meaning is the object as it is disclosed to us in the overall relation we sustain with it, and which is action, emotion, and feeling” (LM 270). Here, Beauvoir contrasts intellectual knowing with the kind of disclosure (in the literal sense of the word as “negates, reverses, or removes closure”) that takes place within the living relations of acting and feeling.

It is in placing ourselves in relation with the Other and thereby opening ourselves to the unexpectedness of the Other that we find opportunities to behave ethically. This is not to say that words or writing can play no part in fostering ethical action. In “Literature and Metaphysics,” Beauvoir intimates that some styles of writing are better than others in terms of their ability to disclose the ambiguous and singular aspects of reality and evoke emotions in the reader.

Like Levinas, Beauvoir is particularly critical of the totalizing tendencies of philosophical writing in this regard. She claims that while the philosophical treatise carries us beyond “terrestrial appearances” into the timelessness of eternity, fiction keeps us on earth because “although made of words, it exists as objects in the world do, which exceed anything that can be said about them in words” (LM 269-70). A novel succeeds not insofar as it accurately *represents* these particularities, but rather insofar as it *evokes* a particular “flesh-and-blood presence” for the reader, “prior to any elucidation” (LM 270). Perhaps this feature of fiction can account for why novels are more likely to account for the complexity of ethical action than philosophical essays.

Beauvoir: The Other as a (Man)ufactured Concept

If ethical action is fostered when we encounter the concrete particularity of the Other, then unethical relations and oppressive regimes can flourish when people allow manufactured representations to replace their relations with Others. *The Second Sex* begins and ends with the idea that the oppressive nature of woman’s situation results in part from the confusion of particular people, who are always uniquely situated, with the abstract concept “woman” (SS, xx, 731).

One of the best ways to protect the interests of tyrants and oppressors is to trick a population into believing that abstract categories such as “woman,” “slave,” and “Jew” are meaningful descriptions of the particular individuals whom they seek to name. Beauvoir explains the effectiveness of this strategy when she writes: “In order to prevent [...] revolt, one of the ruses of oppression is to camouflage itself behind a natural situation since, after all, one can not

revolt against nature" (EA 83). In this manner, the interests of the oppressors are advanced and their power is exercised much more efficiently. The more an "identity concept" takes root, the less force is needed to keep the oppressed in their place. Indeed, if the rhetoric is sufficiently persuasive and if enough of a population believes it and acts on its messages, then individuals will even internalize these identities and work to oppress themselves. To resist oppression in such a context is thus to expect the abyss between existence and its expression. To be ethical under these conditions is to recognize and subvert the distortions inherent in how the existence of the Other has historically been represented and expressed.

The Second Sex is a thorough exploration of the resonances and dissonances between how woman has been defined historically and who women actually are. Beauvoir believes that, historically speaking, woman has always been defined as the negation of man. With reference to a wide variety of examples from biology, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, literature, and lived experience, she shows that woman is again and again conceived as "the Other in a totality of which the two components are necessary to one another" (SS xxvi).

Here Beauvoir explains the Other not as a concrete person, but as one half of a dialectical relation, wherein the opposition between the Other and the self constitutes a larger synthesis or totality. Adopting this Hegelian view of the Other makes sense insofar as Beauvoir is discussing how woman has been defined and conceptualized, for, as her discussions of the ways in which life exceeds language attest, definitions and concepts work by appropriating what is singular and unique and making it a mere reflection of the same. Indeed, in nearly all of the places in *The Second Sex* where Beauvoir treats the Other as the second term in a dialectical relation, she is not talking about who the Other is (an ontological claim), but rather about how the Other has been *defined* historically (a genealogical and descriptive claim). For Beauvoir, "Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought" (SS xxiii); it is a general concept that sorts concrete individuals into different camps.

There are thus at least two notions of Otherness that are operative in *The Second Sex*, which in turn reflect at least two notions of "woman." Woman is "Other" in the sense that she has always been defined as the negation of man, but a particular woman is "Other" in the ontological sense, in that she is a concrete, singular existent. This dual model of Otherness that oscillates between "what is" and "what has been defined" is the ambiguity of the Other, which is also the ambiguity of woman's self-experience:

For if woman is not the only Other, it remains none the less true that she is always defined as the Other. And her ambiguity is just that of the concept of the Other: it is that of the human situation in so far as it is defined in its relation with the Other. (SS 143)

Even though woman *thinks* of herself as Other and performs many of the distinguishing features of this concept in her daily activities, she cannot *experience* herself completely as the Other, because that would entail her becoming merely an object. Try as she might to embody her assigned role as an object for others, her subjectivity is evident at every moment: "the Other nevertheless remains subject in the midst of her resignation" (SS 51). This distinction between the concrete Other and the manufactured concept "Other"

helps us to make sense of Beauvoir's claim that woman experiences herself as both subject and object at the same time.

We can see that this felt ambiguity is the tension between how a woman has been defined and who she is. In truth, a woman is a being who is irreducibly unique and particular and thereby actively resists any categorization or conceptualization. Yet history, society, and men often have other designs for her, and so her very being pushes against the concept "woman" that these forces have manufactured and perpetuated. However, inasmuch as a particular woman performs her existence in concert with this concept, both because she gains social advantages for doing so and because "she is often very well pleased with her role as the *Other*" (SS xxvii), she will become a "woman" in the dialectical sense of the term — defined by man and conceived for his benefit. Due to this phenomenon, the line between the concrete Other and the concept Other, which is also the line between a particular woman and the concept "woman," is not so easily drawn in sexist and patriarchal societies. The work of liberation thus involves separating the individual woman from the definition of her sex and encouraging those parts of her that are in excess of the concept.

The theoretical ambiguity of what it means to be Other gains a literary life in Beauvoir's first novel, *L'Invitée* (*She Came to Stay*), which is a story whose evocation of the Other, at first glance, seems deeply at odds with Levinas' philosophy. *L'Invitée* is the turbulent tale of the relationship between Françoise, a thirty-year-old playwright who is comfortable and independent, and Xavière, a nineteen-year-old who is apathetic, egotistical, and utterly dependent on those around her.

From the novel's opening epigraph that quotes Hegel, "Each conscience seeks the death of the Other," to the shocking ending where Françoise murders Xavière by turning on the gas in her apartment, *L'Invitée* appears to construe the relationship between self and Other as a life and death struggle of opposing wills. Rather than being called to act ethically in the face of the Other and responding to the needs of that Other, Françoise is instead compelled to commit an act of violence. Moreover, Françoise's character is not that of a violent person in the least; it seems that simply entering into relationship with an Other has inevitably produced an impossible situation where violence is the only exit. Is there a way to reconcile even this depiction of the relationship between self and Other with the idea that the Other is a concrete, singular person—a radical alterity?

We should first note that even killing the Other is not entirely inconsistent with Levinas' account of the Other as infinity. According to Levinas, the vulnerability of the Other always tempts us to kill that Other; it is precisely because killing is a real possibility that not killing constitutes genuine ethical action. Nonetheless, perhaps there is a way to interpret Françoise's act as something other than a simple failure to respond to the needs, calls, and vulnerabilities of the Other.

To arrive at such a reading, we would do well to employ the distinction elaborated above between the concrete Other and the Other as concept. Just as the ambiguity of a woman's self-experience is constituted by the tension between how she is defined and who she is, the mounting conflict between Françoise and Xavière is fueled by a widening discrepancy between the concept "woman" and Françoise's self-realization.

When we focus on each of the main characters' relationships to womanhood, their personalities do not seem so contrary to one another in that each of them is struggling with different aspects of her feminine existence. It

therefore makes sense to think of Françoise and Xavière as personifications of two contradictory aspects of one woman's consciousness — in effect, a literary invocation of the ambiguity inherent in woman's self-experience. Viewed in this way, Françoise's act of violence at the end of the novel is not a murder, but a suicide. If the death of Xavière is a kind of suicide, then the following question arises: Which aspects of Françoise are murdered? In short, Françoise murders those aspects of herself that passively accommodate the concept "woman." For Françoise, Xavière represents a burgeoning femininity: feminine adolescence, feminine ignorance, feminine naïveté, and a feminine dependency.

This reading suggests why the majority of the novel's commentators — and feminist scholars in particular — see Françoise's act as a triumph, rather than as a failure. When the final lines of *L'Invitée* relate that "now nothing separated her [Françoise] from herself," they could well be indicating Françoise's realization that who she is can never be exhaustively expressed by a social category nor reduced to her relation to man.

This interpretation also makes sense of the emphasis placed on the lack of correspondence between words and reality in the novel. Whereas at the beginning of the novel Françoise trusts all that Pierre says implicitly and has faith in her own writing, by the end she has come to distrust the ability of words to represent reality. This distrust is best evidenced by Françoise's growing suspicion that there is more to Pierre's stories than what he tells her and by the fact that she and Xavière find alternate, contradictory meanings in the letters of Pierre and Gerbert. It is also evidenced by Françoise's persistent writer's block throughout the novel. As Françoise begins to realize that there is a gap between words and reality, she also realizes the possibility of liberating her identity from the concept "woman" and all that conforming to that concept entails.

Asymmetries between Beauvoir and Levinas

Although Beauvoir's belief that the Other is a concrete, singular person closely parallels Levinas' notion of "the infinite Other," there are two important differences between the two views. First, there is an apparent contradiction in Beauvoir's conception of the Other that is not present in Levinas' philosophy. Although Beauvoir thinks of the Other as a radical alterity, she also admits that a woman can be Other to herself. In other words, for Beauvoir it is possible that the self/Other relation could occur in one woman's consciousness.

For Levinas, however, the thought that a person could be an Other to himself is thoroughly inconsistent: the egological activity of "self-relation," by definition, precludes or nullifies any encounters with alterity. The radical alterity of the Other is precisely that which does not come from the "I" — it is "absolutely Other." Levinas would likely charge Beauvoir with doing violence to the alterity of the Other by trying to fit that alterity into her own self-experience.

Conversely, Beauvoir recognizes, whereas Levinas does not, that the concrete person who is the Other does not remain unaffected by the perpetual violence inflicted upon that Other by the concepts and categories operative in a given society. Moreover, she takes account of the fact that selves can be positioned differently in relation to those concepts and categories. In other words, all Others are not equal and neither are all selves, which is the very meaning of "singularity."

Because oftentimes the category "man," as defined by him, correlates with his sense of himself as subject, he has the privilege of experiencing himself as coherent and knowable. This chosen correlation between concept and

experience is absent in woman's self-experience. Hence, the ethical relation can be enacted within her own consciousness. In the contexts of sexism and patriarchy, a woman is likely to not know her own self, for the singularity of each individual woman exceeds all of the concepts, language, and models that she has available to her to help comprehend herself. The liberatory task before her is thus to treat her self as she would any other Other and attend to those calls and needs within her that cannot be subsumed into the concept "woman."

Beauvoir's account does not reduce the Other to the same, but instead draws out the political import of radical alterity by showing how recognizing the Other as a unique Other can render society more ethical, not only in terms of individual relations but also in terms of groups of people whose particular existences have systematically been subsumed under one manufactured notion. We must liberate these Others from their oppressive situations so that our relationships with them will emanate from their concrete particularity and not from the repeated, disciplined performances of a socially constructed concept.

A second divergence between Beauvoir's and Levinas' accounts is related to Beauvoir's claim that the ethical relation involves reciprocity between self and Other. This claim seems to contrast with Levinas' belief that the relationship between self and Other is thoroughly asymmetrical. According to Levinas, the self is called upon to respond to the Other's needs, but the Other owes the self nothing in return. However, Beauvoir is not saying that the content and actions of the self/Other relationship should be exactly symmetrical; she is simply saying that there must be an openness present in both parties that allows each person to take in the particularity of the Other.

As she states in *The Second Sex*, "To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her own independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him also: mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an *other*" (SS 731; original emphasis). In this passage, Beauvoir observes that before a person can enter into an ethical relation with the Other, she must first recognize that Other as a subject with its own particular wants, needs, and projects. It is only when we stop thinking of other people as objects for our own use that we can even begin to open ourselves to the otherness of the Other.

As long as the self continues to genuinely encounter the subjectivity of the Other, their relationship will not proceed according to principles of exchange, but rather according to their mutual responsiveness to each Other. In admitting this attitudinal reciprocity between self and Other, Beauvoir acknowledges that the Other could be anything at all, even an appropriating self for some other Other and even a person who could be similar to the self. As a result, Beauvoir guards against exoticization of the Other, which has the capacity to distort the Other just as much as appropriation.

Indeed, her criticism of Levinas that accompanies her first use of the term "the Other" in *The Second Sex* gets at precisely this point. When Levinas asserts that "otherness reaches its full flowering in the feminine," he is forgetting that the Other (in this case, woman) is aware of her own consciousness (SS xxii). This failure to consider "the reciprocity of subject and object" encourages Levinas to contradict his own philosophy and ultimately assimilate the Other as his negative reflection: the Other is all that is a mystery to him. As a means to preventing this kind of distortion and appropriation of the Other, Beauvoir suggests that establishing a reciprocity between self and

Other is that condition that must be met before the self can open to the infinity of the Other.

Conclusion

My aim in drawing out the similarities between Beauvoir's and Levinas' views of the Other is neither to "validate" Beauvoir's theory by showing how her thinking closely parallels that of an established male philosopher, nor is it to suggest that Beauvoir was more influenced by Levinas and Husserl than she was by Sartre and Hegel. Quite the contrary, I believe that the juxtaposition of Beauvoir and Levinas helps us to locate Beauvoir at the origins of French phenomenology as a key contributor to its content and subsequent evolution. When we attend to the phenomenological aspects of Beauvoir's philosophy, which in this case is her consideration of the distance between experience and language, we are not only led to fresh interpretations of her major works, but also to think about her theory of gender differently than we may have thought of it before. In addition, focusing on Beauvoir's phenomenological insights helps us to see how her ethical and political philosophy is intimately tied to her theories of being and knowing.

Most importantly, bringing Beauvoir's and Levinas' accounts of the Other together invites us to consider ethical action in a new light. In our daily lives, many of us operate according to the idea that linguistic and conceptual knowledge aids us in communicating with the Other and understanding the Other. In turn, such an understanding encourages us to treat the Other ethically. The philosophies of Beauvoir and Levinas, however, warn us that conceptual understanding not only encourages us to ignore the individuality of the Other by making her or him a mere reflection of ourselves, but it also shifts our attention away from the bodily vulnerability and needs of the Other. In doing so, they invite us to open ourselves to the infinity of the Other and to allow these non-conceptual encounters to call us to responsibility and offer us the possibility of ethical action.

In her autobiography, Beauvoir describes her vocation as a writer as follows:

Conscious of the gulf that lay between my impressions and the factual truth, I felt the need to write, in order to do justice to a truth with which all my emotional impulses were out of step [. . .] [A] writer's business is not to transcribe the thoughts and feelings which constantly pass through [her] mind so much as to point out those horizons which we never reach and scarcely perceive, but which nevertheless are there. (PL 732-33)

By placing the Other at the center of their philosophies, Beauvoir and Levinas are pointing out those horizons which we scarcely perceive, but are nonetheless there. In bringing their respective notions of "the Other" face to face, we can be reassured that more than one thinker considers the tasks of ending violence and oppression "first philosophy."

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