

Criticizing Women: Simone de Beauvoir on Complicity and Bad Faith

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Abstract: One of the key insights of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is the idea that gender-based subordination is not just something done to women, but also something women do to themselves. This raises a question about ethical responsibility: if women are *complicit*, or actively implicated in their own oppression, are they at fault? Recent Beauvoir scholarship remains divided on this point. Here, I argue that Beauvoir did, in fact, ethically criticize many women for their complicity, as a sign of what she called "bad faith". I challenge recent accounts by Nancy Bauer and Manon Garcia, who both read Beauvoir as exonerating complicit women. According to this reading, women emerge as human "freedoms" within a social world where a "destiny" of inferiority is already prepared for them. Their self-subordination is then an inevitable product of acting in a patriarchal world. I argue, however, that this interpretation generates a crucial tension, leading Bauer and Garcia to call on women to stop being complicit, while also claiming they cannot avoid complicity. I propose instead a different interpretation, on which feminine complicity is often fueled by criticizable ethical attitudes that are far from inevitable. By revisiting Beauvoir's notion of "bad faith", I show that this account is compatible with recognizing the limitations imposed on women's agency and I show that this feminist ethical criticism is itself an important part of a collective project of social transformation.

Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir, Complicity, Bad faith, Feminism, Responsibility, Blame, Oppression, *The Second Sex*, Social change, Women

Adopting a feminist worldview "lights up" instances of gender-based hierarchy all over contemporary culture (Bauer, 2015, p. 28). Another thing that it also makes salient is women's own active engagement in these subordinating practices. In today's Western societies, women continue to put time, effort, and money into high heels and daily make-up products; they continue to enthusiastically plan 'white weddings' where they are 'given away' by their fathers; they vocally choose stay-at-home motherhood and economic dependence over professional careers; and they feel empowered by exercise routines

based on striptease shows. Given the unprecedented levels of social equality and opportunity available, why do women seem so willing to continue to participate in these sexist practices? The need to answer this uncomfortable question has created some of the deepest fault lines within contemporary feminism. Some have become skeptical that these are genuine choices and have argued that women are being subtly manipulated by patriarchal forces, unwittingly adapting to oppressive pressures, or internalizing sexist norms (Jeffreys, 2005; Murphy, 2016; Orenstein, 2016). Other feminists have instead sided with women's claims of agency and pleasure and reevaluated these social practices. Maybe high heels are empowering if they make you feel good. And choosing to be a housewife is only oppressive if we devalue care work in the first place (Hayes, 2010; Valenti, 2014, pp. 179-180; Frances-White, 2018, pp. 282-300). However, for a third group of feminists, both options remain deeply unsatisfactory. The idea that women have no mind of their own is itself a sexist commonplace. But why should we be so quick to abandon critical feminist insights about housework or beauty norms?

This desire for a third option has led many contemporary thinkers to turn to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. One of its central claims is that gender-based subordination is not just something done to women, but also something women *do* to themselves — women often make genuine choices to engage in genuinely subordinating practices. As Beauvoir puts it, “the man who sets the woman up as an *Other* will thus find in her a deep complicity” (1949/2011, p. 10). But this raises a question about ethical responsibility: if women are *complicit* in their own oppression, is this a “moral fault” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 16)?¹ Recent Beauvoir scholarship remains divided on this point. On one hand, Beauvoir explains how education, material circumstances, social expectations, and psychological incentives all push women towards submitting to men. On the other hand, she

¹ This question is suggested by the introduction to Volume I of *The Second Sex*, where Beauvoir writes: “Every time transcendence lapses into immanence, there is degradation of existence into “in-itself,” of freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if this fall is inflicted on the subject, it takes the form of frustration and oppression; in both cases it is an absolute evil” (1949/2011, p. 16).

spends many pages outlining the different possibilities that women still have available and her comments about complicit women are often extremely critical in tone. In this paper, I will argue that Beauvoir did, in fact, ethically criticize many women for their complicity as a sign of what she called “bad faith”.

I will challenge two recent accounts by Nancy Bauer and Manon Garcia who both read Beauvoir as ethically exonerating complicit women. On this interpretation, Beauvoir does *not* take women’s complicity to be an ethical fault because she rejects a Sartrean conception of freedom as radical or unsituated. Women cannot simply turn away from the social world and its incentives and this makes complicity a temptation that is very hard to refuse. In the second section, I will show how this exonerating reading gives rise to a crucial tension, leading Bauer and Garcia to call on women to stop being complicit, while also claiming they cannot avoid complicity. I propose instead a different reading of Beauvoir that reintroduces ethical criticism of many complicit women for the “bad faith” or “inauthenticity” driving their behavior. By making a distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of complicity, we can preserve the situated understanding of agency that Bauer and Garcia emphasized, while also criticizing many complicit women today. I end by dispelling the worry that this may amount to ‘victim blaming’. Being confronted with ethically unflattering portraits of one’s own life is difficult and uncomfortable, but it is vital to the ethical reflection, growth, and change required for women’s liberation.

1. Bauer and Garcia: Complicity Without Criticism

In their recent work, both Nancy Bauer and Manon Garcia explore the thorny issue of women’s active participation in what seem like patriarchal social practices. Bauer focuses on American college campuses and the party culture where a standard ‘hookup’ consists in unilateral oral sex performed by women. To many feminists, this seems like a classic case of sexual subordination — yet another way

in which young women are expected to sexually service random men (Bauer, 2015, p. 44). But these students, Bauer tells us, do not think of themselves as victimized or exploited. On the contrary, they see these ‘hookups’ as autonomous and pleasurable choices. For these ambitious women, who do not want to be weighed down by a “needy boyfriend”, casual and one-sided ‘blow jobs’ provide all the sexual satisfaction of a relationship without the downsides (Bauer, 2015, p. 45). Garcia is also interested in the behavior of women in contemporary Western societies who do not see themselves as inferior to men, and who have unprecedented academic and professional opportunities (2018/2021, pp. 12-15, 169). And yet, they

“catch themselves enjoying the conquering way in which men look at them, desiring to be a submissive object in the arms of their partner, or preferring domestic work — the small pleasures of well-folded laundry, of a pretty-looking breakfast table — to supposedly more fulfilling activities” (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. xiii).

Women’s enthusiasm for these seemingly sexist practices emerges then as a hard problem. Are these victims of patriarchal coercion or free agents making empowered choices? Both Bauer and Garcia refuse to go down either of these simplistic routes. They are committed to believing women’s claims about their experiences of agency, power, and pleasure (Bauer, 2015, p. 45; Garcia, 2018/2021, pp. 159, 164, 173). However, they do not see these choices and pleasures as unproblematic. In search of a third option, both turn to Beauvoir’s work.

For Beauvoir, gendered norms of femininity and masculinity encode a kind of “metaphysical division of labor”: men get to *do* things in the world, as subjects, while women as “Others” get to *be* things in the world, as objects (Bauer, 2015, p. 50).² This is a relationship of power and hierarchy, but

² I am adopting here a reading of ‘Other’ as ‘object’ which both Bauer and Garcia use (Bauer, 2015, pp. 47-48, 51; Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 6, see also pp. 111-112). However, as I have suggested elsewhere (Melo Lopes, 2023), *The Second Sex* contains

also a way of “exploiting inherently nonnormative biological facts to split the difference when it comes to the painful existential fact of human ambiguity” (Bauer, 2015, p. 48). All human beings experience themselves ambiguously, as both *active* agents in the world and as *fixed* beings under the eyes of others — as both subjects and objects. This gives rise to a tension between our drive to do things in the world and our drive to succeed in the eyes of others. We would all like to be praised and desired, but this requires taking up the risk of acting and possibly failing in front of other people and of ourselves. Gender roles offer a way around this painful tension by splitting the difference: ‘men-subjects’ avoid the uncertain scrutiny of others, ‘women-objects’ avoid the risk of action. However, even as they adopt these roles, women and men continue to be full human beings and cannot really escape being both subjects and objects. Conforming to gendered norms, in the case of women, involves then a paradoxically active denial of one’s activity: “to strive to be an object is precisely to demonstrate that you aren’t one” (Bauer, 2015, p. 48). It is this paradox that Beauvoir talks about in terms of “complicity” and that Bauer and Garcia label as, respectively, “self-objectification” and active “submission” (Bauer, 2015, p. 48; Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 159).

This Beauvoirian analysis of feminine self-subordination has been historically seen as profoundly anti-feminist. Indeed, Beauvoir’s discussion of women’s complicity has earned her a deeply negative reputation: “many people have commented on the curious violence of *The Second Sex*, and on its ‘victim blaming’” (Acocella, 1998, p. 150). These critics (Felstiner, 1980; Lowe, 2013, pp. 199-200; Lloyd, 2004, pp. 98-99; Le Doeuff, 1980, p. 288; Leighton, 1975, pp. 116-119, 221; Whitmarsh, 1981, p. 149) often focus on this key passage:

“Lord-man will materially protect liege-woman and will be in charge of justifying her
existence: along with the economic risk, she eludes the metaphysical risk of a freedom

a more complicated account of women as “Other”. I take what I say here about women’s complicity to also be compatible with that more complicated account.

that must invent its goals without help. Indeed, beside every individual's claim to assert himself as subject—an ethical claim—lies the temptation to flee freedom and to make himself into a thing: it is a pernicious path because the individual, passive, alienated, and lost, is prey to a foreign will, cut off from his transcendence, robbed of all worth. But it is an easy path: the anguish and stress of authentically assumed existence are thus avoided” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p.10).

Making yourself “Other” to men is materially helpful. It can give you an income, a home, social acceptability, and even prestige. But complicity also has “metaphysical benefits” (Knowles, 2019, p. 245). It allows women to flee the burden of action and to elude their troublesome subjectivity. What Beauvoir seems to be saying here is that complicit women are in “bad faith” (Okely, 1986, p. 59): that they are fleeing their transcendent freedom, its risks and its responsibilities (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, pp. 208, 263, 27). Within the “existentialist morality” framing *The Second Sex*, this abdication, this flight from transcendence is a degradation of “freedom into facticity; this fall is a moral fault if the subject consents to it” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 16). And this is why critics have historically accused Beauvoir of inappropriately blaming women for their own unfreedom.

But Bauer and Garcia both think these charges are misguided. On the contrary, they claim Beauvoir *exonerates* women who actively make themselves unfree. Picking up on earlier arguments by Sonia Kruks (1995) and Kristana Arp (1995), they at times deny, and at others minimize, the role of bad faith in Beauvoir's characterization of feminine complicity.³ Bauer claims that Beauvoir declined to “describe women who fail to object to their status as the second sex” in terms of bad faith (2015, p. 48).⁴ Even when she spoke of women as inauthentic, which is usually taken to be synonymous with

³ For more recent examples of this exonerating reading of Beauvoir see Edwards (2021) and Langley (2023).

⁴ Bauer claims that *The Second Sex* “construes the human condition in terms of bad faith so few times that attempting to find a dozen instances of the term in the book's 700-plus pages could preoccupy you for the better part of an afternoon” (2015, p. 48). “The few times that Beauvoir uses the term bad faith she's almost always lamenting our cleaving to gender

being in bad faith, Beauvoir was not critical: “in her mouth, the words [“authentically assumed existence”] are not those of some overt or even hidden ethical imperative” (Bauer, 2015, p. 49). Garcia is more willing to acknowledge Beauvoir’s use of the notion of bad faith regarding complicit women (2018/2021, pp. 173, 190, 191), but she heavily qualifies this acknowledgment by saying three things. First, for Beauvoir, not all complicit women are in bad faith: “depending on the degree of social and economic enslavement of the woman, her submission could even be a sign of good faith”. Second, given a backdrop of patriarchal domination, no feminine submission is completely a case of bad faith (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 191). And third, the partial bad faith of complicit women is not a “radical moral fault” (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 64).⁵ Indeed, Garcia says at one point that Beauvoir actually “frees submissive women from being accused of bad faith and weakness — an accusation that usually contributes to reinforcing women’s oppression” (2018/2021, p. 198).⁶ On this reading, Beauvoir is doing the very opposite of victim blaming.

What earlier critics missed, according to Bauer and Garcia, was Beauvoir’s distinctive conception of human agency in “situation”. Our “situation” describes who we are in the world: the way we experience ourselves through our bodies, our histories, our social environment and culture, and our socio-economic location. According to an existentialist view often attributed by Beauvoir

roles as a way of dealing with what metaphysically ails us, rather than, à la Sartre, scolding women for doing the best they can in an unjust world” (Bauer, 2015, p. 16).

⁵ “Bad faith, understood as individuals’ tendency to use their situation as a justification for their shortcomings, is not a radical moral fault like it is in Sartre’s view. True bad faith consists, on the contrary, in the refusal to recognize that we are in a certain situation, in which sex difference, as well as skin color, for instance, is significant” (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 64). Garcia exemplifies “true bad faith” with Beauvoir’s story of the Trotskyite militant who “was denying her feminine frailty; but it was for the love of a militant man she wanted to be equal to” (2018/2021, p. 62; see also Beauvoir 1949/2011, p. 4). For another characterization of “bad faith” as lacking a “moral sting” when it constitutes a response to oppression, see Langley (2023).

⁶ Garcia also claims that “Beauvoir does not [critically] judge real women who would be lying to themselves; she severely judges the female behavior that is prescribed by the way men structure women’s destinies” and that “yes, women, insofar as they are human beings and thus can choose their freedom, are responsible for not choosing; but (...) they cannot be held liable for this submission” (2018/2021, pp. 104, 198).

scholars to the early Sartre, our situation can never extinguish or diminish our freedom.⁷ We are all condemned to be free, regardless of our circumstances. Within this supposedly Sartrean framework, if I think my situation *requires* me to act in a certain way, I am in bad faith, fleeing the anguishing truth that “in reality [all humans] are absolutely free to make choices and to create their own projects” (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 135). To live authentically, we must assume ourselves as radically free, always able to do otherwise. Both Bauer and Garcia emphasize that Beauvoir rejects this picture (Bauer, 2015, p. 49; Garcia, 2018/2021, pp. 52-53). For her, it is *through* our situation that we emerge as “freedoms”. It is only within the world of pre-established norms and social relations that we can meaningfully act. Therefore, if I think that my situation requires me to do certain things because I am a woman, I am not turning away from my freedom, but identifying a condition of my meaningful agency in the world.

On this view then, the problem with the early feminist critics of Beauvoir is that they read her using a Sartrean, radical notion of freedom. But once we adopt her more situated understanding of human agents, we can see that women’s active complicity is not “a sign of moral vice”, but something explained by their limited situation (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 156).⁸ Women emerge as agents in a world where unfreedom is socially prescribed to them in the form of femininity. All human beings experience a standing temptation to stick to what is socially prescribed and “keep the soothing pleasures of immanence, of a predictable and submissive existence” (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 194). That temptation can, in principle, be overcome. But for women it is just too strong to be refused (Bauer, 2015, p. 50; Garcia, 2018/2021, pp. 194, 229). Their situation deprives them of the “material and psychological means” to reject social norms (Bauer, 2015, p. 49), making complicity the logical outcome of a “sort

⁷ Authors like Garcia (2018/2021, pp. 51-52), Bauer (2015, pp. 15-16), Knowles (2019, p. 248), Kruks (1995), and Le Doeuff (1980) attribute this view to Sartre, especially in *Being and Nothingness*. But this reading has been compellingly criticized as an oversimplification of Sartre’s views by Edwards (2021), Langley (2023), Kirkpatrick (2023), Webber (forthcoming).

⁸ Leighton anticipates this response but finds it unsatisfying: “In spite of her insistence that the ‘situation’ accounts for all this, one has a dark suspicion that the feminine tendencies towards weakness and perversity are stubbornly entrenched in the very nature of things” (1975, p. 148).

of cost-benefit analysis” (Garcia, 2018/2021, pp. 176, 193). Women lack “true economic freedom” and a social environment where they can “invest themselves fully in their work” (Bauer, 2015, p. 49). There are also threats of loneliness and social disapproval: a woman who refuses to make herself “a beautiful object for men” risks being seen “as abnormal, as unsexy, and she would probably pay a significant price for it” (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 156). Conversely, complicity can bring economic stability and at least apparent protection from violence (Bauer, 2015, p. 51). There are also other advantages: “a slim, good-looking woman may be able to get out of a traffic ticket, she may be served faster in a bar, or she may get a job because of her good looks” (Garcia, 2018/2021, pp. 194-195; see also Bauer, 2015, p. 44). A woman who refuses to become a mother or who becomes a mother but prioritizes her career will face negative public scrutiny (Garcia, 2018/2021, pp. 171, 195). To be complicit is then not “strictly speaking, a choice” to flee freedom, but a consent to an unfreedom that seems structurally inescapable (Garcia, 2018/2021, pp. 156, 196-197).

Bauer’s college students and Garcia’s feminists delighting in “well-folded laundry” are then living in a situation that restricts how free they can be. As Bauer puts it, they are “doing the best they can in an unjust world” (2015, p. 16). The paradoxical character of their complicit behavior, the way they make themselves objects as active subjects, is itself “fruit of the [feminine] situation” (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 200) which makes “acts of self-expression or self-empowerment” indistinguishable “even in theory, from acts of self-objectification” (Bauer, 2015, p. 17). To ethically criticize complicit women would be to cling to a Sartrean notion of freedom that demands that women be impermeable to material and psychological incentives. But Beauvoir’s point was precisely that this was impossible: you “can’t just will yourself to be free” and “abjure relentlessly the temptations to want only what the world wants you to want” (Bauer, 2015, p. 16).

2. A Tension Between Ethical Exoneration and Social Change

On this reading of Beauvoir shared by Bauer and Garcia, feminine complicity is not an ethical fault but a product of the way our world is organized. Women's choices to engage in subordinating practices are not evidence of criticizable bad faith, but the inevitable result of being "a freedom" in a feminine situation. In their complicity, women are consenting to a social destiny that is extremely hard for them to refuse. This analysis has important political implications. If complicity is a product of the world women inhabit, it can be ended by changing women's situation (Garcia, 2018/2021, pp. 199-200; Bauer, 2015, p. 49).

What would this look like? One initially appealing answer is that it would require economic, legal, and cultural changes, targeting institutions and structures that condition women's choices. If those reforms altered the social landscape of incentives and penalties, then complicit behavior would end. However, this proposal misunderstands the Beauvoirian notion of "situation", which does not refer merely to conditions external to agents, but rather articulates the social and the individual levels together. In other words, our situation is something towards which we contribute and that shapes us in return, "in a circular relationship between society and individuals" (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 200). Consider, for example, the case of 'white weddings'. Many of the rituals and practices involved have been historically denounced by feminists as subordinating: women are 'given away' by their fathers, adopt their husband's name, dress in virginal white, and are charged with organizing *their* 'special day' (Tolentino, 2019; Geller, 2001; Ingraham, 1999). Women's active and enthusiastic participation in these ceremonies is arguably a classic case of complicity. But what are the benefits and costs that condition these choices? We could point here to family pressures and social expectations, as well as to the influence of advertising. But a key factor that continues to make 'white weddings' so appealing to women is the complicit behavior of other women. Friends, mothers, and celebrities cast weddings as normal and desirable in their comments and by their own example. And, of course, childhood

daydreaming about ‘the perfect day’ builds up and conditions our adult possibilities. Put more generally, others’ actions make up sociological trends and pressures that shape our experience of the world. And our own choices cement into the histories and bodies that we have to inhabit. Both are key factors constituting our situation and conditioning the complicit choices that emerge from it.

The project of ending feminine complicity is then complicated by its self-perpetuating character. Complicity may have its roots in women’s situation. But part of what constitutes women’s situation is also their complicit behavior. According to both Bauer and Garcia, we can only break out of this cycle if women dare to act against social incentives and to defy their situation. Garcia focuses on how individual freedom “raises the possibility of obstructing the mechanisms that reproduce women’s oppression. In taking the risk of freedom, in working outside the home, women can change the social and economic conditions to the point that submission would not appear as their default destiny” (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 200). Indeed, she looks to Beauvoir herself as an embodiment of this very possibility of acting against social expectations and breaking “the vicious circle of women’s oppression” (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 203). Bauer too is clear that a Beauvoirian political program cannot leave women’s behavior untouched. For her, one of the underappreciated takeaways of *The Second Sex* is “that achievement of full personhood for women requires not only that men stop objectifying women in pernicious sexual and nonsexual ways but also that women care about abjuring the temptation to objectify themselves” (Bauer, 2015, p. 51). However, this reliance here on women’s ability to defy social incentives seems to be in tension with previous arguments. Recall that, according to the reading of Beauvoir that Bauer and Garcia defended, the reason we could not ethically criticize complicit women was that they were doing the best they could in an unjust world. How can we now appeal to women’s ability to resist what we have deemed to be irresistible? One might argue that Bauer and Garcia were never denying that refusing complicity was possible, but rather saying that it was very

difficult. Even so, the tension remains. If we cannot expect complicit women to do otherwise because it is too hard, how can we now call on them to take such a difficult path?

We could try to reconcile Bauer and Garcia's ethical analysis with their political agenda by turning to the potential emancipatory effects of feminist interventions like *The Second Sex*. We could say that the material and metaphysical advantages of making yourself "Other" are alluring, but shallow, deceptive, and yielding only an "adulterated" form of happiness (Bauer, 2015, pp. 16, 51). In contrast, the advantages of living authentically are much greater, but harder to grasp — "how can we measure the satisfaction of living the life we want to live?". Women consent to their Otherness because they cannot see what they are foregoing and how "harmful this decision may be to them" (Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 196). Books like *The Second Sex* can help them resist social incentives by exposing the deeper disadvantages of complicity and sketching "a vision of a just world seductive enough to compete with the allures of the present one" (Bauer, 2015, p. 17; see also Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 196). Maybe we can change the cost-benefit analysis driving complicity by showing women the *real* costs and benefits of their choices. That is perhaps the additional element we need to break the self-perpetuating cycle of feminine submission.

While there is certainly an important place for denunciation, inspiration, and redescription in any feminist politics, we should be skeptical of the idea that women do not understand the real costs of their complicit behavior. Beauvoir's own view was that women feel constantly torn between their humanity and femininity (1949/2011, p. 17). That means that they have no shortage of hints and clues as to the deceptive nature of complicity and of the happiness it promises.⁹ Consider, for example,

⁹ On the epistemic importance of emotional uneasiness, or "outlaw emotions", experienced by subordinated groups see Jaggar (1989).

what Bauer calls “the hookup hangover”: the sense of unease that young women regularly experience after these sexual encounters. When the man in question fails to text back, they realize that their

“power to please him isn’t unique. (...) Then you might wonder whether exchanging a nice dinner for a nice blow job constitutes a fair trade, or why the players are usually guys and the sluts usually girls (...). Even if a girl never comes to suspect that the playing field may not be even, I am suggesting, she does not always experience her sexual way of being in the world as of a piece with her worldly “postfeminist” ambitions” (Bauer, 2015, pp. 46-47).

Bauer’s phenomenological description conveys women’s routine uneasiness with their prescribed Otherness. And this experience gives them some understanding of the precariousness of their complicit happiness. Reading *The Second Sex* may help these college students make sense of these inchoate thoughts, but there is no fundamental epistemic roadblock that needs lifting.¹⁰ Moreover, even as women become inspired to exit complicity and seek freedom, this continues to be a much harder path for them to pursue. The social pressures, the temptations of ease, the economic constraints — the full landscape of structural incentives and penalties that Garcia and Bauer described is still in place. If we cannot criticize women for choosing the easier option under oppression, how can we ask them now to take the hardest path in the name of feminist social change?

This tension between exonerating complicit women and calling on them to change their behavior is not unique to Bauer and Garcia’s arguments or even to the reading of Beauvoir that they share. We see it, for instance, in popular feminist writing. In *How to Get Over a Boy*, author and activist Chidera Eggerue claims that women in heterosexual relationships should confront patriarchal norms

¹⁰ In a later interview, Beauvoir said that second wave feminists “may have become feminists for the reasons I explain in *The Second Sex*; but they discovered those reasons in their life experiences, not in my book” (in Gerassi, 1976, p. 79).

and gender inequality by rethinking their lives and their habits (2020, pp. 17, 98, 142). But she is also clear that we should not criticize women who marry strategically so they “never hav[e] to work again”, or who systematically date rich men who can “spoil” them (Eggerue, 2020, pp. 173, 135, 157). The patriarchal and capitalist world is hard to navigate, particularly as a black woman, Eggerue says, and no one should feel they have to live their life to serve some higher political goal. “Your happiness is not anybody’s group project” and we “do not have to trade our joy for resistance” (Eggerue, 2020, pp. 157- 158). But if embracing classic, patriarchal relationship dynamics is fine because “black women deserve a break”, then Eggerue’s message of feminist self-transformation loses much of its force (Eggerue, 2020, p. 163; see also Melo Lopes, 2022). Similarly, in her bestseller *Women Don’t Owe Your Pretty*, Florence Given, calls on women to resist familiar gender roles (2020, pp. 50, 133, 214), but claims they should not pass judgement on those who embrace them (2020, pp. 33, 37, 60). After all, there are strong incentives to live up to patriarchal standards. And we cannot expect women, who are already in an oppressed position, to ignore those benefits. But then, Given herself asks,

“why don’t I just carry on the way I am, performing femininity for men, and living in the roles supplied to me, so the world continues to reward me with unearned benefits? (...) Why would you take the route of ‘being yourself’ when you know that there’s a much easier, well-travelled route? One where you’re treated better, and all you have to do is grab a make-up brush and a razor!” (Given, 2020, p. 18).

Importantly, Given offers no real answer to these worries. Her call to resist patriarchal norms of appearance becomes effectively hollow because she has already concluded that women cannot be expected to resist them.

It is important to take seriously the limits that oppression imposes on women’s freedom. But this cannot lead us to radically disconnect politics from ethics: to say that the world needs to change,

but that the way individual women should live can be totally governed by existing incentives. To claim this is to embrace a form of apolitical individualism that is incompatible with a feminist commitment to social transformation. After all, if no one is willing to live differently, how will anything ever change? As Amia Srinivasan has put it, “to say that a problem is structural does not absolve us from thinking about how we, as individuals, are implicated in it, or what we should do about it” (2021, p. 101; see also Zheng, 2018, pp. 8-10).

3. Beauvoirian Bad Faith

Bauer and Garcia’s insistence that Beauvoir be read on her own terms is right and important. But their ethically exonerating analysis of complicity ends up undermining their political agenda. To avoid this, I turn to a different interpretative tradition that sees Beauvoir as in fact *ethically criticizing* complicit women (Knowles, 2019; Altman, 2020; Whitmarsh, 1981, p. 36; Schwarzer, 1983/1984, pp. 24-25). In this section, I show that this reading is perfectly compatible with a rejection of radical freedom. We can be sensitive to the oppressive limits imposed on women, while moving beyond a “stance of respectful laissez faire” towards complicity (Frye, 1985, p. 216).

To see this, we need to revisit the notion of bad faith. Bauer and Garcia either denied that Beauvoir views complicit women as inauthentic, or claimed that, insofar as she does, she is not really criticizing them. However, throughout their arguments, bad faith itself is understood in terms of radical freedom: as a turn away from a fully unconstrained ability to always do otherwise. This, as Bauer and Garcia themselves rightly point out, is not the freedom Beauvoir thought human beings had. But, if that is the case, complicit women in *The Second Sex* seem to be ethically exonerated by default. They could never be in bad faith because, within a Beauvoirian framework, that is simply a foreign concept — there is no choice between freedom and the world when we are situated agents. And yet, when we look at the text, Beauvoir explicitly uses the term “bad faith” in her discussion of

adolescent rebellion, of motherhood, of narcissism, and of love (194/2011, pp. 365-369, 628, 681-682, 695, 702)¹¹. Her comments are critical, and even harsh. So, instead of trying to downplay these passages, I propose that we take them as evidence of a distinctive *Beauvoirian* notion of bad faith, one that does not implicitly rely on radical freedom.

Beauvoirian bad faith is about a choice, but not the choice between living out one's "feminine destiny" or rejecting it, between embracing freedom or embracing the world. There is no such choice point for Beauvoir. We cannot pit transcendence against situation because our capacity for transcendence is only realized within the concrete possibilities created by our situation. However, as situated agents, we all relate to social prescriptions ambiguously. We experience the social world as both constraining and enabling, as a place where we find out who we want to be and where we are made to be in certain ways. Therefore, we all feel a kind of existential discomfort in relation to social norms and scripts. The ethically significant choice is then the one between facing this discomfort or ignoring it. Beauvoirian authenticity is not a matter of embracing "transcendence" against the world. It is a matter of negotiating the inescapable tension we experience between these two things, rather than willfully ignoring it.

What does this look like in the case of women? When Bauer's college students experience the "hookup hangover", they are experiencing this discomfort as situated agents. Doing what the world wants them to do is appealing, but it makes them uneasy. They then have a choice between listening to this discomfort or shoving it aside. If she is in bad faith, the college student will not dwell on her worries. She will repeat to herself the social script as authoritative — 'yes, that was hot, that's a hot hookup' — and she will do it all again next week. This is what Charlotte Knowles, following

¹¹ Altman also points out that "in *The Second Sex* she tends to speak of a "fuite inauthentique" (inauthentic flight) rather than using the term "mauvaise foi," but the latter term does occur" (2020, p. 25). Altman describes the chapters of "Justifications" in particular as filled with "protracted jeremiads against three life paths women can take in complicitous bad faith" (2020, p. 91).

Heidegger, calls “stubbornness”: a repeated flight from one’s recurring experience of discomfort as a situated agent (2021a, p. 234). Consider another example, inspired by Garcia. Imagine this young woman realizes that acting in hyper-feminine ways can get her out of a traffic ticket. She feels herself cringe as she talks to the leering policeman. But then she says to herself: ‘the world is what it is, I might as well save some money on a ticket’. Here, a cost-benefit analysis is also a form of criticizable stubbornness, a way of pushing aside discomfort. In both examples, women insist on seeing the social world as fixed and absolute, even while they experience it as relative and questionable (Knowles, 2019, p. 251). They bury their head in the sand and inhabit their lives as if “neither people nor things can be different from what they are” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 642).

Living authentically requires facing the friction that inevitably arises between us and the world. This means adopting a creative stance towards social norms and being willing to explore possibilities to do things differently. It requires seeing “my situation and the way I am oriented within it, as something that can change, and as something that is not inevitable” (Knowles, 2021a, p. 235). For example, the authentic college student will not shut down her doubts but follow them down the path that Bauer herself sketched: is “exchanging a nice dinner for a nice blow job” a fair trade? She will seriously worry that these sexual practices are at odds with her self-conception as an ambitious student. And this will lead her to do things differently: explore other parties, other partners, or other ways to have sex. When cringing as she flirts her way out of a traffic ticket, she will also wonder: do I really have to do this? Taking a stand against the sexist attitudes she condemns may be worth some money. But note that, in both cases, authenticity does not fully dictate what she will do. If she is poor, this woman may find that, even if she feels profound discomfort, she needs to strategically flaunt her décolletage because she cannot afford to pay the ticket. Her complicit behavior may be the same as that of the woman in bad faith, but her attitude will be importantly different.

Indeed, Beauvoirian *bad faith* and *complicity* are distinct phenomena that can come apart. Being complicit means that one contributes to one's own unfreedom and that of other women by, for instance, actively participating in the 'hookup culture' Bauer describes. Being in Beauvoirian bad faith involves stubbornly ignoring the discomfort that these sexist practices provoke. Complicity is about behavior. Bad faith is primarily about our existential attitude. Both are plausibly degreed notions.¹² Strictly speaking, on the reading I am defending here, what is ethically significant is *not complicity per se*, but our existential attitude: how we face or silence our discomfort with our complicit behavior. And this is why it would be wrongheaded to criticize women simply for being complicit. As the case of the poor woman flirting her way out of a ticket shows, sometimes complicity arises, not out of a criticizable existential attitude, but out of a lucid understanding of one's constrained possibilities.

In Beauvoir's work, the figure of the 'enclosed woman' represents this possibility of complicity and bad faith coming apart (Beauvoir, 1947/2018, p. 41; Beauvoir, 1949/2011, pp. 16, 95, 206, 587, 643, 701, 765). The 'enclosed woman' exists in Islamic harems¹³, Greek gynaeceums, and modern French households (Altman, 2020, p. 383; Beauvoir, 1949/2011, pp. 16, 95). She is 'enclosed' in that she is physically separated from the external world and her situation holds little possibility of escape or change. Regarding these highly constrained women, Beauvoir says, in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that "it is possible that in this situation, limited like every human situation, they realize a perfect assertion of their freedom", even though they "have no instrument, be it in thought or by astonishment or anger, which permits them to attack the civilization that oppresses them" (1947/2018, p. 41). The enclosed woman may have no realistic possibility of defying the world and of ending her complicity. However, it is still *possible* for her to be authentic or inauthentic in her complicit behavior.¹⁴ Even under severe

¹² For example, Beauvoir talks of women in a "little bad faith" (1949/2011, pp. 326, 670) or having bad faith "in excess" (1949/2011, p. 700).

¹³ For a critical discussion of orientalism in relation to this trope see Altman (2020, pp. 347- 462).

¹⁴ Highlighting this possibility of authentic or inauthentic complicity by enclosed women, Beauvoir says of women in harems that "there is often laziness and timidity in their resignation; their honesty is not quite complete" (1947/2018, p.

oppression, women retain a robust kind of freedom that they can exercise in ethically significant ways.¹⁵ We could call this a “medio-passive agency”: a “kind of responsive agency exercised in situations that are not fully under our control” (Knowles, 2021a, p. 232; see also Altman, 2020, p. 67). This is not a Sartrean freedom to surpass the world, but a Beauvoirian capacity to always *respond* to our experience of the world. The secluded woman too can respond or fail to respond to her situation, even as she cannot significantly change it (Knowles, 2021a, p. 234). As Meryl Altman highlights, this yields an “extremely demanding” but “equal opportunity” ethics (2020, p. 93; see also Whitmarsh, 1981, p. 36). Any situation can be lived authentically or in bad faith and no one is automatically exonerated from ethical criticism, regardless of their oppressed position.¹⁶ At the same time, even “ignorant and powerless individuals, [can] know the truth of existence and raise themselves to a properly moral life” (Beauvoir, 1947/2018, p. 51).

But what would it mean for the enclosed woman to be authentic in her complicity? We get exemplary glimpses of this in “The Girl”, *The Second Sex*’s chapter on adolescence. Here we meet a series of admirable heroines picked from literature and history, living in highly constrained settings, and lacking the means to contest their subordination.¹⁷ But many of these girls live authentically: they face the fact that they are “tormented, in the throes of difficult conflicts” between their femininity and their subjectivity. They draw on this conflict to cultivate a complex, rich inner life, and a greater understanding of human psychology than their brothers (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 372). The authentic

51). In her earlier work, Bauer claims that this passage shows “a disturbing retreat into the familiar Sartrean insistence on the radical limitlessness of human (metaphysical) freedom” (2001, p. 169).

¹⁵ In contrast, Garcia characterizes this as a case of “forced submission, in which agency almost completely disappears” (2018/2021, p. 190). Sonia Kruks also claims that “those forms of oppression that prevent meaningful action may impinge upon it [freedom as an ontological quality of human existence] so totally that its enactment will virtually cease” (2012, p. 71).

¹⁶ This is why Beauvoir says that, for both women and men, “in various forms, the traps of bad faith and the mystifications of seriousness are lying in wait for both of them; this [medio-passive] freedom is entire in each” (1949/2011, p. 664).

¹⁷ Examples include Maggie, from *The Mill on the Floss* “in which George Eliot embodied the doubts and courageous rebellions of her youth against Victorian England”, as well as characters from early 20th century works by Rosamund Lehmann and Margaret Kennedy (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, pp. 372-373).

girl is perspicacious and critical, she avoids “the traps of seriousness and conformism. The concerted lies of her circle meet with her irony and clear-sightedness”. She courageously “throw[s] into question established optimism, preconceived values, and hypocritical and reassuring morality”. Adolescent authenticity also manifests itself in more sustained searches for alternative spaces of freedom, such as the “fields and woods” where these heroines can exist like “a human being; a subject, a freedom, she is freed both from her family and from males” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, pp. 376-377). Some of these girls try to be genuine actors in realms compatible with their social Otherness, like love or poetry (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, pp. 373-377). They do not transcend or even challenge the sexist myths that link them, as women, to nature, heterosexual love, or the ethereal realm of poems. But neither do they “play at being a woman”. The authentic girl tries to “accomplish herself as transcendence: this means seeing which possibilities are opened to her by what are called virile and feminine attitudes” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 60). In loving *generously* or engaging *deeply* with poetic texts, the girl tries to live her femininity as a creative subject.¹⁸ She is both complicit and admirably authentic as she lives a life severely constrained by patriarchal social norms.

We can now see how rejecting radical freedom is compatible with ethically criticizing many complicit women. Beauvoirian bad faith is not a matter of choosing to play along with the world or to resist it. It is a matter of a more subtle choice between responding to the discomfort of being “a freedom” in the world, or stubbornly ignoring it. Importantly, Beauvoirian bad faith is distinct from complicity. In the case of enclosed women, they can easily come apart. Bauer and Garcia were right insofar as they claimed that a Beauvoirian feminism should not criticize women simply for being complicit. What we should criticize is “complicitous bad faith” (Altman, 2020, p. 91). The question is

¹⁸ For another examination of “The Girl” focused on freedom and authenticity see Simons (2015). In her words, these descriptions of authentic ways to live such an oppressive situation show that Beauvoir recognizes a passive form of disclosing the world (“une forme passive de dévoilement du monde”) (Simons, 2015, p. 304).

then: how can we tell if complicity is driven by bad faith or not? In the next section, I will argue that we need to look closely at the details of women's lives to judge this.

4. When Complicity is Criticizable

Beauvoir provocatively says that women cannot assume themselves authentically “except in revolt: this is the only way open to those who have no chance of building anything; they must refuse the limits of their situation and seek to open paths to the future” (1949/2011, p. 664). This suggests a particular relation between authenticity and complicity: if she is living authentically, a woman will always try to refuse making herself “Other” to men. Beauvoirian authenticity is then both an ethical and a political attitude because it requires seeing our shared social arrangements as being open to creative refashioning. This is the very opposite of the stubborn insistence on the status quo associated with bad faith.

However, as we have seen, not all women can change their lot. For the enclosed woman, this relation between authenticity and exiting complicity is severed by her highly constrained circumstances. The authentic girl in *The Second Sex* does not contest patriarchal power, even as she roams the fields and reads poetry. These are cases where authenticity cannot lead to ending individual complicity and promoting social change. One could worry that this problem generalizes. While Beauvoir contrasts the “woman in a harem” with “the western woman of today”, who “chooses (...) or at least consents” to her own oppression, maybe the two are not so far apart (1947/2018, p. 41). Bauer's and Garcia's descriptions often suggest that, in patriarchal societies, women are all more or less enclosed. Some are enclosed by walls, others by upbringings, psychological incentives, and socio-economic circumstances (see also Edwards, 2021, p. 57). If this is right, then Beauvoir's distinction may be simplistic and the connection between authenticity and exiting complicity may be purely theoretical.

To respond to this challenge and show that the distinction is plausible, we need to look at women's lives in more detail. Are all women under patriarchal social regimes so constrained? Beauvoir acknowledged there were plenty of enclosed women in her time, but she was rather specific about who they were:

“I think there are some women who really don't stand much of a chance. If they are thirty-five, with four children to cope with, married and lacking any professional qualifications – then I don't know what they can do to liberate themselves.” (Beauvoir in Schwarzer, 1983/1984, p. 43).

This cornered housewife may be authentic, but she will be mostly unable to substantially change her participation in the social arrangements that make her unfree and perpetuate feminine Otherness. She can still regain a certain “independence in her work, in caring for the children: she draws a limited but concrete experience from it” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 663). In this respect, she can be like the adolescent girl roaming the fields and living authentically, pushing against but never really challenging her subordination. Without money, with no way of making a living, and with four children, the cornered housewife is unable to exit complicity, in spite of her ethically admirable attitude.¹⁹

But in *The Second Sex* we meet other women who have more leeway to change how they live. And here the connection between authenticity and exiting complicity reappears. For example, Beauvoir describes a cleaning woman washing a hotel floor whom she heard saying: “I never asked anyone for anything. I made it on my own.’ She was as proud of being self-sufficient as a Rockefeller.” Beauvoir presents this working woman as someone who is “productive and active, she regains her transcendence; she affirms herself concretely as subject in her projects; she senses her responsibility

¹⁹ It is telling that many of Beauvoir's readers wrote back contesting her claim and arguing that such women “can still put up a very good fight!”. As Beauvoir replied: “so much the better” (in Schwarzer, 1983/1984, p. 74).

relative to the goals she pursues and to the money and rights she appropriates” (1949/2011, p. 721). However, Beauvoir is quick to say that she is far from free. Her work is exploited, and she is burdened with a ‘double-shift’ of household duties. But her attitude shows a moving authenticity: she has creatively found a way to concretely be a subject in her world. She feels accomplished, she has some money, and she cultivates a form of true assertiveness. Unlike the housewife, her authenticity goes *some* way towards making herself, in some important respects, a freer being.²⁰ In the process, she is also changing the situation of women in her society.

Even in cases where women cannot exit complicity, authenticity is still important as a motor of future social changes: it pushes us to refuse self-subordination in the present and *readies us* to do so in the future if the opportunity presents itself (Knowles, 2021a, p. 235). Without this ethical stance, structural changes, new rights and opportunities will not have an effect on women’s lives. Women will not be interested in taking advantage of them, or in participating in any kind of collective movement that could better their individual situation. We see this spelled out in “The Girl”, where Beauvoir reflects on the life prospects of her authentic young heroines. She says “the richness and strength of their nature and fortunate circumstances have enabled some women to continue in their adult lives their passionate projects from adolescence. But these are exceptions” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 377). Most of these girls will be “broken by the world”, end up “yielding”, and entering “adult existence submissively”. Nevertheless, when the teenager’s “fight has only been – as happens most often – a symbolic revolt, defeat is certain” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 377). The authentic girl can be broken, but the girl in bad faith has already bought into her destiny. There is no change possible, even if her circumstances are favorable. She will stubbornly turn away from new opportunities, perpetuate her own unfreedom and that of women more broadly.

²⁰ I am disagreeing here with Sonia Kruks when she says that although Beauvoir “applauds those who struggle in their individual lives against their oppression, she also points out that such struggle is doomed to failure” (1995, p. 90).

Indeed, if authenticity readies women to end complicity, bad faith does the very opposite. It steeps them in an apolitical individualism that *fuels* self-subordination. They become invested in the way the world is, even when they could change it. For Beauvoir, complicit bourgeois women are a paradigmatic illustration of this. It is for them that she reserves her harshest criticism:

“In the upper classes, women are willing accomplices to their masters because they stand to profit from the benefits they are guaranteed. (...) they do not hesitate to radically sacrifice their autonomy as human beings; they stifle all thinking, all critical judgment, all spontaneity; they parrot conventional wisdom, they identify with the ideal imposed on them by the male code; in their hearts, and even on their faces, all sincerity is dead. (...) Their vain arrogance, their radical incapability, their stubborn ignorance, turn them into the most useless beings, the most idiotic that the human species has ever produced” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 663).

As Altman puts it: “Beauvoir didn’t hate women, but she sure didn’t like *ladies* very much” (2020, 70). It is true that the wealthy are also subject to the temptations of femininity. In fact, in being “partly exempt from the practical burdens of other women” they are “peculiarly vulnerable to morally suspect temptations” (Altman, 2020, p. 140). It is in the glamorous world of affluent socialites that we find the most pleasurable and powerful forms of self-objectification. But having money, education, and social capital also matters. These bourgeois ladies have more alternatives in life than peasant women or shop girls, they are better “materially situated or practically equipped to step away from sexist arrangements” (Altman, 2020, p. 184). And yet, unlike many working-class women, they hold received norms as unquestionable and put extra effort in meeting social standards at their most strict. For Beauvoir, their deep complicity while faced with a relative ocean of opportunity is a clear sign of the

stubbornness of bad faith — of their criticizable refusal to deal with the discomfort of being a situated agent in a patriarchal world.

What these examples show is that we can get evidence for people's existential attitude from examining how they behave, given the opportunities they have. Any situation can be lived authentically or in bad faith. And if she assumes herself authentically, a woman will always try to exit complicity. But different situations afford us different possibilities for doing so. Therefore, while social position does not exonerate or condemn anyone, it tells us something about the ethical conclusions we can draw from their complicit behavior. Beauvoirian feminism requires then an intersectional analysis of gendered experience: to criticize complicit women, we need to know exactly *which* women we are talking about (Altman, 2020, pp. 74, 148). In the case of the cornered housewife and other 'enclosed women', their complicity is uninformative about their ethical attitude. We need to understand *how* they live their Otherness to make a judgement. But in cases like those of the bourgeois ladies, complicity licenses ethical criticism. We know they have opportunities to live unconventionally and yet we see them inflexibly sticking to social expectations. As Beauvoir puts it: "once there appears a possibility of liberation, it is resignation of freedom not to exploit the possibility, a resignation which implies dishonesty and which is a positive fault" (1947/2018, p. 41). There is also an important historical dimension here. Beauvoir was keenly aware that women's lives were changing, and a world was emerging where they could dedicate themselves to their "studies, sports, a professional training, or a social and political activity" (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 381). It is true that, today, "women are — still — heavily rewarded for pleasing men" (Bauer, 2015, pp. 16). But many more women inhabit situations where authenticity can make a difference. To that extent, women's complicity today is a better indicator of their ethical attitude than it was in the 1940s.

Given all this, it is not irrelevant that Bauer and Garcia's examples focus on exactly those women today whose self-objectification or submission seems most at odds with their possibilities. Garcia portrays independent-minded feminists reading up "on advice and norms on the best ways to be an attractive sexual object, an obliging wife, a perfect mother" (2018/2021, p. xiii). Bauer is explicitly interested in "the situation of a certain class of comfortably affluent young women today" who are torn between the sense they can do anything they put their minds to and the pressure to conform to objectifying norms of attractiveness (2015, p. 13). There are incentives and disincentives influencing these behaviors. But a Beauvoirian approach should lead us to be skeptical and ask: how strong are these constraints? These are not cornered housewives, or even cleaning women. If they do not participate in 'hookup culture', these students' life prospects will not be radically damaged. To say that self-objectification is the only way they can exercise their situated agency is far too quick. In fact, what Bauer and Garcia themselves suggest is that these women are missing, not opportunities to do otherwise, but the *courage* to resist and to *take the risk* of freedom (Bauer, 2015, p. 51; Garcia, 2018/2021, p. 200). This seems to be a matter, primarily, of holding a criticizable existential attitude.²¹

5. Blaming the Victim?

This alternative reading of Beauvoir avoids the tension between the structural inevitability of complicity and the political calls for self-transformation that we saw in Bauer and Garcia's accounts. All women have a human capacity to respond to their circumstances creatively and many women today have options to significantly refuse complicity. When they do not, this is indicative of Beauvoirian bad faith. It is a "moral fault" and also a political failure because it perpetuates gender-based subordination (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 16). The Beauvoirian ideal of authenticity highlights then how ethically admirable attitudes are part and parcel of a project of feminist liberation.

²¹ For other examples of situations where complicity is criticizable along similar lines see Knowles (2021b).

Importantly, we can say all this without adopting a Sartrean notion of radical freedom and while recognizing that women's agency is limited to various degrees within patriarchal societies. Read in this way, Beauvoir severely complicates the often-expressed idea that "oppressive structures (..) make it impossible for an agent not to be complicit in their own oppression" (Hirji, 2021, p. 668), and she re-asserts the value of individual resistance to patriarchal ways of life in the face of contemporary skepticism (Widdows, 2022).

In this last section, I want to briefly return to the worry that initially motivated Bauer and Garcia. In criticizing women for their complicitous bad faith, are we inappropriately blaming the victims of patriarchal oppression? Feminist thinkers have historically been deeply invested in avoiding 'victim blaming' maneuvers. This includes blaming women for situations in which they are subordinated and over which they have no control; shifting attention from perpetrators and oppressive structures by focusing on women's choices; downplaying the social limitations of agency imposed on women; and trying to find causes for hierarchical gender dynamics in a feminine nature. These kinds of arguments prevent women from "obtaining justice, help and sympathy when they have been harmed, but also add to their harm by creating confusion and feelings of guilt about their own responsibility for their suffering" (Wendell, 1990, p. 20). I take all these to be bad things. However, the reading of Beauvoir I have defended avoids these pitfalls, while holding women responsible in a robustly critical way.

First, Beauvoir's analysis of complicitous bad faith does not depend on thinking of women as fully in control of their situation. It does not require a voluntaristic conception of freedom. It relies instead on a nuanced understanding of situated agency. Second, Beauvoir is clear that women's responsibility does not erase the role of other social actors. Woman's education invites her to "take the easy slope (...). She is wrong to yield to this temptation; but the man is ill advised to reproach her

for it since it is he himself who tempted her (...) the wrongs of one do not absolve the other” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, pp. 757-758). Third, Beauvoir’s criticism of bourgeois women is not a piece of individualistic moralizing. It does not attribute their self-subordinating behaviors to an immutable individual weakness, a form of private immorality, or a feminine nature. Instead, Beauvoir treats these as contextualized attitudes and choices with a political significance and criticizes them as such.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that Beauvoir’s existentialist notion of responsibility cannot be understood through what Iris Marion Young calls the “liability model” of responsibility. On this model, the point of investigating responsibility is to find “guilt or fault for a harm” by an agent that bears the appropriate causal connection to the problem and had the right control and knowledge to act in the way they did (Young, 2011, p. 97). This liable agent can then be singled out for “the purposes of sanctioning, punishing, or exacting compensation or redress” (Young, 2011, p. 98). When we worry about ‘victim blaming’, this is how we are thinking about ethical criticism. But, in *The Second Sex*, the accusation of bad faith is directed at “a way of being, not a set of acts” by complicit women (Frye, 1985, p. 217). Although there is an important connection between existential attitude and complicit behavior, the two are not the same. Beauvoir’s theorizing of responsibility also differs from that of the liability model in that it is not driven by backward-looking goals like punishment or redress. The central questions in *The Second Sex* are forward-looking ones: “How, in the feminine condition, can a human being accomplish herself? What paths are open to her? Which ones lead to dead ends? How can she find independence within dependence? What circumstances limit women’s freedom and can she overcome them?” (Beauvoir, 1949/2011, p. 17). The point of criticizing complicit women is then to enlarge freedom and agency in the future, rather than to saddle someone with a particular past wrong.

Beauvoir's harsh comments aim, not at separating the 'good' women from the 'bad' ones, but at confronting us all with uncomfortable realities in ways that stimulate ethical growth and political change.²² The critical portraits of complicity in *The Second Sex* are then best seen as negative moral exemplars. As Kate Kirkpatrick has argued, the strategic use of negative exemplars was common to many existentialist thinkers: "sometimes morally fruitful discontentment was achieved by the shock of recognizing what was not admirable within oneself, or by the discomfort of uncertainty about exactly what example the exemplars were supposed to serve" (forthcoming). Feeling negatively about oneself is part of experiencing "discontentment", but it is not the ultimate goal. Beauvoirian criticism is then not a "summative", but rather a "formative" critical response, to use Robin Zheng's distinction. "Whereas summative critical responses like blame are justified when exercises of agency violate clear moral standards", formative responses are aimed at improving rather than assessing agency and are justified when we deviate from our ethical ideals (Zheng, 2021, p. 504). Accusing women of complicitous bad faith is a way of calling their attention to how far they have estranged themselves from their own agency. In close interpersonal contexts, formative ethical criticism may be best conveyed in subtle cues, and it is important to be mindful of our relationships with others in criticizing them (Zheng, 2021, pp. 514-516). Indeed, Beauvoir herself was particularly effective because, contrary to what has been sometimes claimed (Leighton, 1975, p. 116; Whitmarsh, 1981, pp. 149-150), her criticism was not a finger-wagging proclamation from above. As her detailed phenomenological descriptions suggest, her harsh words come from a place of deep familiarity with these behaviors and attitudes.²³ This is undoubtedly part of why *The Second Sex* resonated with so many women who recognized themselves in these unflattering portraits (see also Knowles, 2021b, p. 9).

²² For a discussion of the connection between Beauvoirian criticism of complicity and feminist social change see Melo Lopes (2021).

²³ Commenting on the relation between *The Second Sex* and Beauvoir's autobiographical writings, Dorothy Kaufmann McCall goes as far as to say that her "critique of what she calls woman's complicity with her situation is in part a critique

Many of Beauvoir's readers felt this sting of ethical criticism. And, for some, this was a life-changing experience. One woman wrote to Beauvoir about reading her work:

“(…) there were moments in which I almost ‘felt like slapping myself’. It is always uncomfortable to catch oneself in being passive, in one’s complicity. (…) Depressing? In my case [your book] made me want to live briskly (…) all your books have given me ‘something else’; […] what I was desperately looking for in order to be myself” (Letter from Huguette Céline Bastide to Simone de Beauvoir, 18 March 1970, unpublished manuscript, reproduced in Rouch, 2019, pp. 247-251).²⁴

Beauvoir's reply to this letter is telling: “You have read me as I wish to be read” (my translation, in Rouch, 2019, p. 240).²⁵ What *The Second Sex* often gave women was not a new set of facts or arguments, but the shock of criticism, accompanied by a picture of women “as unfinished, capable of change, and capable of gaining power to direct our lives” (Wendell, 1990, p.15).

of herself” (1979, p. 221). See also Gerassi (1976); Altman (2020, p. 363); Schwarzer (1983/1984, p. 37); Garcia (2018/2021, pp. 201, 89-91, 95).

²⁴ Thank you to Laurencia Sáenz Benavides for bringing this letter to my attention. I am relying here on her translation.

²⁵ «Vous m’avez lue comme je souhaite qu’on me lise et je suis très heureuse de vous avoir un peu aidée à vivre.» (in Rouch, 2019, p. 240)

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