*Feminist Philosophy and the Force of Satire.*

*On Simone de Beauvoir’s Demystification of Motherhood*

**Abstract**

This paper argues that satire constitutes a particularly effective strategy for feminist philosophy through an analysis of Simone de Beauvoir’s account of motherhood. Feminists have grappled at length with how to interpret Beauvoir’s focus on the unpleasantness of pregnancy and challenges of motherhood. In this paper, I suggest a new interpretive strategy. My view is that Beauvoir’s disparaging depiction of motherhood cannot be read by the letter; rather, it is an exercise in satire. By overemphasizing its strangeness and difficulty, Beauvoir dethrones motherhood as the pinnacle of feminine existence, transforming it from women’s only possible destiny into a contingent feature of existence. My underlying contention here is that such feminist satirizing speaks to the aims of feminist philosophy more generally: the satirical subversion of our buried assumptions opens the possibility of imagining the world anew.

Keywords: Simone de Beauvoir, motherhood, feminist philosophy, satire

**Introduction**

In chapter six of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir provides an analysis of the experience of pregnancy and motherhood. She depicts motherhood as an alienating experience for women, which reduces them to an animalistic state and threatens their existential freedom. Referring to certain women who are more like “breeders” than mothers, she writes: “for the future mother, the opposition between subject and object disappears…she is plant and animal, a collection of colloids, an incubator, an egg” (2011: 613). In pregnancy, Beauvoir suggests, a woman’s body turns into inert “flesh”; the pregnant woman “is no longer a subject anguished by her freedom” (613). Beauvoir thus implies an opposition between transcendence and embodiment which oddly reproduces a quasi-dualistic understanding of the mind/body relationship. This tendency to fall into an opposition between flesh and transcendence, however, contradicts the foundational premises of Beauvoir’s project: that the subject is always embodied, and that the body is always a historical situation.[[1]](#endnote-1) Thus, when dealing with motherhood, Beauvoir slips into language which undermines her own radically emancipatory idea that women’s physical anatomy does not determine their destiny.

The question I raise in this paper is why Beauvoir’s treatment of motherhood seems to stray from her most radical and central thesis. Why do the themes of motherhood and pregnancy lead Beauvoir to deviate into misleadingly essentializing language? I suggest that motherhood is a particularly sensitive topic for Beauvoir’s project: insofar as women have historically been reduced to the role of reproducers, their fulfillment has been made to depend on their attachment to children, to tasks of reproductive work. The rationale for Beauvoir’s analysis is, therefore, to radically subvert the representation of pregnancy and motherhood as the most—and only—fulfilling experience for women. By overemphasizing its challenges and difficulties, Beauvoir’s purpose is to *debunk* the myth of motherhood as an uncomplicated aspect of female existence which comes naturally to women.

Here, my underlying contention is that feminist philosophy calls for argumentative methods distinct from those of traditional analytic philosophy. Parody, irony, exaggeration and ridicule—in short, satire— make it possible to expose the hidden oppressive effects of naturalized gender norms. Feminist satire disarms sexist assumptions and misogynistic ideas by mocking them, and by laying bare the vacuity of the arguments they invoke. To put it simply, I want to make the case that satire constitutes an important and effective strategy for feminist theorizing by leaning on Beauvoir’s account of motherhood in *The Second Sex*. Reading Beauvoir’s chapter as an exercise in satire casts it in a radically new light: her overwhelmingly negative portrayal of motherhood is no longer contradictory, nor can it be attributed to a stubborn trace of misogyny pervading her thinking. Instead, Beauvoir’s description of difficult and painful mother-child relationships becomes a virulent attack on the dominant attitude that women are biologically destined for motherhood.

The argument proceeds in four steps. I begin by showing that satire constitutes a longstanding and effective strategy for feminist theorizing. This is clear on an empirical level: feminists have used satire as a privileged mode of argumentation from the very inception of Western feminist theory. More importantly, still, my claim is that the specific nature of gender subordination makes satire *particularly* effective for feminist philosophy: debunking naturalized norms requires recourse to argumentative strategies distinct from those of conventional analytic philosophy. This brings the argument to an analysis of Beauvoir’s chapter on motherhood. Here, I argue that my approach to Beauvoir’s text radically shifts the prevailing frameworks used to interpret her work on motherhood: her aim is not to denigrate motherhood, but rather to expose the contradictions within conservative discourses which exalt it for its own sake, as a universal good. By subsuming her discussion of pregnancy within a forceful plea for the legalization of abortion, Beauvoir shows that meaningful motherhood is contingent upon freedom of choice. As such, Beauvoir’s satirizing idealized maternity transforms motherhood from women’s natural, necessary condition into an existential possibility.

**Feminist Theory and the Force of Satire**

I want to begin by suggesting that satire constitutes an important and effective strategy for feminist theorizing. Firstly, to make this case, it is important to take note of the prominence of satirical genres—polemical writing, political pamphlets—in the history of Western feminist theory since its emergence. In 18th century France, Olympe de Gouges’ *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen* (1979) is, for instance, a parody, a satirical appropriation, of France’s 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man. By shifting the subject of the declaration from ‘man’ to ‘woman,’ Gouges was able to reveal the hypocritical discrepancy between the promise of universal equality and democracy borne in this founding document and its failed realization: its exclusion of half the country.[[2]](#endnote-2) In a similar vein in England, Mary Wollstonecraft’s famous work *A* *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* uses the tools of irony and ridicule as weapons to decry women’s subordination (Carroll 2021). Much like Gouges’ *Declaration*, Wollstonecraft’s text parodies another preexisting male-centric work, while deriding its author (Carroll 2021: 183[[3]](#endnote-3)). Wollstonecraft’s seminal feminist text copies the conservative economist and philosopher Edmund Burke’s *Reflections on the Revolution in France* and continuously mocks Burke, “pleading that she must handle him delicately for fear that an overly rigorous debate on a ‘metaphysical’ topic like the rights of man would ‘derange’ his nervous system” (as cited in Carroll: 183).[[4]](#endnote-4) Wollstonecraft further explicitly defends recourse to satirical argumentative methods: in her proposal for a model of feminist education, she claims women must be provided with an “instruction in ridicule” to challenge their subordination (207).

More recent feminist theorists in the 20th century have continued to extend this legacy of parody and satire, using these as part of their argumentative arsenal. Valerie Solanas’s *SCUM Manifesto* (1968) is a noteworthy example of such a modern satirical text. In this provocatively titled pamphlet, of which the acronym stands for “The Society for Cutting Up Men,” Solanas calls for an all-female society, advocating the total and complete eradication of men. She repeatedly brands men as ‘lacking,’ writing that “the male is an incomplete female, a walking abortion” (1968: 3).[[5]](#endnote-5) This polemical and violent language is not simply the ramblings of a mad woman, however; careful reading reveals that Solanas’s text operates a radical reversal of dominant misogynistic discourses peddled throughout Western history. By calling men ‘lacking,’ Solanas satirizes the systematic devaluation of femininity in relation to masculinity which was always the norm. She turns misogynistic arguments against themselves: it is not women who are lesser, rather, man is revealed to be “deficient” (3), an “incomplete female” (6).

Shulamith Firestone’s (1972) call for women to seize the means of reproduction, might, further, be read as another interesting example of feminist satire. While Firestone’s style and tone is perhaps not quite as seeped in sarcasm as Beauvoir’s chapter on the mother, Firestone nonetheless shared a lot of Beauvoir’s views and often echoed her polemical statements.[[6]](#endnote-6) In *The Dialectic of Sex* (1972), dedicated to Beauvoir, Firestone proposed to transgress stringent societal taboos: she argued for women’s “seizure of control of human fertility— the new population biology as well as all the social institutions of childbearing and childrearing” (11). She advocated that babies be created in test-tubes (197) and separated from their biological parents (36). Her denunciation of women’s (as well as children’s[[7]](#endnote-7)) subordination led her to imagine a new social structure beyond the nuclear family—that very institution often viewed as the cornerstone, and scaled-down model of society.

We can see, from these examples, that satire and its frequent association with the promotion of radically alternative political programs, is a commonly used method of feminist theorizing. My claim, however, is not merely that satire is a privileged feminist genre because it is common, because it has been used by an important range of feminists. Rather, I want to suggest that feminists turn to satire in particular because of the specific requirements and aims of feminist philosophy. To put it differently, the *distinctiveness* of women’s subordination calls for satire. This is because feminist social critique takes as its target naturalized gender norms which condition and deeply permeate our relationship to the world: it attacks our taken for granted assumptions and background beliefs, all of which we find difficult to question, since they are so integral to the ways we inhabit the world. What satire can uniquely do is reveal— through irony, reversal, exaggeration, and ridicule— exactly what is *not natural* about our presuppositions, assumptions, and internalized beliefs. It inverts, shifts, and diverts our constructed values and principles to show either their baselessness, their lacunae, or their concealed effects. In other words, satire reveals the contingent, and specifically contingent historical oppression, exactly for what it is.

 Following this reasoning, then, it seems to me that satirical writing extends what is politically conceivable: by advocating extreme, radical, and sometimes even unfeasible political solutions, feminists are in fact working to ‘stretch’ the bounds of what is imaginable. This becomes evident when we examine the texts I mentioned earlier by Gouges, Wollstonecraft, Solanas, and Firestone, alongside the political effects which arose with them. When Gouges advocated the equal rights of women this was not only provocative in terms of dominant values at the time, it was a ludicrous position: there was no perceived contradiction in promoting the ‘universal rights of man’ which in reality excluded half of society. The contradiction, now obvious for us, needed to be diagnosed, analyzed and made perceptible; and this is exactly what Gouges achieved through her satirical feminist appropriation of France’s founding republican text. In other words, highlighting the absurdity of the political situation of women’s unequal rights under the guise of supposedly ‘universal’ principles required something like parody—it could not be expressed in the mainstream vocabulary and discourses available at the time. My suggestion then is that feminist writing, if its purpose is to diagnose the concealed and naturalized effects of women’s subordination, requires tools and methods of argumentation which enable us to envisage the world in a different light. In this sense, we might say then that feminist exercises of political satire force us to stretch our imagination beyond what is currently possible or thinkable. By denouncing the oppression that *is*, it becomes possible to push for what is *not yet*. In other words, satire grants us a glimpse of the unimaginable: the possibility of an alternative future becomes, however remotely, discernible.

**Interpretive debates and contestations in Beauvoir scholarship**

I would now like to turn to Beauvoir’s infamous chapter on the mother. Beauvoir’s treatment of motherhood has long been a contested subject within feminist debates. Many commentators have read Beauvoir’s insistence on the passivity of the body, and on pregnancy’s physicality as deeply problematic (Jeremiah 2006). Early engagements with this topic, Sara Ruddick’s (1980) article “Maternal Thinking” as well as Iris Marion Young’s (1990) “Throwing Like a Girl,” both criticize Beauvoir for overemphasizing the disempowering aspects of pregnancy and motherhood.[[8]](#endnote-8) Differently, other feminists such as Yolanda Patterson (1986) highlighted Beauvoir’s biographical details, her personal hostility towards having children,[[9]](#endnote-9) and her relationship with her own mother, factors often cited to explain Beauvoir’s position, and even to justify it. However, as Margaret Simons (2010) contends, this latter framework frequently led commentators to misinterpretations, such as viewing Beauvoir’s work as a mere reformulation of Sartre’s. These tendencies, for Simons, stemmed not from a lack of respect for Beauvoir as a philosopher per se, but because scholars often “respect her autobiographical writings—and later interviews—too much” (2010: 912).[[10]](#endnote-10)

In light of such blind spots within earlier scholarship, the importance of revisiting Beauvoir’s account of motherhood has thus recently been foregrounded by feminist commentators.[[11]](#endnote-11) Newer interpretations of Beauvoir’s position have emphasized the complexity of her attitude, moving away from bluntly critical engagements with her writing on motherhood. Nancy Bauer (2017), for instance, identifies two possible framings of Beauvoir’s description of motherhood since the 1980s, aiming to surpass the limits of both. On the one hand, the “crudest” (148) reading states that Beauvoir sees motherhood as inherently negative and as a hindrance to women’s freedom determined by biology. More sympathetic readings, differently, highlight passages where Beauvoir opposes biology’s determining force, insisting on the context of social political oppression conditioning motherhood[[12]](#endnote-12): Under this view, however, Beauvoir’s opposition to motherhood is analyzed as an effect of Sartre’s influence, which led her to think women *could* possibly experience motherhood as fulfilling, so long as they ‘transcended’ their physical condition and reproductive capacities. Bauer tries to overcome the limitations of both interpretations: she argues that Beauvoir’s description of motherhood is based neither on biological essentialism nor on excessive Sartrean voluntarism, but on the fundamental insight that “*under sexist social conditions*, a woman needs to think twice about whether becoming a mother is a good idea” (149, emphasis in original). Thus, Bauer suggests Beauvoir’s fundamental goal is to put in relief “the extent to which having a female physiology *can interfere* with a person’s life plans” (152, emphasis added).[[13]](#endnote-13) Her project becomes to soften the blow of Beauvoir’s description of motherhood: it should no longer be read as universalizing or essentializing, but as a contextualized and historicized account of motherhood under specific social and political conditions.

Bauer’s analysis is undeniably an important contribution to Beauvoir scholarship. Nonetheless, it seems to me that framing Beauvoir’s account of motherhood as simply an effort to reveal the extent to which motherhood is “fraught with danger and paradox” (2017: 153) undervalues the radicality of Beauvoir’s gesture. My contention is that her account is not only contextualized and historically specific, but that it is marked by a logic of subversion: her vehement insistence on the difficulty of pregnancy, on its discomforts, is in fact a complete *reversal* of dominant rhetoric and traditional understandings of motherhood which form an integral pole of our cultural value system. To fully understand Beauvoir’s writing on motherhood, we must analyze it as a feminist argumentative strategy which exposes the hypocrisy and contradictions at work in the dominant system— a system which institutes motherhood as the inexorable feminine destiny. Adopting this interpretive lens not only acknowledges the genuine radicality of Beauvoir’s writing, it also avoids the two main pitfalls feminist commentators have often fallen into. Once we recognize Beauvoir’s writing as an attempt to reverse social norms, and mystifications around motherhood, the risk of artificially taking a side for or against her account, or of psychologizing her work in a way which fails to take seriously her philosophical contribution, become obsolete. Against these traps, my aim is to take full measure of Beauvoir’s contribution to feminist philosophy.

This interpretive framework additionally recognizes Beauvoir’s attention to literary form, which she considered undivorceable from philosophy. In her essay “Literature and Metaphysics,” Beauvoir recalls feeling desperately “torn” between philosophy and literature in her early years (2004: 269). She soon comes to dispel the difficulty of choosing between disciplines, however, by emphasizing their complementarity. When it comes to expressing the “subjective, singular, and dramatic aspect of experience” as well as its “ambiguity” (275), philosophy on its own is insufficient. Disclosing the complexity of subjective experience requires literary dramatization and stylization: only literature can convey human experiences in their full temporal thickness and existential texture. She writes:

“It is not by chance if existentialist thought today attempts to express itself sometimes by theoretical treatises and sometimes by fiction;… it is an effort to reconcile the objective and the subjective, the absolute and the relative, the timeless and the historical… if the description of essence is a matter solely for philosophy properly speaking, then the novel will permit us to evoke the original upspringing [*jaillissement*] of existence in its complete, singular, and temporal truth.” (274)

Clearly, then, *The Second Sex* is both a philosophical and literary text. Its literary character is first notable in Beauvoir’s colorful language and imagery, and her constant references to a plethora of novels (138, 205, 217, 231, 237, 279, 304-9, 321, 351, 358, 402, 435, 517, 520, 534), plays (520) and poetry (105). But this inclusion of literary texts is not simply there to demonstrate the breadth of Beauvoir’s erudition. The web of literary references woven in *The Second Sex* furnishes its argument with what philosophical reflection alone cannot: through reporting diverse experiences in their affective quality and disordered variability, it reveals the existential reality, lived and temporal, of what it means to be a ‘woman.’[[14]](#endnote-14)

Thus, I want to suggest that Beauvoir’s style in her chapter on motherhood is in fact an integral part of the overall writing strategy she adopts in *The Second Sex*, and that more broadly, it fits within her conception of existentialist philosophy. The fact that I read her as deliberately choosing a specific style of writing is not inconsequential. As I aim to show in my next section, it radically shifts how we can understand her description of motherhood. Her choice of language and imagery, as well as her hyperbolic and dramatized statements create a rhetorical strategy of subversion. Beauvoir reveals by means of satire the contingency of motherhood’s annexation to womanhood.

**Dismantling the opposition: Beauvoir’s critique of anti-abortion discourses**

I now turn to Beauvoir’s defense of abortion in the first section of her account of motherhood. I read this passage as a vehement tirade against the hypocrisy of the ban on abortion. As I contend, this opening passage of Beauvoir’s chapter on motherhood should be read as a satire of the faulty arguments used to proscribe abortion, which work only to subordinate women.

One of the main contradictions peddled by anti-abortionist voices is their factitious concern for women’s health. The purported danger of abortion is often cited as a reason for their criminalization (2011: 327)[[15]](#endnote-15) ; nonetheless, it is well-known by honest doctors that abortions practiced in a hygienic environment do not represent significant risks for women. As Beauvoir holds, it is rather the criminalization of abortion that produces dangerous conditions. Left with no other options, women terminating their pregnancies are forced into the hands of unqualified individuals operating in unsanitary environments. Beauvoir deplores that the incompetence of “‘back-alley’ abortionists and their operating conditions cause many accidents, some of them fatal” (598). She shows with this observation that the law produces the very conditions it alleges to prevent, it “demands that this delicate operation be executed clandestinely” (597-598). Women are put in peril in the very name of their health and safety.

In addition to so-called safety concerns, religious arguments are often the focal point of anti-abortion discourses. Beauvoir briefly alludes to these arguments, which she considers as having no currency. She dismisses the Christian position that the fetus has a soul, “and the gates to paradise are closed to it without baptism” (599), asking sardonically, “Why…keep God from welcoming the embryonic soul into his heaven? If a council authorized it, he would not protest the pious massacre of the Indians any more than in the good old days” (599).[[16]](#endnote-16) This dismissal of religious arguments underlines the speciousness of ideas circulated by the catholic church: pious sentiments have not only been used to justify some of the most violent chapters of history, they have often been at their very source (“*pieux massacre*”). Provocatively, Beauvoir portrays God as being “authorized” by a council, placing divine authority under the administrative rule of an imaginary council of clergymen—an irreverent image which demotes God from universe-creator to middle-management.

Another striking paradox in anti-abortion rhetoric lies in the valuation of pregnancy for its own sake, with no concern for the future of the mother or child. Beauvoir notes that “the same society so determined to defend the rights of the fetus shows no interest in children after they are born” (2011: 598). Motherhood is glorified as an absolute good but the often-difficult reality of bearing children is completely elided, as is the near impossibility for working-class women to raise multiple children with limited public assistance. For women without the means or will to become mothers, the consequences of banning abortions are that children become either literally abandoned and placed in orphanages where cruel practices are ubiquitous, or are raised by parents who resent their very existence. In Beauvoir’s words, “society closes its eyes to the horrible tyranny practiced in ‘reform schools’ or in the private homes of child [executioners]” (598).[[17]](#endnote-17) Here, Beauvoir’s statement radically reverses the frequent framing of women who have abortions as ‘killers’ or ‘monsters’: the “executioners” are no longer these women, but those who raise children in abusive and cruel conditions.

Furthermore, Beauvoir does not only satirize spurious arguments against abortion; she also criticizes discourses occurring when unmarried women choose *not* to terminate their pregnancies. Unwanted pregnancies, which are unavoidable so long as birth control is illegal, put women in an impossible position. Whether they end their pregnancy or decide to have a child outside of marriage, they will be the objects of societal scorn as “illegitimate motherhood is still so terrible a stain that many prefer suicide or infanticide” to being unmarried mothers (602). A sophisticated system of combined social shaming and political economic penalization[[18]](#endnote-18) ensures that women are prevented from exceeding the moral-legal situation wherein motherhood outside of marriage is an indelible mark of dishonor.[[19]](#endnote-19)

For Beauvoir, this configuration is bolstered by the institution of a “male moral code” (338) which dictates the rules motherhood must follow. Only women’s freedom is amenable to be affected by unchosen motherhood: men share half of the responsibility for bringing pregnancies about, but they are somehow never implicated in condemnatory discourses against abortion. Rather, men paradoxically oscillate between supporting the permissibility and the interdiction of abortion. When it is useful for them, abortion becomes acceptable and legitimate: “Men universally forbid abortion; but they accept it individually as a convenient solution” (606).

Further, inconsistent positions regarding whose life is valued or depreciated—mother versus child—are strategically deployed. Beauvoir is particularly accusatory towards a certain Dr. Roy, a supporter of the ultra-conservative Maréchal Pétain. Roy is guilty of “monumental bad faith” (599) evidenced in his appeal to antithetical arguments against abortion. Whose life matters is opportunistically taken up so that women are continuously placed in a position of ‘sacrificeability.’ Roy says that

“it is immoral to choose between one life and another… and bolstered by this argument, he advises sacrificing the mother. He declares that the fetus does not belong to the mother … But when these same “right-thinking” doctors exalt motherhood, they affirm that the fetus is part of the mother’s body, that it is not a parasite nourished at the mother’s expense.” (599)

It is clear that Beauvoir’s aim is to dismantle oppressive anti-abortion arguments by showing their lack of validity and reliance on false premises. Her satire of Roy, as well as other anti-abortionists, reveals their argument to be founded on nothing more than hypocrisy and bad faith. What I would like to suggest in my next section is that Beauvoir does not, however, only engage in political satire on an explicit level. Her political denunciation is complemented by a dismantling of the topic of motherhood itself. Beauvoir not only turns around the arguments of her adversaries and reveals them to be completely vacuous; she also turns around the very theme of motherhood by approaching it *through* the question of abortion. The order of priority between motherhood and abortion is reversed: the choice of beginning her chapter of motherhood with a defense of abortion is, therefore, not inconsequential. I suggest in my next section that it is itself a provocative and satirical move.

**Beauvoir’s symbolic reversal: motherhood subsumed under the right to abortion**

In the first instance, Beauvoir’s emphasis on the astronomical numbers of abortions occurring in 1940s France is particularly noteworthy. Beauvoir insists that “every year there are as many abortions as births” (597). She supports this claim with evidence from various sources: women who experienced abortions, doctors, and even statements she personally collected. Beauvoir cites at length Madame Geneviève Serreau’s testimony which provides an insight into a typical hospital ward saturated with women having attempted to perform abortions upon themselves. She writes: “fifteen out of eighteen had had miscarriages, half of which were induced” (601). Estimations by doctors and professors are also evoked—including that of the infamous Dr. Roy, who “in 1938 estimated the number [of abortions] at one million” (660). An entire page is devoted to quoting and commentating on the experience of a young Berliner who underwent an illegal abortion, “a typical case heard thousands of times” (602). In a particularly inflated statement, Beauvoir even writes in the first person. She states: “a social worker told me that in ‘poor neighborhoods’ women share advice, borrow and lend instruments, and help each other out as simply as if they were removing corns” (604).

What I am trying to show by reporting these statements is not simply that Beauvoir’s defense of abortion is argued for with an impressive use of relevant sources and research—though this is also noteworthy. Rather, I want to draw attention to Beauvoir’s generalization of abortion, to her subsumption of motherhood under the theme of abortion. It seems to me that rather than representing the reality of abortion in her context simply numerically or statistically, Beauvoir subverts dominant depictions of motherhood by presenting abortion as *more primary* than pregnancy itself. Her provocative emphasis on the commonality, the ordinary nature of abortion for women across all kinds of social positions (“employees, secretaries, students, workers, peasants,” 602) can thus be seen as operating as a term-to-term inversion of the condemnations conveyed in dominant anti-abortion rhetoric. Abortion is no longer abject, a monstrosity, nor a crime: it is rather a banal, everyday occurrence, as common as “removing corns” from one’s feet.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Thus, Beauvoir’s technique of reversal ultimately amounts to a subsumption of pregnancy under the authority of abortion. With this reading in mind, it becomes clear now that Beauvoir’s opening of the chapter is deeply ironic: “it is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her physiological destiny; that is her “natural” vocation, since her whole organism is directed toward the perpetuation of the species” (597). This first sentence is followed by a pages-long passionate tirade endorsing the right to abortion: the entire section can be read as an ‘undoing’ of the opening statement. In short, Beauvoir turns around the problem of motherhood by addressing it first in terms of the acts which foreclose it. Motherhood begins only through implicating its termination.

I suggest, then, that Beauvoir’s description of motherhood thus attempts to debunk the myth of maternity as a tranquil realization of the feminine self, or as the ‘telos’ of womanhood. Her radical denunciation of anti-abortionist discourses disrupts the traditional conflation of womanhood with motherhood. To become fulfilled, women do not need to become mothers but need to gain the right to abortion. This is how Beauvoir concludes the first section of her chapter: “birth control and legal abortion would allow women to control their pregnancies freely” (607).[[21]](#endnote-21) Ultimately Beauvoir modifies the dominant meaning of abortion. It should not be seen as the antipode of motherhood but, conversely, meaningful motherhood becomes dependent on the right to abortion.

**Trials and tribulations of motherhood**

Building upon my first section, I now turn to the second half of Beauvoir’s account, focusing more specifically on the lived experience of pregnancy and motherhood. What I suggest is that Beauvoir not only thematically satirizes idealized maternity by making meaningful motherhood contingent on the right to abortion. Beauvoir attacks and subverts the *content* of traditional descriptions of maternity too. To show this, I draw attention to Beauvoir’s accentuation of the disruptiveness characteristic of the experience of pregnancy: spotlighting the strangeness of pregnancy frames it not as a natural state but as an ‘abnormal’ condition of embodiment.

Focusing on the phenomenality of pregnancy, Beauvoir especially stresses its peculiarity, salient in the uncanny experience of being ‘inhabited’ by a separate body. Through pregnancy, according to Beauvoir, women ambiguously feel the baby as part of themselves, and simultaneously, perceive the fetus as an externality:

“the fetus is a part of her body, and it is a parasite exploiting her; she possesses it and she is possessed by it; it encapsulates the whole future, and in carrying it, she feels as vast as the world; but this very richness *annihilates her*, she has the impression of *not being anything else*” (“de ne plus être rien”: 612, emphasis added).

Beauvoir here describes pregnancy as a state in which the woman’s subjectivity is overtaken by carrying the child. Her metaphor parodies the fetus as a kind of alien, no longer an extension of the mother but a leech sucking its life force from her body. This characterization thus overthrows the traditional vision of pregnancy as a symbiosis between mother and baby.

Further, Beauvoir presents pregnancy not as a stage of a woman’s life, but contrarily, as a loss of control, and a radical disruption of one’s regular embodiment. Pregnancy is not a natural feature of women’s embodiment, but an ‘undoing,’ through which women’s bodies are *stripped* from them. On a physical level the pregnant woman’s body is no longer really her own as it is inhabited by another; on a symbolic and existential level, the woman’s body is socially taken from her. Beauvoir shows that the pregnant body is transformed into a sacred object which does not truly ‘belong’ to the woman. She becomes “alienated in her body and in her social dignity” (613). She is no longer in control of her body which is now transformed into a vessel for a new life, now representing a symbol of life itself. From the point of view of the mother, this strange experience of embodiment translates into bizarre and irrational desires and psychological behaviors. Beauvoir writes, “feeling *distressed in her body*, woman expresses, as often happens in *psychastenies*, this feeling of strangeness through a desire that fascinates her” (616-617, emphasis added). Beauvoir provocatively analogizes pregnancy to ‘psychasthenia,’ “a neurotic state characterized especially by phobias, obsessions, or compulsions that one knows are irrational” (Merriam Webster, 2023): pregnancy is thus compared to a collapse of one one’s mental state.

Beauvoir goes even further: she caricatures pregnancy as a quasi-illness, emphasizing the plethora of unusual, unpleasant, and gruesome side effects of pregnancy. Beauvoir cites a particularly horrifying case reported by Hélène Deutsch, where a woman suffering from extreme morning sickness could not stop herself from anxiously examining her vomit, fearing that she would find fragments of the embryo in it. Here, Beauvoir writes, pregnancy is experienced as “an illness of the digestive apparatus” (616). Such cases are further supported by Beauvoir’s own testimony: “I knew a young woman who suffered both from excessive vomiting and fierce constipation” (616). Special attention is paid to secretion, “constipation, diarrhea, and expulsion” (616), which works to present pregnancy as a gruesome bodily transformation, and to evoke disgust in the reader.[[22]](#endnote-22) The result is that pregnant bodies are no longer represented as ‘normally’ functioning bodies: they seem not at all to do what they are ‘supposed’ to do, but to be suffering, even *ill* bodies. Beauvoir’s account thus radically denaturalizes motherhood. Ironically, it is not something which ‘comes naturally’ to the body.

My contention is that Beauvoir’s characterization of these experiences is not an attack of motherhood itself, nor a condemnation of women who want to become mothers. Rather, it seems to me that Beauvoir’s emphasis on the peculiarity of pregnancy is intended to subvert dominant discourses’ idealization of motherhood, and the widespread assumption that pregnancy is something women’s bodies are instinctively and unproblematically *meant* to do.[[23]](#endnote-23) Beauvoir’s assimilation of pregnancy to a kind of disorder is a reversal of the common notion that women are never as happy as when they are pregnant, or, the cliché of the ‘glowing’ expectant mother. Crucially, then, Beauvoir castigates not motherhood per se, but the mystification which “begins when the religion of Motherhood proclaims that *all mothers* are exemplary” (632, emphasis added). Motherhood is not necessarily always negative or unfulfilling, but it is simply a contingent feature of existence, which can—like any other—go terribly wrong.

Read in this light, Beauvoir’s account of motherhood takes on a new meaning. Her dramatic overstatements, her insistence that all mothers are “obsessed” with harming their children (627),[[24]](#endnote-24) becomes an attempt to expose the unfoundedness of universalizing motherhood as the greatest achievement for women. It is made clear by Beauvoir that cruel mothering is mostly produced by the very symbolic idealization and sanctification of maternity. Precisely because the concrete experience of motherhood so often contradicts society’s idealization of it, most women are unhappy mothers who abuse their power over their children. When women, trained to expect motherhood as the necessary pinnacle of their existence, come to have a child they are often devastated *not* to find themselves perfectly fulfilled (635). Their overall position of subordination across society is a source of anger which drives them to take out their frustration upon the only subjects over whom they have power, their children: “a mother who beats her child does not only beat the child, and in a way…: she is taking her vengeance on man, on the world, or on herself” (632). The crux of the problem, then, is really that women have such limited options, and are expected to become mothers whether or not this corresponds to their desires. In other words, for Beauvoir, the problem is not maternity per se, but women’s oppression (632).

Beauvoir thus wants to resist the notion that motherhood is inherently valuable, natural, or necessarily fulfilling for women, to expose this fallacy for what it is. She aims to deconstruct the “two preconceived ideas” “that motherhood is enough in all cases to fulfill a woman” (641), and “that the child is sure to find happiness in his mother’s arms” (644). Her disparaging description of mothering is therefore articulated with the aim of showing that women are not born with an essence which makes them natural caretakers.[[25]](#endnote-25)

By denaturalizing motherhood in this way, Beauvoir opens the possibility of viewing it differently from a natural condition. Her exercise in feminist satire reveals motherhood as an existential choice which women must be able to authentically choose for themselves. Her commentary regarding women who become pregnant for pregnancy’s sake, or simply because they are expected to, makes this particularly clear. These women “eagerly seek the possibility of alienating their liberty to the benefit of their flesh: their existence appears to them to be tranquilly justified by the passive fertility of their body” (613). But for Beauvoir, justifying one’s existence by *naturalizing* one’s condition can only be a form of bad faith. An authentic existence comes from actively choosing something for oneself; it cannot come from submitting one’s existence to the purpose of producing another life. The view that motherhood could be in itself a meaningful end for existence can only lead to alienation. But this does not entail that Beauvoir encourages women to transcend a biologically determined condition. The very idea that one’s biology can condition anything at all is what Beauvoir refutes: such bad faith is already rooted in an erroneous image of the female condition as one vowed to maternity.

**Concluding remarks**

To close this paper, it seems fitting to consider an exception in Beauvoir’s text: one of the only references to a genuinely fulfilling pregnancy, that of the author Colette. For Beauvoir, Colette’s pregnancy is unique, because the author continued to write throughout it: she did not conform to a pre-defined maternal role but decided to treat motherhood as a creative experience. Beauvoir approvingly cites Colette’s phrase, “the child showed signs of coming and I screwed on the top of my pen” (620). While some commentators have suggested that this emphasis on surpassing one’s condition repeats a misogynistic valuation of ‘masculine’ transcendence over ‘feminine’ immanence (Zelinka 2014), it seems to me that such a dismissal misunderstands Beauvoir’s argument. I want to suggest on a final note, that Beauvoir’s interest in Colette makes it possible to view motherhood not simply as something women should take on as a ‘project’ in a way which transcends their physical condition. It reveals, differently, that motherhood is not a rigidly fixed reality. The image of Colette writing up until the very moment she entered labor hints at a parallel between the artistic, creative activity of writing, and the life-changing moment of becoming a mother. What I think the image shows is that motherhood, like a creative endeavor, must be freely ‘written’: to become a fulfilling condition, it must be re-invented.

Thus, it seems to me that Beauvoir’s chapter on the mother, if we want to do it justice, should be read in the context of her view of existentialist philosophy as undivorceable from literature; but more importantly still, we must read it in the context of feminist philosophy more broadly. As I have defended in this paper, considering Beauvoir’s chapter as an exercise in feminist satire reveals its meaning in a radically new light. It becomes an attempt to imagine the world differently, to compell readers to consider motherhood anew. Such an effort to re-imagine the world, I have argued, epitomizes feminist philosophy’s satirical spirit.

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1. Beauvoir states the explicitly phenomenological idea that “presence in the world vigorously implies the positing of a body that is both a thing of the world and a point of view on this world” (2011: 44). Prominent readers of Beauvoir such as Judith Butler supports the view that Beauvoir understands ‘woman’ as a “historical situation” rather than as a “natural fact” (1998: 520); see also Heinämaa for phenomenological reading of Beauvoir’s perspective on women’s embodiment (2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Not only the form of the document, a reversal of the actual *Declaration of Rights of Man*, speaks to an attempt to subvert dominant logics and values, further, Gouges uses inflammatory and highly evocative figurative language as well. For instance, she writes that “woman has the right to mount the scaffold; she must equally have the right to mount the rostrum” (Gouges 1979: 91). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. As a text, Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication* is in fact organized as a response to Burke’s *Reflections*: it mimics, and reappropriates Burke’s philosophical and literary style and form for its own feminist political project (Carroll 2021: 183). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Evidently, Wollstonecraft wry humor and mocking tone in fact executes an exact reversal of the patronizing and disempowering arguments used against women (that they have weak nervous systems, are easily indisposed, fragile, unstable, and irrational). This kind of sarcastic reversal is also found in Solanas’ *SCUM Manifesto* (1972). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. The manifesto’s program indeed states that men should literally be ‘cut up,’ to be transformed into women. As Solanas writes, “If men were wise they would seek to become really female, would do intensive biological research that would lead to men, by means of operations on the brain and nervous system, being able to be transformed in psyche, as well as body, into women” (1968: 3). Additionally, the inauguration of an all-female society is presented as a kind of evolutionary inevitability: “Eventually the natural course of events, of social evolution, will lead to total female control of the world and, subsequently, to the cessation of the production of males and, ultimately, to the cessation of the production of females” (40). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Firestone is notably often cited for calling pregnancy “barbaric” and for the crude remark that childbirth is “like shitting a pumpkin” (as cited in Faludi 2013). Firestone has been criticized for this crass and denigrating characterization, as well as for her account of racism which has been charged with being rooted in racism itself (Merck 2010: 164). Overall, however, *The Dialectic of Sex* has largely been forgotten in the feminist cannon. This is likely because her work “fails to anticipate mechanisms of exclusion,” especially due to its biological deterministic tendencies which sometimes problematically resonate with trans-exclusionary arguments (Lane-McKinley 2019: 333). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Firestone famously declared that “childhood is hell” and called for the abolition of the “myth of childhood” alongside that of femininity (Jackson 2010: 122). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Young (1990) asserts that Beauvoir ignores “the wide range of variations in maternal experience” and proposes that motherhood can be experienced, differently, as a source of empowerment. Further, in “Humanism, Gynocentrism and Feminist Politics” (1985) Young also spearheads the criticism of Beauvoir as a “male-identified” thinker. Similarly, Young, Ruddick suggests that “maternal thinking” should be reclaimed as a valuable consequence which arises from the experience of mothering. Adrienne Rich’s voice is also important within these early readings of Beauvoir (1986). In her book “Of Woman Born,” Rich engages with Beauvoir in a more sympathetic way than Ruddick and Young. She attacks the institution of motherhood as a “myth” used to justify and perpetuate women’s oppression. Nonetheless, Rich also imagines that motherhood is not inherently disempowering and could be a source of fulfillment for women if societal norms and political structures evolved. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Beauvoir’s insistence that entering a marriage and having children is comparable to selling oneself into slavery is one such often quoted line (Patterson 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Simons (2010) suggests that Beauvoir underestimated and undermined the value of her own philosophical contributions in her autobiographical writings. As Simons shows, Beauvoir eliminates references to her philosophical work in her *Diary* and *Memoirs*, which led commentators to repeat Beauvoir’s elisions and erasures. While Simons’ argument is convincing and provides much textual evidence that Beauvoir did not see herself as a philosopher, or ‘do justice’ to her own philosophical work, my contention is that Simons’ reading over-psychologizes Beauvoir and, in a sense, undercuts her autonomy as a thinker. I strive to frame my reading of Beauvoir in a way which avoids these potential problems. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The recent publication of *Political Writings* (2012), a collection of Beauvoir’s essays which had never previously been translated into English, has accompanied a new wave of interest in Beauvoir’s work. This collection of essays, furthermore, provides a new interpretive framework in which to read Beauvoir. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Penelope Deutscher has done extensive work in tracking the various contradictions in Beauvoir’s work, specifically in the Second Sex’s description of feminine embodiment (1997: 176-8). In response to these inconsistencies, Deutscher identifies and explains the vast array of interpretive strategies which have been adopted by different commentators. Deutscher’s own solution consists in “[reading] Beauvoir’s contradictions to the letter”: instead of “attempting to resolve the contradictions”, she asks “what they enable in her work” (180). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See also Alison Stone (2017) and Kate Kirkpatrick (2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. As such, I do not consider *The Second Sex*’s existentialist framework to be incidental (see e.g., Chanter 1995, 13), an interpretive claim which has often been used to navigate or mitigate the contradictions in Beauvoir’s work (Deutscher 1997). By considering that Beauvoir only fortuitously adopts an existentialist framework because of the intellectual influences surrounding her, and defending that her ‘real’ commitment was in fact to feminism, commentators could justify the inconsistencies in some of her arguments. My position, however, is that *The Second Sex* constitutes an *existentialist* analysis of the subject position ‘woman’; thus, Beauvoir’s conception of the links between literature and existentialist philosophy is highly relevant. Furthermore, the phenomenological character of *The Second Sex* (Heinämaa 2003) is also important in relation to the role literature in Beauvoir’s book. It has been argued for instance that Beauvoir’s literary references are used for the purpose of eidetic variation, the step of the phenomenological reduction where the phenomenologist attempts to identify the essential features of a particular phenomenon. It might be considered then that the appeal to fiction serves to consider the wide ranges of experiences lived by different women (Oksala 2022: 7; Mann 2018: 56): in this way, Beauvoir would be able to determine what it means to be a ‘woman’ through identifying the key, universal features of experience shared by all women. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. It is striking that the discourses against abortion in the current US context often appeal to the very same disproven arguments that Beauvoir mentions here. See Solnit (2021). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The translation does not fully capture Beauvoir’s point: what she says in the original text is that God would not protest allowing fetus souls into heaven any more than he protested against the massacre of Native Americans committed in his own name. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. The translation to “child abusers” weakens Beauvoir’s original expression “bourreaux d’enfants,” meaning ‘child *executioners*.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Beauvoir emphasizes both the social shaming of undergoing abortions, and the precarious economic position unmarried pregnant women find themselves in. She writes, for instance, that “the fact that the operation they undergo is a clandestine and criminal one multiplies the dangers and makes it abject and anguishing. Pain, sickness, and death seem like chastisement: we know what distance separates suffering from torture, accident from punishment; with the risks she assumes, the woman feels guilty, and it is this interpretation of pain and blame that is particularly distressful.” (2011: 604). Further, she emphasizes the economic challenges which face illegitimate mothers: “there is little distress more pathetic than that of an isolated and penniless girl who sees herself ensnared in a “crime” to erase a “fault” that people around her consider unpardonable” (601). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. The French term “fille-mère,” used to describe unmarried mothers particularly illustrates the gendered asymmetry within the legal-moral apparatus Beauvoir denounces. It reveals, firstly, the vast discrepancy between what an unexpected pregnancy implies for women and for men: there is no equivalent masculine term to designate unmarried fathers. Secondly, what the title ‘fille-mère’ reveals is the oppressive intersection between misogynistic social constructions and the principles of the patriarchal legal system: “fille-mère” relegates unmarried mothers to the status of ‘filles,’‘girls.’ Fully-fledged and legitimate womanhood comes only when motherhood is ratified within legal heterosexual marriage. In short, neither unmarried mothers (‘fille-mères’) nor childless women be considered as fully legitimate women. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. My aim here is not to contest the validity of Beauvoir’s sources: undoubtably, abortions were a common practice at the time, though there does not exist reliable data to assess rigorously how widespread they were, since they were obviously not reported. My point is therefore not that what Beauvoir says about abortion is not *true*; there is no way we can know how many women in fact had abortions in 1940s France. What we can see, however, is that insisting in Beauvoir’s manner that abortion become a condition for meaningful motherhood was a remarkably provocative political move. For a more comprehensive account of the government’s criminalization of abortion, especially during the 1940s Vichy regime, and a detailed analysis of the abortion practices from 1850 to 1950, see Farbice Cahen’s work (2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. The original French is even clearer on this point: “d’assumer librement ses maternités” (Beauvoir 2011: 339). Rather than ‘control,’ per se, Beauvoir is in fact concerned with the possibility of *choosing* and owning motherhood for oneself. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Toril Moi (1986) notably criticized Beauvoir’s emphasis of ‘leakiness’ and ‘sliminess in her descriptions of women’s bodies. For Moi, this amounts to a misogynistic and phallocentric perspective on the female body, which problematically associates it with immanence, while the male body is framed as conquering and transcendent. Moi’s criticism of this imagery is compelling; nonetheless, my argument here interprets Beauvoir’s insistence on the unpleasant aspects of pregnancy as a provocative exaggeration. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. The Institut National de l’Archive (INA) houses footage from a 1976 television talk show, *Aujourd’hui Madame*, in which a short street interview clip is shown: passers-by are asked their opinion on women who choose not to have children. Overwhelmingly, the interviewees’ answers (particularly those of the men) state that women without children fail to fulfill their ‘natural’ role. The footage demonstrates with astonishing force that nearly thirty years after the publication of *The Second Sex,* the mainstream attitude in France had essentially not changed. Still, childless women were overall considered to be selfish, unnatural, or somehow not ‘real’ women. The footage is interesting in and of itself; but it also speaks to the remarkable innovativeness of Beauvoir’s text and its astoundingly provocative tone in the context of 1949.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GAExCYGyqdM> [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. The English translation “all psychoanlaysists agree that mothers who are obsessed about harming their children” somewhat modifies Beauvoir’s original statement “tous les psychanalistes admettent que les mères vivent dans l’obsession de faire du mal à leurs enfants” (2011: 362). With the addition of “who” in the translation, Beauvoir’s overstatement loses some of its force. Her original claim is that ‘*all’* psychoanalysts recognize that women live in the obsession of harming their children. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Beauvoir also explicitly opposes the notion of a “maternal instinct.” She considers that her account of motherhood and its extensive sources and literature prove that this term “does not in any case apply to the human species” (2011: 629). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)