

A black and white photograph of Simone de Beauvoir in conversation with another woman. Simone de Beauvoir is on the right, wearing a light-colored, patterned jacket and a necklace. The woman on the left is seen from the back, wearing a dark top. In the background, a man in a suit is partially visible.

NANCY BAUER

SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR,  
PHILOSOPHY, & FEMINISM

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# SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR, PHILOSOPHY, & FEMINISM

NANCY BAUER



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*To Anneliese Bauer Cooper*

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PHILOSOPHY, & FEMINISM

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## Introduction: Recounting Woman

What I call something, what I *count* as something, is a function of how I *recount* it, tell it.

—Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*

A man never begins by establishing himself as an individual of a certain sex: his being a man poses no problem.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*<sup>1</sup>

**T**hen what kind of problem does being a woman pose? The burden of this book is to show that in formulating this question and enacting answers to it, Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* dramatizes the extent to which being a woman poses a *philosophical* problem—which is to say, a problem for and of philosophy. To say that it is a problem *for* philosophy is to propose that insofar as philosophy fails to take account of the being of woman it cannot lay claim to the universality for which, by its own lights, it must strive; it lacks the standards, one might say, by which to interpret its own use of the word “man” in the absence of an account of woman. To say that it is a problem *of* philosophy is to propose that insofar as one fails to explore the bearing of philosophy on the being of woman, one will not be able to give an adequate account of what kind of a problem being a woman poses and, therefore, may close off certain possibilities for addressing this problem. A central achievement of *The Second Sex*, I want to show, is in the ways it forges connections between the idea of being a woman and the idea of philosophy, ways that bind the overcoming of the problem of being a woman with the overcoming of a certain conception of the philosophical. The ambition of this book is to specify these modes of affiliation.

While more and more careful readers of *The Second Sex* are coming to accept the idea that it can bear up under and indeed rewards serious philosophical scrutiny, there is little evidence that the average reader attributes the unmatched power it has had to change the terms in which people view women's place, or places, in the world as a fundamentally *philosophical* one. In the last sentence of the introduction Beauvoir claims that her goal is to “describe the world in which woman must live” (TSS xxxv; my emphasis); and, indeed, the book manifestly concerns itself in the main with facts of history, both ancient and contemporary, so that it can appear to constitute more of a sociology of sex difference than a philosophy of it. Moreover, to the extent that Beauvoir sets out to attribute all but the most brute biological distinctions between men and women to the vicissitudes of culture, *The Second Sex* might be seen as repudiating even the possibility of a genuine *philosophy* of sex difference. But this can only be the case if we imagine that we already know what culture is, as well as what it means to be a product of culture. That we are misguided in our self-satisfaction with regard to this knowing is, I aim to show, one of the great themes of *The Second Sex*. By recounting the history of what she calls “civilization,” Beauvoir reveals a certain ignorance of ours not only of it and its conditions but also, since these are the conditions under which humans have been sexed beings, of ourselves. In this respect *The Second Sex* can be seen to bear an affinity to Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, which also resorts to a “history” of human culture as a means of, among other things, preparing us for thinking about inequalities among human beings.<sup>2</sup> The recounting of each fact in *The Second Sex* is, I want to claim, an instance of thinking in service of this preparation.

In using the word “recounting” here I have in mind Stanley Cavell's observation, quoted in the epigraph to this introduction, that “what I call something, what I *count* as something, is a function of how I *recount* it, tell it.”<sup>3</sup> Here Cavell is of course counting, if you will, on the multivocality of the word “recount.” He's noticing that to tell a story about anything—about a table or a word or a feeling or sex difference—is implicitly to make a claim, or a set of claims, about what that thing *is*, about what, in other words, is to count as such a thing. Making these claims manifest, discerning from the story what

the teller counts as what, is work that recounting by its nature appeals to its audience to perform. Of course, neither the claims nor the interpretation are bound to be philosophical. That they are—or, in the case of interpretation, can be—with respect to *The Second Sex* has to do with the way Beauvoir inherits the tradition of modern philosophy in her recounting of woman.

I mean this to be a very specific claim, one that cannot be spelled out apart from a close look at what Beauvoir is doing in *The Second Sex*. But even before I undertake that work I can be explicit about what the claim is not meant to be saying. I am not proposing, in particular, that what makes *The Second Sex* (or any other piece of writing) fundamentally a work of philosophy is that it merely avails itself of previous philosophers' ideas, "using" or "applying" them. If so doing were in and of itself a mark of philosophical originality or significance, then there would be no question, or no important question, regarding the status of Beauvoir's achievement, given her repeated and explicit use throughout *The Second Sex* of key concepts from the writings of, for example, Hegel or, even more obviously, Jean-Paul Sartre, her lifelong companion. I do not wish to claim, to hone the point more finely, that because it can be argued that what's at the heart of Beauvoir's recounting of woman is indebted in certain critical respects to the thought of, for instance, Marx or Freud or Husserl or Heidegger or Merleau-Ponty or Descartes, it follows that her achievements are fundamentally or importantly philosophical ones. Rather, my claim is that discovering the philosophical import or lack thereof of a piece of writing itself requires an act of philosophical appropriation, one grounded in the reader's own investments and concerns. The aim of this book is to attempt such an appropriation of *The Second Sex*.

In the past several years there has been a heartening renaissance of philosophical interest in Beauvoir, a flowering that has produced extremely useful work tracing sometimes surprising lines of affinity between her writing and that of her philosophical forebears and contemporaries.<sup>4</sup> Understandably enough, given the decades-old treatment of Beauvoir as, philosophically speaking, nothing more than her partner's mouthpiece, it is the concern of most revisionist considerations of her writing to bring her out from under Sartre's shadow. Such

comparisons are not without their interest; indeed, I myself will propose several and dwell on them at some length. But I think that in Beauvoir's case they are of limited interest. The problem is that studies that ground themselves in comparison proceed as if the occasion of Beauvoir's writing about women were incidental to the working out of some long-standing set of philosophical preoccupations she inherits from some other thinker or set of thinkers.<sup>5</sup> The view I lay out in this book is that if there is something philosophically significant about *The Second Sex* it's not going to be the mere fact that Beauvoir uses or even contests other philosophers' work in it; it's going to be that this book, a book so influential that it is not an exaggeration to credit it with inciting a worldwide interest in rethinking the question of what counts as a woman—or, better, what a woman is to count as—is a book of philosophy. That it is not generally recognized as such is not, I think, because readers have failed to see that it is filled with philosophical moments, many of which can be shown to use or contest other philosophers' ideas. Rather, I claim that the reason the philosophical achievements of *The Second Sex* are under-recognized, to put it mildly, has to do with the development by Beauvoir of a distinct and important way of appropriating the philosophical tradition, a method of appropriation that by its very nature is recognizable, inheritable, only through its being philosophically reappropriated. I argue in what follows that Beauvoir was able to develop this model only in the context of thinking about women—and of course specifically about being a woman herself. I further argue that the productivity of this thinking, the massive real-life power of *The Second Sex* as a piece of writing, is itself a product of Beauvoir's bringing philosophy to bear on her investigation. The guiding task of this project is thus to explore how Beauvoir's interest in investigating the condition of women both depends on and enables her interest in having a philosophical say.

Still, in assessing *The Second Sex* as a work of philosophy one cannot ignore the fact of the book's evident political commitments. And insofar as a goal of the writing is to ameliorate the condition of a particular group of human beings, namely, of course, in this case, women, then one might want to see it as abrogating any serious philosophical pretensions from the start. As I observe in chapter 1, the

very phrase “feminist philosophy” can sound like a contradiction in terms. But I go on to argue in that chapter that the feminism of *The Second Sex* cannot be understood as its *starting point*; rather, the book’s feminist effects (where here I use “feminist” loosely to refer to whatever promotes the amelioration of the condition of women or sees itself to take an interest from the first in the interests of women) are the *product* of an inquiry that roots itself in philosophy. Consider as a start on some evidence the first few lines of the introduction to volume 1, lines that in chapter 2 I compare with the opening of Descartes’s *Meditations*:

I have hesitated for a long time to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, above all for women; and it is not new. The *querelle du féminisme* has caused enough ink to be spilled. At present it is almost over: let’s not talk about it any longer. Yet one does speak about it still. And it doesn’t seem that the voluminous foolishness spouted during the last century has shed much light on the problem. Besides, is there a problem? And what is it? Are there even women? Certainly, the theory of the eternal feminine still counts some adherents; they murmur, “Even in Russia, *they* [elles] still truly remain women”; but other well-informed people—and sometimes the same ones—sigh, “Woman is losing herself, woman is lost.” We don’t know any longer whether women still exist, if they will always exist, if it’s necessary or not to wish for their existence, what place they occupy in this world, what place they should occupy there. “Where are women?” asked an intermittent magazine recently. But first of all: what is a woman? (*LDS* 1:11, TM; see *TSS* xix)

Here, from the outset, Beauvoir claims that we don’t even know what women are, let alone whether they exist or whether or how their existence is problematic.<sup>6</sup> If this is the case, then Beauvoir’s inquiry cannot begin with properly feminist aspirations—that is, with a desire to advocate on behalf of women. Instead, her work originates in what is posed as a philosophical question: What is a woman? And it is at least conceivable that her response to this question will not count as feminist.

But why exactly do I take it that Beauvoir's question is to count as *philosophical*? For starters, it seems patent that the thoughts that lead up to it make it impossible to take it as a *straight* question, a question that somehow reveals in itself or its context the shape of the answer for which it calls, as do questions such as "What is a table saw?" (asked by a customer at a woodworking store) or "Where is Brunei?" (asked by a child of a parent as they watch the nightly news) or "What causes tides?" (asked by a vacationer of a friend during a stroll on the beach). Beauvoir's question arises in the context of her chronicling a certain perversion in conversations about women: people can't seem to stop engaging in the *querelle du féminisme*, even though it irritates them and even though it has produced nothing but foolishness.<sup>7</sup> The explanation for this unfortunate situation, Beauvoir suggests in the first paragraph of *The Second Sex*, has to do with confusion over what is meant by the word "woman" in these discussions, confusion so deep that one is tempted to question whether women really exist.

But this is a curious claim. For Beauvoir herself seems offhandedly to affirm the existence of women just a sentence or two before she explicitly questions it. "The subject is irritating, above all for *women*," she writes. Notice that Beauvoir says "women" flat out where she could have said "people who identify themselves as women" or "people we call 'women'" or even "females." That she doesn't employ a substitute must be seen as deliberate, given the concerns of these opening lines. I take her here to be drawing a distinction between our ordinary uses of the word "woman," a word we use every day as unproblematically as we commonly use any other word, such as "table" or "chair" or "man," and our use of the word in discussions *about* women, that is, about women as a type. When she says, "The subject is irritating, above all for women," no question is likely to arise about what the word "woman" means (although, of course, one might wonder why Beauvoir claims that the subject is more irritating for women than for men). The trouble comes when we find ourselves making claims into which we import ideas about the *essence* of woman.

One can see here echoes of philosophical concerns about what happens when our words pass from ordinary to metaphysical use.

Consider, for example, what Wittgenstein says at section 116 of *Philosophical Investigations*:

When philosophers use a word—"knowledge," "being," "object," "I," "proposition," "name"—and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?—

What *we* do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.

Wittgenstein here seems primarily to be worried about the tendency of people who explicitly think of themselves as philosophers to bring undue metaphysical pressure to bear on language. But Beauvoir seems to be suggesting that the trespassing also occurs among nonphilosophers in discussions concerning what it means to be a woman. There is a sense, in other words, in which our metaphysical pronouncements about women naturally arise from within ordinary contexts. We ordinarily are not tempted, in our discussions of chairs and tables, to worry about their essence. But this is because we are essentially comfortable with the role that tables and chairs play in our lives; we do not worry that sitting on a table or laying out a hand of solitaire on the seat of a chair constitutes a violation of our understanding of what a table or a chair *is*. But this is not the case when it comes to our discussions of women. In very ordinary situations we find ourselves suddenly waxing metaphysical, as when, for instance, we begin by discussing the question of the role of women in the military and end up claiming that "women are fundamentally no different from men." We seem to be confronted by a dilemma: if we find that what we naturally identify as women are treated in systematically troubling ways, then we will want to talk about what to do about this situation; yet these discussions will easily slide into metaphysical excursus that produces "voluminous foolishness."

By using the words "easily slide" here, I am sidestepping a problem that I bring into a greater degree of focus in chapters 1 and especially 2, namely, how to identify the particular features of the dissatisfaction that underlies the move from the ordinary to the metaphysical

in certain conversations about “woman.”<sup>8</sup> In these early chapters I investigate the idea that this dissatisfaction *is* particular—that is, that it has certain features that are different from the features of the sort of dissatisfaction that leads a professional philosopher to the point at which it seems that our ordinary objects are not “real” or are otherwise beyond our full grasp. It may also be different from the sort of dissatisfaction that underlies the push to the metaphysical in discussions that do not take place in “officially” philosophical contexts, such as everyday conversations about ethics or works of art. One might say that I am interested in an anatomy of the species of skepticism that arises in discussions about “women.” In chapter 2, I compare this skepticism with the philosophical skepticism so vividly developed in the founding document of modern philosophy, namely, of course, Descartes’s *Meditations*. I argue that Cartesian skepticism goes hand-in-hand with Descartes’s revolutionary relocation of the source of philosophical authority from institutions and texts to the individual human mind. And I suggest that Beauvoir capitalizes on her own sense of herself as a woman to effect a further transformation in what it means to be an individual human being, so that the skepticism of hers about the existence of “women” that goes hand-in-hand with this transformation can be seen as a revolutionary inheritance from and thus challenge to that of Descartes. This inheritance and challenge is emblemized for me in Beauvoir’s early posing of the question “What is a woman?” which I claim means to break into the tradition of philosophy at the moment, directly after his discovery of the cogito in the second meditation, that Descartes asks, “What is a man?”

One occasionally sees Descartes mentioned in revisionist discussions of Beauvoir. But ordinarily the mention occurs in a sort of historical *reductio* of influence that moves, for example, from Beauvoir to Sartre to his teacher Husserl to Descartes via Husserl’s *Cartesian Meditations*.<sup>9</sup> This is to be expected, given that most philosophers who find themselves taking an interest in Beauvoir are steeped in the so-called continental tradition of philosophy and are therefore extremely knowledgeable—certainly, far more than I—about the development of various trajectories of thought within the history of modern philosophy. (Indeed, a continental philosopher is just as likely to have read Beauvoir’s *Ethics of Ambiguity* as *The Second Sex* [more likely,

perhaps], whereas, having been trained in the Anglo-American “analytic” tradition, I can’t recall if I had heard of the *Ethics* before my burgeoning interest in *The Second Sex* led me to it.) It is no wonder that for such philosophers *the* task of criticism when it comes to *The Second Sex* is situating Beauvoir in relation to other philosophical figures—and, given the standing view of Beauvoir’s relationship with her lifelong companion, both philosophical and otherwise, particularly over and against Sartre. But what piqued my interest in Beauvoir, and what continues to pique it, is not where she fits in the progression of philosophy as a discipline but how the occasion of her writing about women, and specifically about herself as a woman, opened up new ways for her to appropriate the philosophical tradition. In Beauvoir’s writing, the emancipation of women, an emancipation that on her view can come to full flower only in the wake of a certain transformation in the human being, is linked with a certain transformation in the conventional understanding—both continental and analytic—about how to inherit the tradition of philosophy. On my reading of *The Second Sex*, this linking is most apparent in Beauvoir’s appropriations of Descartes and of Hegel, the latter taking place in the context of her appropriation of the work of Sartre; and it is in the spirit of illuminating this linking that my own attempts to situate Beauvoir with respect to these three other philosophers takes place.

I intend these transformations and linkages to be under scrutiny throughout this project. But the concept of appropriation, and of course particularly what I take to be Beauvoir’s concept, is explored most thoroughly in the case of her inheritance of certain stretches of Hegel’s thought, which is the subject of chapters 3 through 7. My basic claim is that Beauvoir’s thinking about sex difference is transformed by and in turn transforms the so-called master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, enabling Beauvoir to produce powerful pictures both of the consequences of our various investments in sex difference and gender identity and of the possibilities for genuinely productive philosophical criticism.<sup>10</sup> My strategy is to throw this achievement into relief by comparing Beauvoir’s appropriation of the master-slave dialectic in *The Second Sex* first with Sartre’s appropriation of it in *Being and Nothingness* and then with her own attempts to express her investment in it in her earlier philosophical works, includ-

ing *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In chapter 3, I offer a rendering of the dialectic with an eye toward providing a background against which to place Sartre's and Beauvoir's appropriations of it. In chapter 4, I argue that in *Being and Nothingness* we find an appropriation of the dialectic that is governed by the standard conception of what it is to take one's place in the tradition of philosophy. On this conception, the business of philosophical criticism is to build new systems on the wreckage of old ones, starting with a threshing of the old elements into foundational truths and fatal errors. I argue that Sartre's allegiance to this conception of philosophy forces him to overlook certain key elements in Hegel's dialectic, elements that, even by Sartre's own standards, he ought to have found himself interested in. And I set the stage for examining Beauvoir's own method of philosophical appropriation, developed, I claim, in *The Second Sex*, in which the main goal is not to "get it right" but, rather, to understand the attractions and powers of philosophical abstraction as they bear on one's everyday life.

In chapter 5, I look at two of Beauvoir's early pieces of philosophical writing, one, *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, rather obscure, and the other, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, relatively well known. Both books are generally dismissed as second-rate attempts to defend Sartre against those critics of *Being and Nothingness* who accused existentialism of being a form of nihilism. Revisionist readers of Beauvoir are wont to observe that her defense of Sartre often takes the form of rather stark disagreement with him. While I do not contest these readings, my central purpose in looking at both books is to track Beauvoir's pre-*Second Sex* efforts to articulate her own interest in Hegel's master-slave dialectic. I argue that although we can see Beauvoir struggling in these works to express her sense of the potential fruitfulness of the dialectic, not to say of Sartre's inheritance of it, she lacks the existential context at this stage in her history to appropriate it in the genuinely original and productive way that, I argue in chapters 6 and 7, one finds it taken up in *The Second Sex*. In these chapters, I attend very closely to this act of appropriation, showing exactly how Beauvoir's aspirations to write about being a woman are inextricably intertwined with her discovery of what I argue is both her own philosophical voice and a model for doing philosophical work that lies waiting to be appropriated by both feminists and philosophers.

That no attention has been paid to this model is in part, of course, a consequence of the fact that Beauvoir has been all but neglected as a philosophical figure. I can't imagine anyone doubting that part of the reason for this neglect is the simple fact of her having been a woman. (Can we name a woman philosopher whose work has been sufficiently acknowledged? Can we specify the significance of being a woman philosopher?—which is to ask, Do we know what it means to be a woman philosophizing? That we find resources in *The Second Sex* to begin thinking about these issues is, to my mind, only one of its great—neglected—achievements.) But my assessment of the importance of *The Second Sex* as a work of philosophy depends on the idea that the risk of (philosophical) neglect is internal to what Beauvoir is doing in this book. What I mean, exactly, by “internal” is under study in various ways throughout this project. Here, I merely desire to express my conviction that the philosophical neglect of this book is a phenomenon that anyone who wishes to take it as a serious work of philosophy is obliged to address.

The philosophical neglect of *The Second Sex* is related, I think, to another feature (or nonfeature, as the case may be) of the critical reception of Beauvoir by any number of feminists and other readers—namely its tone, which, despite universal acknowledgment of Beauvoir's leading role in provoking the world to confront the scandal of systematic sexism, is very often one of heavy condescension, even among her most ardent admirers. Given my sense of the reasons behind the neglect, I suggest that the condescension is not simply gratuitous either, that it, too, calls out for investigation. But while the meaning of the concept of “neglect” is obvious enough, that of “condescension” is not. So rather than simply defer an investigation of the concept, I want here to spend some time specifying what I mean in invoking it.<sup>11</sup> I begin simply by acknowledging the sheer difficulty of getting through *The Second Sex*. It is a long book—so long, in fact, that its American publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, insisted that the translator cut what turned out to be more than 10 percent of its original one-thousand-plus pages.<sup>12</sup> But lots of books are long. What makes *The Second Sex* hard has to do particularly with both what Beauvoir has to write and how she writes it. Elizabeth Hardwick, in an early—and thoroughly mixed—review, had this to say about the experience

of getting through what she called (in a virtuoso display of backhanded praise) “this madly sensible and brilliantly obscure tome on women”:

The more one sinks into this very long book, turning page after page, the more clearly it seems to lack a subject with reasonable limitations and concreteness, a subject on which offered illustrations may wear some air of finality and conviction. The theme of the work is that women are not simply “women,” but are, like men, in the fullest sense human beings. Yet one cannot easily write the history of people! This point may appear trivial; nevertheless, to take on this glorious and fantastic book is not like reading at all—from the first to the last sentence one has the sensation of playing some breathlessly exciting and finally exhausting game. You gasp and strain and remember; you point out and deny and agree, trying always to find some way of taking hold, of confining, defining, and understanding.<sup>13</sup>

Hardwick’s impression jibes with the fact that Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* extremely quickly, over a period of two-and-a-half years during which she also spent weeks and months on other work.<sup>14</sup> And the book feels rough and ready, as if it flew off the pen of an author bursting with words.

But the fact that not every *i* and *t* are dotted and crossed cannot account for the disquieting frequency of gestures of condescension toward this book and its author. The ubiquity of this feature of the secondary literature is under study in the third chapter of Toril Moi’s *Simone de Beauvoir*.<sup>15</sup> On Moi’s view, condescension to Beauvoir is a product of “patriarchal ideology” (92), which she sees as fundamentally hostile to the idea of the intellectual woman (and, a fortiori, the idea of a woman *philosopher*). With the aim not of doubting the quality of Beauvoir’s work but instead of “discredit[ing] Beauvoir as a speaker,” her critics “want to convey a picture of a childlike creature, unconscious of the effects of her own discourse” (52). Moi cites example after example to support the idea that Beauvoir has repeatedly been a victim of flat-out sexism.<sup>16</sup> But I wonder whether there isn’t

something more specific in Beauvoir's writing that arouses the temptations to patronization to which her critics succumb. The following five common gestures of condescension toward Beauvoir strike me as responses to a *particular* writer and her work:

1. a conception of Beauvoir as the mother of modern feminism, a figure who founded a movement, the inaugural text of which consists mostly of insights that have been surpassed by others' later acts of writing;
2. a view of *The Second Sex* as a book that is eye-opening but not radical (where often the complaint is that Beauvoir uses men as the standard against which women ought to be measured);
3. an identification of the philosophical dimension of *The Second Sex* as consisting in nothing other than warmed-over Sartrean existentialism;
4. a linking of what are taken to be the shortcomings of *The Second Sex* with biographical facts about Beauvoir, particularly her relationship with Sartre; and
5. an understanding of numerous features of Beauvoir's book, sometimes her shortcomings and quite often her achievements, as products of the writing of which she is *unconscious*.

Luce Irigaray is perhaps the most famous commentator to offer a gushing homage to Beauvoir and follow it up with the suggestion that *The Second Sex* is fundamentally inadequate (thereby exemplifying gestures one and two above, those most frequently encountered, often in the introductory moves in feminist work that ultimately does not concern itself in any sustained way with Beauvoir's writing). Here's how Irigaray's short essay "A Personal Note: Equal or Different?" begins:

What woman has not read *The Second Sex*? What woman hasn't found it inspiring? Hasn't as a result, perhaps, become a feminist? Simone de Beauvoir was indeed one of the first women in this century to remind us of the extent of women's exploitation, and to encourage every woman who had the good fortune to come

across her book to feel less isolated and more certain about not being oppressed or letting herself be taken in.<sup>17</sup>

But then a couple of pages later we find this:

To demand equality as women [as Irigaray apparently takes *The Second Sex* to aspire above all to do] is, it seems to me, a mistaken expression of a real objective. The demand to be equal presupposes a point of comparison. To whom or to what do women want to be equalized? To men? To a salary? To a public office? To what standard? Why not to themselves?

A rather more thorough analysis of the claims to equality shows that at the level of a superficial cultural critique, they are well founded, but that as a means of liberating women, they are utopian. (12)

And the essay ends with these lines:

To respect Simone de Beauvoir is to follow the theoretical and practical work for social justice that she carried out in her own way; it is to maintain the liberating horizons which she opened up for many women, and men . . . [ellipsis in original, though I am also deleting a sentence here]. It seems to me that her concern for and writings on this subject are a message not to be forgotten. (13-14)

Here we find a nice expression of what is quite a common take on Beauvoir, namely, that we all ought to be grateful to her given that “in her own way” she strove to achieve social justice and helped many of us become feminists, even though we can now see (thanks, I take it, to writers such as Irigaray) that she didn’t manage to express her real objectives properly and thus left us with a “message” that is in danger of being forgotten.

The third gesture of condescension, the assumption that the philosophical dimension of *The Second Sex* is derivable in some terribly uninteresting or self-deluded way from Sartre’s early philosophy, is in-

vited by Beauvoir's own repeated disavowals of her powers as a philosopher. In chapter 2, I suggest that what Beauvoir means to disavow is at least in part an identification with the conventional understanding of what it is to be a philosopher. But ordinarily her disavowals are taken either flatly or as an ironic sign of her failure to escape sexism in her own self-evaluation. The rejection of Beauvoir's philosophical originality is particularly stark in the following remarks by feminist philosopher Andrea Nye:

In Beauvoir's *The second sex* [sic], there is always palpably present in each chapter—whether on a woman's sex life, her professional life, her religiosity, her household duties—the framing metaphysics of the human condition as laid out by Sartre. In her introduction, Beauvoir explicitly positioned herself not as a woman or as a feminist, but as an existentialist.<sup>18</sup>

As my discussion of these matters in chapters 3 through 7 confirms, Beauvoir's debt to Sartre in *The Second Sex* is undeniable, meaning not only impossible to deny but also unimportant to deny, indeed important to acknowledge and to explore. But to claim as Nye does that Sartre's existentialism is the “framing metaphysics” of the book is to rule out from the start the idea that anything Beauvoir has to say about women—about which existentialism has to say nothing, or at least nothing that anyone seriously interested in women could confirm—will be of philosophical import.<sup>19</sup>

The suggestion that it was her emotional attachment to Sartre that compelled Beauvoir to crib from his philosophy is all over the critical literature and constitutes what I am identifying as the fourth form of condescension to her work. The temptation to this gesture is acknowledged by the contemporary French philosopher Michèle Le Doeuff, and her work on Beauvoir is as thought-provoking as it is in part because in her attempt to allow herself the fantasy of giving in to this temptation she actually frees herself of it.<sup>20</sup> Briefly, Le Doeuff's idea is that in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir transforms existentialism “from the status of a *system* (necessarily returning back on itself) to that of a *point of view* oriented to a theoretical intent by being trained on a de-

terminate and partial field of experience.”<sup>21</sup> This transformation figures most starkly, on Le Doeuff’s view, in the paradoxical metamorphosis of what she sees as the moralism of Sartre’s existentialism in *Being and Nothingness*—the insistence on the idea that people are “free” in some deep and important sense regardless of the circumstances of their lives, an insistence epitomized in the concept of bad faith—into a powerful picture of oppression in *The Second Sex*.

The scrupulousness with which Le Doeuff both acknowledges and attempts to undo her temptation to dismiss parts of *The Second Sex*—her determination to account in as many words as it takes for her sustained interest in the book, despite her simultaneous reservations about it—evinces a stake in her writing about Beauvoir that confirms my own interest in the book as an object of philosophical study. Again, it seems to me not accidental that the subject of more than half of Le Doeuff’s book *Hipparchia’s Choice*, subtitled “An Essay Concerning Women, Philosophy, Etc.”—the joke is of course that there’s a series here, as though we know anything serial or systematic about the relationship between “women” and “philosophy”—is Beauvoir. But Le Doeuff is still convinced that Beauvoir’s attachment to Sartre comes at the cost of availing herself of a *direct*, unmediated relationship to philosophy. Here, Le Doeuff judges Beauvoir to have taken her place in a long line of women whose aspirations to philosophy have been inseparable from their libidinous devotion to particular male philosophers:<sup>22</sup>

The ethics underlying Beauvoir’s thought are not hard to identify since she says herself that her point of view is that of existentialist morality. *The Second Sex* is also a labour of love, and as a wedding gift she brings a singular confirmation of the validity of Sartrism: your thought makes possible an understanding of women’s condition, your philosophy sets me on the road to my emancipation—your truth will make me free.

Here we find a stereotype in philosophical liaisons. Since the days of Antiquity, women have been admitted into the field of philosophy chiefly when they took on the role of the loving admirer: we can call this the “Heloise complex” [after the lover of Peter Abelard]. (*Hipparchia’s Choice* 59–60)

Here again a critic sees Beauvoir's commitments and perspectives as standing without need of interpretation, wishing to take at face value her (awfully few and far between) overt expressions of indebtedness to Sartre, largely on the basis of what is known about her extraphilosophical commitments. But suppose that Le Doeuff is exactly right about all this. Then the question of exactly what's wrong with these commitments remains. One way of putting this question is this: Why, in Beauvoir's hands, must we still see it as *Sartre's* truth?

In criticizing the idea that Beauvoir's achievements are somehow second-hand or otherwise not to be credited exclusively to her—the idea that she is *unconscious* of the force, infelicitous as well as happy, of her work—Toril Moi suggests that it is Beauvoir's self-presentation as an intellectual woman that galls her readers. But that it may be something more specific—and general—about Beauvoir's *writing* that gives the impression that she's not fully or at least adequately on top of what she's doing is evidenced by the fact that even Moi has been inclined on occasion, especially in her earlier work on Beauvoir, to indulge in gestures that resemble those she deplores. Consider the following two quotations from an early discussion by Moi of Beauvoir's use of the concept of alienation in *The Second Sex*:

Beauvoir's account of the girl's alienation transforms and extends her own highly reified initial concept of alienation: *rather unwittingly*, I think, Beauvoir here *manages* to challenge the limitations of her original point of departure ("Ambiguity and Alienation" 107–108; my emphasis).

While there are *strong biographical reasons* [not specified further] for her *misjudgment* on this point, rhetorically speaking, the main source of Beauvoir's idealization of the penis would seem to be metaphorical (ibid. 109; my emphasis).<sup>23</sup>

Here we see both a reluctance to assign Beauvoir full credit for a philosophical achievement as well as an appeal to what Moi calls "biographical reasons" in explanation of what is identified as a philosophical shortcoming. On my view, the temptation to both of these ges-

tures has to do with Beauvoir's self-presentation not as an intellectual woman in general but as a woman philosopher.<sup>24</sup>

I address the threat posed by Beauvoir's philosophizing as a woman (whatever that turns out to mean) more fully in chapter 2, where I also relate the critical condescension I have been chronicling to the charge that her writerly voice in *The Second Sex* is off-puttingly arrogant. But I wish to plant the idea, early on, that this condescension constitutes at bottom an avoidance of something in Beauvoir's work, a warding off, specifically, of the difficulty, both intellectual and, let us say, spiritual, of the project she is asking us to undertake in thinking seriously—thinking philosophically—about the question of what a woman is. To ask this question seriously, regardless of whether one is a man or a woman, turns out to be no less foundation-shaking than to ask the epistemological question that inaugurates Descartes's *Meditations*. It seems preposterous that Beauvoir sets out to rebuild our sense of who we are by putting herself at the foundation of an answer to her question: what will ground the investigation is her declaration that there can be no better answer to it than "I am." Surely this mundane response cannot be the basis of a genuine philosophical investigation, let alone a revolutionary work. But surely we will not want to decide *this* question until we have made sure that we have given this woman her say.

Is Feminist Philosophy a Contradiction in Terms?  
First Philosophy, *The Second Sex*, and the Third Wave

**A**lthough most of us have come to terms politically with the idea of feminist philosophy, there is ample evidence that for the most part neither feminists nor philosophers wish to bestow unqualified intellectual approval on it.<sup>1</sup> From the point of view of skeptical feminists, philosophy—with its emphasis on passionless thinking, reason, objectivity, universality, essences, and so forth—apoteosizes a way of encountering the world that is inherently and hopelessly tailored to serve the interests of men and thwart those of women. From the point of view of skeptical philosophers, on the other hand, philosophy’s unimpeachable commitment to open inquiry is incompatible with feminist “theory,” which, in their view, is by definition constrained by a political bottom line. From both sides, then, “feminist philosophy” can look like a contradiction in terms.

*I'm very grateful for the many important suggestions for improving this chapter that I have received from people who listened to an early version of it at Harvard University, Carleton College, Michigan State University, Wellesley College, Loyola University of Chicago, the University of New Hampshire, the University of California at Irvine, Vanderbilt University, and Tufts University, as well as at a meeting of the International Association of Women Philosophers.*

And yet philosophers of all stripes tend to turn a blind eye to this appearance of some sort of fundamental tension between feminism and philosophy. No doubt there are honorable reasons for doing so.<sup>2</sup> Surely, most decent male philosophers deplore at least the idea of sex inequality and, on the realization that women have been woefully underrepresented in the discipline, are prepared to put aside any qualms they may have about combining philosophy with an “ism.” Then again, to many feminists, modern philosophy, from its inception in the seventeenth century, has predicated itself on a disastrously fateful distinction between mind and body, one that groundlessly guarantees the impertinence of fleshly immanence—and thus of sexual difference—to the great basic questions. The project of at least exploring the possible bearing of the fact of human embodiment on these questions hardly seems to require justification.<sup>3</sup> And this project, with its potential to revolutionize philosophy (once again), has dovetailed nicely with a growing sense on both sides of the analytic-continental divide that philosophy in its modern incarnation may have run its course.<sup>4</sup>

Still, in and of themselves the ubiquity of sexism and the downplaying of the body in the history of modernist thinking do not dissipate the tension inherent in the idea of a feminist philosophy. Surely, philosophers might remedy these ills without adopting a specifically feminist agenda. One needn't be a feminist to admit that women can do philosophy and that their exclusion from the tradition is, at the very least, regrettable; and any number of empiricists and physicalists have argued strenuously that Descartes and his ilk have gotten the relationship between mind and body wrong. Furthermore, the sorry history of women and philosophy does not obviously call for a redoubled effort on the part of feminists to have a philosophical say. One could argue—and many *have* argued—that theorizing, far from improving women's lives, has actually hampered the women's movement, both by drawing talented women away from a focus on feminist political action and by strengthening the politically enervating idea that to be a feminist requires the adoption of a self-destructively radical ideology. In another context, I would contest both of these arguments. Here, my aim is to draw attention to the curious lack of serious work on the question of how philosophy and feminism are sup-

posed to go together. Just why confronting this tension head-on is evidently a singularly unappealing task is a question the addressing of which would take me too far astray, although I will at least note that the aversion must have something to do with, on the one hand, non-feminist philosophers' fear of being branded misogynistic and, on the other, feminist philosophers' refusal to waste time justifying their undertaking to unsympathetic men.

I have scant tolerance for philosophers, male or female, sympathetic or hostile, who condescend to the idea of feminist philosophy. In my experience, they have rarely read more than one or two (ordinarily infamous) pieces of feminist writing—and that much just to congratulate themselves on their own conventionality. Feminist philosophers ought not waste time addressing the skepticism of their condescending colleagues. But there is a difference between meekly or neurotically organizing one's work around a fantasy of converting naysayers and engaging in thinking that genuinely needs to be done for its own sake. My view is that it is a grave mistake for feminists to ignore the appearance of some sort of fundamental tension between feminism and philosophy, and the purpose of this chapter is to show why. Briefly, my claim is that once we give the sense of contradiction its due, we see that genuinely feminist philosophical work—or, if you like, genuinely philosophical feminism—not only has the potential to revolutionize philosophy but actually demands a reappraisal, from the ground up, of what it is to be a human—a thinking and sexed—being.

This claim at present has the philosophically disappointing features of being overdramatic and underspecified. But before I try to provide reasons for you to believe it might be true, let me specify briefly here at the outset what I don't want the claim to imply. I don't want it to imply that philosophical work by feminists that sidesteps the apparent contradiction between feminism and philosophy—in other words, the *bulk* of feminist philosophical work—is ultimately valueless. To the contrary, I'm claiming that the value or truth of feminist philosophy is often distorted or otherwise obscured by the specter of the apparent contradiction. The second thing I don't want my claim to imply—my claim, again, that any marriage, if you will, between feminism and philosophy must be a revolutionary marriage—is

that there's only one way to get hitched. Of course, I will argue both in this chapter and in the remainder of this book that Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* exemplifies the powerful results of allowing the apparent contradiction its due. But if I thought that Beauvoir had exhausted the possibilities for feminist philosophy, or that the self-transformation that I think feminism and philosophy require of one another could be achieved once and for all, then what I have to say in this chapter and indeed in this book as a whole would be of scant philosophical interest. I'm proposing here not only a very general *way* of doing something that I'm asking you to recognize as productively feminist *and* productively philosophical but also something like a set of terms for evaluating the effectiveness—if not the value or truth—of feminist philosophical work.

My faith in *The Second Sex* as a productively feminist philosophical piece of writing may well strike you as anachronistic. Surely, the objection goes, we long ago learned what we could from Simone de Beauvoir and have moved well beyond the confines of her parochial understanding of women's lives. We all know by now that Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* elides the concept "woman" with a very specific picture of what it means to be a white, bourgeois female in contemporary Western culture. This charge is ordinarily linked to the observation—sometimes critical, sometimes friendly—that *The Second Sex* is riddled with contradictions, contradictions of which, it is repeatedly underscored, Beauvoir herself appears to have been profoundly unaware.<sup>5</sup> The implication, often, is that at best what *The Second Sex* offers us is an opportunity to thresh the dross of ethnocentrism, class bias, and racism—not to mention "masculinism"—from the usable kernels of Beauvoir's analysis of women's "situation."

A particularly negative version of this view of Beauvoir is memorably expressed in Elizabeth Spelman's merciless attack on *The Second Sex* in her book *Inessential Woman*. Beauvoir, Spelman claims, runs roughshod over "the populations she contrasts to 'women'" and

doesn't reflect on what her own theoretical perspective strongly suggests and what her own language mirrors: namely, that different females are constructed into different kinds of "women"; that

under some conditions certain females count as “women,” others don’t. (68)

If there is any merit in this charge—and, given the range of distinguished readers of Beauvoir who at least sympathize with Spelman’s sense that Beauvoir’s text teeters precipitously on an unstable foundation of contradictions, there must be—then it is no wonder that you will not find *The Second Sex* front and center on the desks of most third-wave feminist philosophers. We third-wavers are in the challenging (in a stingy mood, you might even say self-contradictory) position of wishing to do philosophy—that is, at some level or other to make generalizations about the way things are with women—but we wish to do it precisely without making generalizations about The Way Things Are With Women. That is to say, we wish to make *some* generalizations, only not the kind that philosophers have traditionally made.

It seems to me that the only way for this sort of position to make sense is for us to realize that what it calls for is not merely new philosophical methods and strategies but in fact a serious rethinking of what philosophy is—of what counts as generalization or universalization and of what features of generalization and universalization do the work that philosophical work has traditionally done, whatever that work on inspection turns out to be. What I want to claim here is that, ironically enough, perhaps the central achievement of *The Second Sex*—an achievement, by the way, of which I think Beauvoir was very much aware—is precisely this rethinking of what philosophy is; thus there’s no better way that I know of for us third-wave feminist philosophers to figure out how to take particular individual and community characteristics seriously in our work than to understand what Beauvoir is doing in *The Second Sex*.

In holding this view I am not denying or overlooking the moments in the book that other philosophers have conceptualized primarily in terms of the notion of “contradiction.” Rather, I wish to account for these moments by rethinking what exactly it is that *The Second Sex* achieves at the level (in my view, its primary level) of advancing our understanding of what philosophy can and ought to as-

pire to be. In the chapters that follow I work out in detail the claim that Beauvoir's landmark book on women constitutes nothing less than a challenge to philosophy to transform itself, internally and from the ground up. I also trace the astonishing power that *The Second Sex* has had as a feminist and humanist document precisely to Beauvoir's calling for and forging of this new conception of philosophy. Here, my goal is simply to motivate the idea that we third-wave feminists have set a task for ourselves that requires our forging a new conception of philosophy and to indicate why Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* is a promising place to begin our search.

I'm going to proceed by sketching and evaluating four well-known types of attempts to bring feminism and philosophy together. It's going to turn out that all of these attempts fail with respect to the task of accounting for the apparent contradiction between feminism and philosophy: they are sometimes feminist and sometimes philosophical but never both simultaneously. This failure casts a pall over the very idea of feminist philosophy and tends to obscure the virtues of the work it marks; important feminist insights are overshadowed by the specter of the apparent contradiction. It is therefore important to understand what is causing the failure to resolve the contradiction in each case. I will suggest that the reason that feminism and philosophy tend never quite to coincide in these types of attempts is *not* because the very concept of "feminist philosophy" is in fact hopelessly oxymoronic. Rather, the problem is that most feminists are working with and within certain standard conceptions of philosophy that simply lack the resources to yield a decent account of the basic meaning and significance of sexuality and sex difference, as well as of the ramifications of these basic dimensions of human life. If feminists are to do what is genuinely recognizable as philosophy, it must be because we are convinced that theorizing at a relatively high level of abstraction will improve the lot of women (and, many of us would say, of men). The task is to figure out a way to work at this level of abstraction without either forgetting our social and political goals or attempting to fashion our polemical manifestos out of philosophical whole cloth.<sup>6</sup>

When I use the word "philosophy" I mean to be speaking (more or less following Wittgenstein, I imagine) about an activity marked by a certain subliming of the ordinary—by a certain transformation of

everyday concerns into metaphysical ones.<sup>7</sup> While this activity has its rewards, it also has its pitfalls, for when we do philosophy we often find that we have become untethered from our moorings, from the everyday concerns that propelled us to philosophize in the first place, and that we are lost. If we are gentleman philosophers, if for all intents and purposes we have all the time in the world for contemplation, this untethering is unfortunate. But when we are doing feminist philosophy—when there is an urgency to the everyday questions we are asking—the untethering is nothing short of disastrous. The challenge for those of us who wish to do feminist philosophy, then, is to see whether we can come up with a new way of doing philosophy, one that is rigorous and generalized enough really to count as philosophy but that at the same time is tethered in the right way to the sorts of everyday, real-life problems of sexism that are the *raison d'être* of feminism.

Each example of feminist philosophy I'm going to discuss exemplifies one of four broad ways of conceiving how feminist concerns and philosophical methods and ideas are supposed to fit together:

1. Feminism can use preexisting philosophical tools to *justify* certain feminist political positions.
2. Feminism can make philosophy more rigorous by exposing sexist blind spots in its history and in contemporary philosophical practice.
3. Feminism can provide a unique (woman-oriented or pro-woman) stance from which to address traditional or at least relatively traditional philosophical questions. This approach is ordinarily called “feminist standpoint” philosophy.
4. Feminism can provide us with a new metaphysical conception of the person, one whose mission is to yield an account of the distinctions or apparent distinctions between human males and females and whose discoveries will ramify throughout philosophy, from epistemology to ethics, philosophy of mind to—even, some claim—logic.

In real life, these four categories sometimes overlap, of course. But for purposes of clarity, I'm going to treat them separately here. I will then

begin to indicate, in anticipation of the detailed work I do in the rest of this book, why and how Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical strategy represents a powerful alternative to the four I survey here.

#### STRATEGY 1: APPLIED FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

Not surprisingly, many feminists have engaged in philosophical argument to justify certain political positions. I'm thinking here mainly of a certain style of work on social issues primarily affecting women, such as birth control, abortion, the family, sexual discrimination and harassment, and rape.<sup>8</sup> In this sort of work, philosophy is to serve as the handmaiden of feminism: one raids one's philosophical toolbox to work up arguments to fortify feminist stances. I don't mean to be unfair here; I am claiming neither that all work in "feminist ethics" conceives of philosophy this way, nor that there is anything inherently wrong with using philosophy to fortify feminist stances. Again, my goal is to show why this particular strategy fails to dispel the air of contradiction around the idea of feminist philosophy. The problem with what I'll call the applied-ethics approach to feminist philosophy, at least from the perspective of what is motivating my inquiry, is that there is no inherent relationship between one's commitment to philosophy and one's commitment to feminism. There is no guarantee either that traditional philosophical analysis will produce results that coincide with one's experience of sexism or that a commitment to seeing this experience as specifically an experience of something called sexism is compatible with the rigorous application of traditional philosophical methods of analysis. There's no guaranteeing, in other words, that philosophy will give you the "right" feminist answer or that the right feminist answer will be recognizably philosophical. And when philosophy does yield the right feminist answer, it's going to be a coincidence.

Furthermore, even when we happen upon such a coincidence it's not at all clear that the result will actually matter in the real world. This is a point that Richard Rorty made in a 1990 Tanner lecture

called “Feminism and Pragmatism.” Like feminist and other philosophers who do applied ethics, Rorty conceives of philosophy as consisting in a set of conceptual tools. But he thinks that these tools are essentially useless for feminists, who need to remember, he says, that they are not just tinkering with the current social order but are engaged in a utopian movement for social and political change. From the point of view of feminism, Rorty argues, the only thing that matters is how and how much things change. It doesn’t matter how we get there. In particular, it doesn’t matter whether we do philosophy or not. Indeed, Rorty argues quite forcefully that the best way to get things to change is not to waste time trying to provide philosophical arguments that change is necessary. This is because what’s transfixing sexist people is not that they are lacking arguments, per se, for feminist views but that their own sexist views of the world are deeply entrenched. Rorty’s position is that this entrenchment is in large part the product of the way we currently speak about the world, including the way we currently construct philosophical arguments. So what’s needed to overturn sexism is the creation of conditions under which what Rorty calls a “new idiom” is likely to emerge. This new idiom, this new way of speaking, is going to be the product not of group efforts but, rather, of inspired individuals, whom Rorty calls “prophets.” The prophet on Rorty’s definition “get[s] people to feel indifference or satisfaction where they once recoiled, and revulsion and rage where they once felt indifference or resignation”; s/he “change[s] instinctive emotional reactions” by engendering “new language which will facilitate new reactions” (“Feminism and Pragmatism” 232).<sup>9</sup>

Rorty is thinking here of people such as the feminist legal scholar and activist Catharine MacKinnon, whose development of the notion of “sexual harassment,” for example, has indeed led to dramatic changes in the terms in which woman have been able to think and speak about certain noxious behaviors on the part of their employers and teachers.<sup>10</sup> MacKinnon is also notorious for her provocative way of putting things, as when she unabashedly declares in her most systematic work of feminist theory that “[f]or many women, [sexual intercourse] is a rape” (*Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* III). On Rorty’s view, MacKinnon in such instances evinces a prophetlike willingness to risk sounding crazy to the mainstream in the service of try-

ing to provide feminists with a genuinely powerful way of changing things.

If you agree that philosophy is just a set of tools used to construct arguments, then it's going to be hard to counter Rorty's pessimism about philosophy's usefulness for feminism. Surely Rorty is right to imagine that a powerful voice speaking in a powerful new idiom is more likely to bring about feminist change in the world than a bunch of dry philosophical arguments. If you imagine, as Rorty does, that philosophy is fundamentally a set of conceptual tools, then I challenge you to say how or why Rorty is wrong to insist that the only task for philosophy—a task he apparently takes himself to be performing—is “to clear the road for prophets and poets, to make intellectual life a bit simpler and safer for those who have visions of new communities” (240) and “to drag outdated philosophy out of the way of those who are displaying unusual courage and imagination” (256, n. 26). Can it be denied that, from the point of view of results, flashy rhetoric will practically always triumph over pedantic argumentation? Hasn't philosophy been on the defensive about this ever since Socrates? (Then again, hasn't the defense, ever since Socrates, tended to consist in reconceiving of philosophy precisely as something other than a set of conceptual tools?<sup>11</sup>)

Although his unflinching admiration for the goals of feminism as articulated by some of its most radical academic proponents—an admiration vehemently expressed in a Tanner Lecture, no less—is, to say the least, impressive, Rorty's paternalistically advising feminists to stay away from philosophy, as though knowingly guarding his little sisters from the advances of his best friend—from another himself, to borrow Aristotle's term—strikes me as suspicious. The suspicion is heightened by the fact that Rorty's argument is couched in what Nancy Fraser has nicely called a “a marriage proposal”—specifically, an extended plea for feminists to abandon traditional “universalistic” philosophy in favor of accepting the services of those he calls “we pragmatists,” men who he suggests are happy to stay at home and do the philosophical housework while the visionary feminist women they wish to support practice crying out in the wilderness (Fraser 259–260).

But why think of philosophy as a set of conceptual tools, as Rorty

and certain applied-ethics feminist philosophers do? Why can't philosophy be, for example, a *form* of what Rorty calls prophecy? This is a way of asking why Rorty can't see Catharine MacKinnon, his paradigmatic feminist prophet, as tapping into power that is recognizably philosophical precisely at certain high rhetorical moments in her work. For example, in the middle of his essay Rorty scolds MacKinnon for defining feminism as the belief "that women are human beings in truth but not in social reality."<sup>12</sup> The problem here, on Rorty's view, is that MacKinnon is appealing to some metaphysical notion of "truth." This is problematic for Rorty for at least two reasons. First, MacKinnon seems to lower herself, as it were, to the level of metaphysical debate, a level on which, Rorty famously contends, there is a lot of blather about the way things are "in truth," which obscures the fact that the way things are is merely a matter of the way we choose to describe them. Second, for MacKinnon to indulge in the language of metaphysics obscures, on Rorty's view, the rhetorical radicality of her point, which would be better expressed, presumably, by the stark declaration that "women are not human beings."

What Rorty fails to see is that for MacKinnon, a woman, to declare that she both is and is not a human being seems patently of philosophical interest. Her declaration raises questions about what it means to claim that one is not treated as a human being, about what it is to identify oneself as a human being while the culture denies you this status, about what it is to use speech in order to observe that you aren't acknowledged as a speaking being. It is precisely these sorts of questions—questions, I'm claiming, that philosophy ought to recognize as falling within its purview—that a viable feminist philosophy must provide the space to pose. But in order to see what I'm talking about, you have to be open to the possibility of a less impoverished conception of philosophy than Rorty has. To the extent that I share Rorty's enthusiasm for MacKinnon, it is precisely because her work provides glimpses of what a richer conception of philosophy might look like. And yet these moments are embedded in writing that sees itself as radically refusing philosophy. An example of this refusal is to be found in MacKinnon's insistence on the foundational truth of some of her most controversial ideas. "Objectivity," she flatly declares, for example, "is the epistemological stance of which objectification [of

women] is the social process” (*Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* 114). Such sentences implicitly convey a refusal of philosophy, which makes MacKinnon’s writing in general a poor candidate for resolving our apparent contradiction.

## STRATEGY 2: ROOTING OUT PHILOSOPHICAL SEXISM

In her blunt refusal even to consider the viability for women of any philosophical notion of objectivity, MacKinnon exposes herself to the wrath of Martha Nussbaum, who in an infamous 1994 essay in *The New York Review of Books* limns what for us will be a second strategy, one closely related to the first, for doing feminist philosophy. The purpose of Nussbaum’s essay is to launch a polemic against feminists who question the usefulness of traditional philosophy for feminism and to claim, moreover, that feminists must use traditional philosophical methods to fight sexism. According to Nussbaum the entrenchment of sexism in our culture is ensured by what she calls “convention” and “habit,” and its extirpation requires fighting these things with the weapon that’s most effective against them, namely, with what she calls reason. “The appeal to reason and objectivity,” she says, “amounts to a request that the observer refuse to be intimidated by habit, and look for cogent arguments based on evidence that has been carefully sifted for bias.”<sup>13</sup> If habit is in part responsible for sexism, and if reason is our best weapon against habit, then it follows that philosophy as we know it is not only useful for feminism but absolutely essential to it. In her essay, which in large part takes the form of a polemic against feminists who question the usefulness of traditional philosophy for feminism, Nussbaum goes so far as to claim that the rejection by feminists of traditional philosophical methods “is a perilous theoretical position for feminists, and leaves them without the resources to make a convincing radical critique of unjust societies” (62).

These resources, she claims, are to be found in doing philosophy

exactly the way it has always been done, only better. As she puts it near the conclusion of her essay,

Doing feminist philosophy is not really something different from doing philosophy. . . . To do feminist philosophy is simply to get on with the tough work of theorizing in a rigorous and thoroughgoing way, but without the blind spots, the ignorance of fact, and the moral obtuseness that have characterized much philosophical thought about women and sex and the family and ethics in the male-dominated academy. (62)<sup>14</sup>

I take it that no one would claim that the purging from philosophy of blind spots, ignorance of fact, and moral obtuseness would be a bad thing. But in defining feminist philosophy as that which is supposed to do the purging, Nussbaum begs at least three questions. First, she doesn't say what it is about feminism that should or could give us cause to imagine its practitioners to be less prone to blind spots, ignorance of fact, and moral obtuseness than anyone else. In fact in the early pages of her essay, she herself excoriates exactly these traits in those philosophically trained feminists whose work she deplores, namely, those feminists who question the value-neutrality of philosophy's commitment to things such as reason and objectivity. But of course these feminist philosophers come in for Nussbaum's contempt precisely in attempting to provide a corrective to the blind spots, ignorance of fact, and moral obtuseness one finds running through traditional philosophical work. They just see these blind spots, etc., in a different, more fundamental, place from the place in which Nussbaum sees them. Nussbaum herself seems blinded to Kant's insight that philosophy can criticize itself, and at the deepest levels, and still be deeply philosophical. And she also seems blind to the taking up of this idea by Hegel and then by Marx, both of whom saw that certain people in certain positions—masters, for example, or capitalists—might be *systematically* blinded to the truth, so that their scanning their worldviews for mistakes would never suffice to reveal the basic injustice of their power.<sup>15</sup>

This leads to the second question that Nussbaum begs, namely,

the question of just how deep male bias in philosophy goes. It's apparently basic to her conception of philosophy that the sexism in it is merely superficial, merely the product of blind spots and so forth that we, or at least feminists, are now in a position to correct. You might say that Nussbaum's view assumes that we need not bring reason to bear on the possibility of blind spots with regard to what we call reason. But this is exactly the picture of philosophy that many feminists, wishing at least to explore the possibility that sexism is somehow fundamentally a part of philosophical practice as we know it, contest. If we stipulate that feminist philosophy is to be essentially no different from philosophy per se, then we seem to leave no room for this sort of exploration.

In begging the question of the depth of sexism in philosophy, Nussbaum also can be seen as begging a closely related third question, namely that of how we are to distinguish hopelessly problematic blind spots, ignorance of fact, and moral obtuseness from more remediable failings. To clarify what I'm getting at here, I'm going to consider an example from Hegel, not because I wish to single him out as more or less sexist than any other philosopher but because I think this example draws attention to the potential interest for feminists in making distinctions between deep and superficial instances of sexism. Let me turn, then, to some unfortunate lines of Hegel's, lines found in the addition to paragraph 166 of *The Philosophy of Right*:

Women are capable of education, but they are not made for activities which demand a universal faculty such as the more advanced sciences, philosophy, and certain forms of artistic production. Women may have happy ideas, taste, and elegance, but they cannot attain to the ideal.

The difference between men and women is like that between animals and plants. Men correspond to animals, while women correspond to plants because their development is more placid and the principle that underlies it is the rather vague unity of feeling. When women hold the helm of government, the state is at once in jeopardy, because women regulate their actions not by the demands of universality but by arbitrary inclinations and opinions. Women are educated—who knows how?—as it were by

breathing in ideas, by living rather than by acquiring knowledge. The status of manhood, on the other hand, is attained only by the stress of thought and much technical exertion.<sup>16</sup>

I trust I am not alone in having felt obliged on more than one occasion to provide a serious response to a disillusioned student who demands to know why or how we should read the writing of someone capable of penning such words as these. One response is that we can read this writing to see if *it* gives us the means to understand the cause and significance of its own offensive moments. That is, we can try to see if the author's philosophy itself provides a standard against which to judge his or her own shortcomings. Now, I predict that it is in fact possible to articulate such a standard in the case of Hegel, and specifically in the picture we get in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* of the human subject as an entity constantly forced to recognize unbearable existential contradictions between its general picture of the world and its particular beliefs. In Hegel's case, to give a sketch of my grounds for making this prediction, there is a contradiction between his general account of what a human being can aspire to be, an account that in no way, at least in principle, excludes women, and his specific judgment in this passage that women are systematically incapable of genuinely thinking. There is a contradiction, to put the matter another way, between Hegel's general picture of the human as self-contradictory and his specific exclusion of women from the possibility of genuinely thinking—from, as it were, having opportunities to contradict themselves. And since Hegel's overall project is to make claims about the structure and evolution of human rationality—what thinking is, what its standards are, what it can aspire to be—then to assess Hegel by his own lights is to ask whether these claims stand in need of being surpassed, or “sublated,” to use Hegel's word. To the extent that Hegel's understanding of rationality shares features with other influential conceptions of rationality it turns out that to evaluate it, even by his lights, is to ask whether the philosophical concept of “rationality” is inherently problematic. That is, it requires a willingness to bring the nature of the standards of philosophy into question. Now, it's of course true that Nussbaum, who thinks that feminist philosophy ought to be the same as regular philosophy, only better, would

endorse the general idea of purging philosophy of Hegel's sexism. But I'm arguing that it's hard to see how she could *justify* any specific project of the sort I've sketched, given that she bluntly refuses up front to bring basic philosophical standards into question.

### STRATEGY 3: FEMINIST STANDPOINT PHILOSOPHY

I have suggested that Nussbaum might herself be blinded to the Hegelian insight that some people, by virtue of their social position, might be systematically blinded to the truth. This insight, especially in its Marxist form, is behind the idea that feminist philosophers ought to be working from something called a "feminist standpoint." Feminist standpoint philosophy proceeds from the twin assumptions that perfect objectivity is impossible and that we feminist philosophers therefore must strive consciously to develop and work from a coherent conception of what is to count as a specifically feminist subjectivity—a stance that will involve more or less radical intellectual repositionings. This stance, it is claimed, will, paradoxically, be more objective, in the sense of providing a better vista on the true state of affairs, than any male or masculinist stance. Of course, unsympathetic male philosophers may be tempted to dismiss the open partiality of a feminist standpoint as blatantly antiphilosophical. But it's at least plausible that declaring up front where you're coming from and who you're fighting against will reduce the incidence of bias in your work—instances such as the passage from Hegel I have just quoted—and will thus enhance its scrupulousness.

Some feminist standpoint philosophers, however, claim not only that their work is more scrupulous than that of traditional philosophers, but even that it is better positioned for providing a *true* description of the way things stand. This claim derives from Marx's distinction (itself, interestingly enough, derived from a distinction of Hegel's) between the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, whose self-interest blinds them to the truth, and the standpoint of the proletariat, who are structurally in a better position to see things as they

really are. One of the earliest advocates of feminist standpoint philosophy was the philosopher Nancy Hartsock, who in an influential early article (written in the 1970s) suggests that

like the lives of proletarians according to Marxian theory, women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallographic institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy. (Hartsock 284)

Whether or not one finds Marx's claims about the proletariat convincing, and whether or not one buys the idea that the only alternative to disavowing one's partiality is to proceed from it, Hartsock's use of Marx's model to justify privileging a feminist philosophical standpoint raises certain very difficult questions. What, for example, is to count as a "feminist" standpoint? Who decides? How can we tell the difference between an appropriately partial standpoint and one that is inappropriately so? When do we know that the feminist standpoint is no longer necessary, which is to ask, are there special circumstances under which such a standpoint is necessary and others under which it is not? Is feminist philosophy, taking the guise of feminist standpoint philosophy, just a stopgap measure? Even if we could answer these questions, one might be dubious about Hartsock's claim that "women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy." Do women's lives have enough in common with one another to allow us to make claims about a privileged vantage point they make available? Is this vantage point more privileged than the vantage point of certain men oppressed by the culture, for example, men of color or gay men? Why privilege something called the "feminist" standpoint, if indeed it makes sense to talk about such a standpoint, more than that of any other movement of oppressed peoples?

The skepticism about the possibility of a "feminist" standpoint that these sorts of questions raise has been voiced, of course, by those philosophers, male and female, conservative and feminist, who find the idea of a specifically feminist philosophy incoherent or otherwise deeply objectionable. But objections along these lines have also been lodged by certain critics internal to feminist theory who believe that it

is dominated by privileged white academics insidiously claiming to speak for women of all colors and classes.<sup>17</sup> Both sets of skeptics, however different their motivations, call into question the grounding intuition of feminist standpoint philosophy, namely, the sense that there's a *philosophically* fundamental and important distinction between (all) women and (all) men. What's objectionable, though, is not the idea that women's experiences might differ from those of men, or even the claim that they might differ in systematic and specifiable ways. The objection, rather, is to the idea that these differences are philosophically pertinent. Any differences between the sexes, according to both types of feminist standpoint skeptics, are to be explored (or dismissed) as artifacts of culture, phenomena to be studied by activists or politicians or anthropologists or sociologists or literary critics or psychologists. The objection, then, is not necessarily to feminism, per se, but to the idea of a specifically "feminist" *philosophy*. And specifically, the problem is that any such philosophy worth the name—that is, philosophy that is not just social science in disguise—is bound to endorse some sort of *metaphysical* claim about essential differences between the sexes. That is, it is bound to be—to use the term common in feminist circles—*essentialist*.<sup>18</sup> And if you hold an essentialist view of sex difference, then you open yourself to just the sort of hopelessly vexing questions that, I have been claiming, antistandpoint critics often launch, and from both sides, at feminist philosophy.

But what's odd about the essentialism of feminist standpoint philosophy is that most of its proponents are themselves uncomfortable with the idea that women are in some essential, metaphysical sense different from men. They themselves would prefer to endorse the more modest claim, the claim that launched the second wave of feminism thirty or forty years ago, that as far back as we can see human culture has been marked by widespread, systematic oppression of women. In an attempt to disavow what's problematic about essentialism, many feminist philosophers attempt to construe their work not as alternative to but, rather, as *corrective* of that of the philosophical tradition. Invoking such "difference feminists" as Carol Gilligan,<sup>19</sup> they argue that the philosophical tradition is marked by certain recurrent biases they identify loosely as "masculinist," biases that need to be corrected, in the name of philosophy's interest in truth and

objectivity, by the consideration of aspects of experience that they identify—again, loosely—as “feminist.”<sup>20</sup> This more modest claim is not that all men exhibit these biases or that all women, or even all feminists, share the experiences on the basis of which correctives to these biases are offered. The claim is that certain experiences *tend* to be part of men’s lives more often than women’s, or vice versa. And its proponents safeguard against the threat of overgeneralization carried by their uses of sex distinctions by cleaving to a philosophical intuition central to feminist standpoint philosophy, which is that attaining truth and objectivity requires that the philosopher acknowledge an inherent dimension of *subjectivity* in his or her own words. He or she must not assume that his or her own experience as an actor or a knower or a thinker, the experience that informs his or her philosophical practice, is universal. But the problem here is that there is never an account given of why the resulting work ought to count as philosophical work. How can work done from an explicitly subjective point of view count as philosophy? I’m not suggesting that it cannot do so; indeed, I am going to argue, and at some length, that *The Second Sex* provides a powerful account of how it can. But *simply* to deny the possibility of objectivity (or, as the case may be, to figure objectivity as nothing but some sort of collection or intersection of subjectivities) is, I would argue, to deny the possibility of philosophy.

Since it is surely too early to deny that the oppression of women might be a subject for philosophy—since, to put it another way, we know comparatively little about the phenomenon of oppression and perhaps even less about what kinds of things count as “subjects” for philosophy—the task has to be to figure out how to talk about this oppression without lapsing into essentialism. This, I think, is surprisingly hard to do.<sup>21</sup> For once the terms of the debate have come under the sway of metaphysics, once, that is, you feel obliged to undergird your feminist politics with a philosophical account of the concept “woman,” then there’s no way, or at least no obvious way, back to the level of intuition, back to the sheer sense of feeling oppressed on the basis of your sex. If you try to provide such an account, then invariably there will be a group of women who will deny that your account is accurate. If you say that these dissenters are blind to the truth, you commit the aptly named crime of paternalism. If, on the other hand,

you simply deny flat out that you can give a metaphysical account of the concept “woman,” on the grounds that women are not essentially like one another in any respect—a position that, it’s important to notice, entails a commitment to your thinking that the idea of giving such an account is at least coherent—then you leave yourself with a problem about how to justify a politics based on the oppression of women. This is the problem that confronts those opponents of essentialism who are identified in the current jargon as “antiessentialists.” The debate between essentialists and antiessentialists now dominates feminist theory. It’s a skeptical debate over the question, to put it plainly, of whether and in what sense “women” (whatever that term means) exist.

#### STRATEGY 4: ANTIESSENTIALISM

A watershed moment in the growing tide of sympathy in recent years for antiessentialism (a tide heightened by the increasing obviousness of the problems essentialism was bringing in its wake) was the publication in 1990 of the book *Gender Trouble*, written by the philosopher Judith Butler, whose influence on the shape of academic feminist philosophy in recent years is hard to overestimate.<sup>22</sup> Like many feminists, Butler rejects the idea that our gender norms—what counts normatively as “masculine” or “feminine”—are in any sense natural. But her position goes beyond the now familiar if still contested idea that it’s wrong to suppose that “normal” human females share or ought to share certain particularly “feminine” traits, while “normal” human males share or ought to share particularly “masculine” ones: she also rejects the common view that the division of human beings into two biological sexes is inevitable. Butler contests the very tendency of human beings to conceive of themselves as necessarily either male or female—as, in other words, destined to identify themselves with one or the other pole of an inevitable binary opposition between the two sexes. That there are not two unproblematically discrete biological sexes is suggested to Butler by empirical phenomena such as her-

maphrodisms, unusual genetic make-ups (for example, people with male genitals and XX chromosomes), medically assisted transsexualism, and so forth. These phenomena, on her view, dramatize the fact that biological sex is essentially like biological hair color: there's a natural continuum, and how we choose to see that continuum is not determined by anything inherent to it. Thus, there's nothing called "sex" or "gender" that precedes our own concepts. We don't apply concepts of maleness and femaleness to some set of qualities that's already there. Indeed, Butler wants to say that our use of these concepts *creates* sex and gender, which then insidiously appear to have been there already. And our failure to see that our sex and gender norms are constructed rather than natural—that, for example, there's no such thing as "woman" apart from our construction of the concept—systematically oppresses all human beings.<sup>23</sup>

But if the very category "woman" is inherently oppressive, as Butler takes all our references to biological sex to be, then identifying yourself as a woman ought to have the paradoxical effect of reinforcing your—and everyone else's—systematic oppression. So how, if we are Butlerians, can we coherently base our feminist politics on the fact of our womanhood? Butler urges us to subvert oppressive sex and gender norms by trying to reveal to ourselves how they work both to oppress us and to cover over their own true origins. She also has suggested that it's perfectly reasonable to "deploy" the concept "woman" strategically in certain *political* contexts, even if we can't, by dint of logic, unproblematically use sex and gender terms in our theoretical attempts to overcome the oppression they anchor. Butler recommends that we attempt to subvert these very terms by "citing" them in parody, as she puts it in her book *Bodies That Matter*,<sup>24</sup> rather than obeying them. For example, we can use the word "queer" as an epithet of praise instead of damnation. Or we can undermine the conventional gender signification of our own bodies by dressing them in drag, counting on what Butler calls "the unanticipated resignifiability of highly invested terms" (28)—shock value—to do the subversive work. (Thus we get an echo in this highly metaphysical account of the advice Rorty provides in attempting to convince feminists to *sidestep* metaphysics—that is, the advice to speak in a new idiom.)

Butler's response to the worry that her theory takes the wind out

of feminist sails turns on a metaphysical picture of our concepts—particularly those concepts of ours concerning sex difference—as thoroughly the product of social convention and therefore, in principle, thoroughly malleable. Now, this is a view that Butler derives in large part from her reading of Jacques Lacan’s reading of Freud, in which Lacan argues, as Butler does, that the human subject is thoroughly constituted by and through her culture. But Lacan, invoking Freud’s interpretation of the Oedipus myth, complicates this picture in a way that Butler doesn’t: he stresses how ambivalent we are bound to be about subverting the very structures through which we come into existence—in this case, our conceptual structures, our language. On Lacan’s view, nothing less is jeopardized in a wish for subversion of these structures than our connectedness to the world. This is a consequence of Butler’s view that she, especially in her prescriptive moments, seems constantly to want to underplay. She doesn’t adequately acknowledge the substantive, real-world risk for a feminist in the idea of ceasing to fight on behalf of “women” in favor of abjuring the straightforward use of this term and limiting one’s activism to subversive gestures on the order of filling one’s closet with gender-dissonant clothes. Not surprisingly, one result of Butler’s work has been to provoke a feminist backlash against it on precisely these grounds. It’s better to put your philosophy on the line, feminists such as the philosopher Susan Bordo contend, than to endanger everything you’ve worked for as a feminist.<sup>25</sup>

The reason that a Butleresque philosophy of sex and gender isn’t a promising candidate for resolving our apparent contradiction is that in conceiving of itself as a purely metaphysical inquiry it from the outset is paradoxically forced to deny the *experience* that gives rise to feminism—namely, the sense of being oppressed because you are something called a woman. Let me try to make this point in as clear a way as I can. The problem for someone who wants to conduct an investigation into the nature of sex difference that is at once philosophical and feminist is to figure out how to do so without denying the social fact of sex difference. You have to be able at one and the same time to question what a woman is *and* to identify yourself as a woman—or, as the case may be, as a man. You have to operate simultaneously at the level of our ordinary concepts—the level, after all, on

which feminism situates itself—and at the level of philosophy, where these ordinary concepts are put in question. This is something that none of the candidates for a viable feminist philosophy that I've just considered do. Characteristically, work identifying itself as feminist philosophy is work that is peppered with moments of feminism and moments of philosophy, but not moments that are at one and the same time feminist and philosophical.

Now, it may strike you that by definition a moment can't be both feminist in an everyday sense and philosophical at the same time—that the everyday is to be delimited, if you will, as exactly that which isn't philosophy. But I'm suggesting that this paradox has to be overcome in order for there to be a genuine resolution to the apparent contradiction in the concept of feminist philosophy. And we're now at a point at which it's possible for me to begin to indicate why I find a potential candidate for this resolution in, of all places, what is often called the founding text of the contemporary feminist movement, namely Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. It's my view that this book, in its willingness to keep in play a certain natural relationship—I mean, a relationship that arises naturally as we sexed beings think about sex difference—between the everyday and the metaphysical is a paradigmatic example of the possibility of genuine feminist philosophy. And I want to conclude this chapter by laying out the groundwork for my claim, which will be developed especially in chapters 2 and 7, that this negotiation of the everyday and the philosophical is one of the great achievements of *The Second Sex*, one of the achievements that accounts for its undisputed power in galvanizing the fight against sex-based oppression.

## BEAUVOIR AND FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

We get a glimpse of Beauvoir's willingness to keep what I have called a certain natural relationship between the everyday and the metaphysical in play in the early pages of the introduction to *The Second Sex*, particularly at the following juncture. Beauvoir writes:

If her female function does not suffice to define woman, if we refuse also to explain her by “the eternal feminine” and if nevertheless we admit that, at least for the time being, there are women on the earth, we then have to ask the question: what is a woman?

The very posing of the problem immediately suggests to me a first response. It is significant that I pose it. A man would never have the idea of writing a book on the singular situation that men occupy in humanity. If I want to define myself, I am obliged first off to declare: “I am a woman”; this truth is the background against which all further assertions will stand out. (*TSS* xxi, TM; *LDS* 1:13–14)<sup>26</sup>

Here we see Beauvoir launching her inquiry by posing what appears to be a metaphysical question—What is a woman?—and then immediately suggesting an everyday answer: I am. This places a certain limit on what is going to count as an acceptable philosophical response to the question: it must account for Beauvoir’s own identity as a woman. But notice that this limit does not come from Beauvoir’s politics—indeed, many counterculture feminists were embarrassed that Beauvoir did not call herself a feminist until the late 1960s, decades after the publication of *The Second Sex* had played a key role in launching the feminist movement. Rather, the limit on what will count as an answer to the philosophical question “What is a woman?” comes from our everyday criteria in using this word. That is to say, it’s not a political position but, rather, her everyday experience, her experience as a woman, her finding herself bound to identify herself as what the word “woman” names, whatever it names, that constrains Beauvoir’s philosophical investigation.

For Beauvoir, then, no answer to the metaphysical question “What is a woman?” will suffice that does not acknowledge the origins of this question in her ordinary sense of herself as, in the first instance, before all else, a woman. In response to a question asked ten years after the publication of *The Second Sex* about how she came to write this book, Beauvoir said,

The idea of *The Second Sex* came to me very late. Men or women, I thought that each could handle their own problems by them-

selves; I wasn't aware that femininity is a situation. I wrote three novels, some essays, without worrying myself about my condition as a woman. One day, I had a desire to explain myself to myself. I began to reflect and I became aware with a sort of surprise that the first thing I had to say was this: I am a woman.<sup>27</sup>

And in the autobiography Beauvoir felt able to begin writing upon completion of the part of her investigation into womanhood that became *The Second Sex*, she puts the impetus for conducting this investigation this way: "I said how this book was conceived: almost fortuitously. Wanting to speak about myself, I realized that it was necessary for me to describe the feminine condition."<sup>28</sup> Because Beauvoir's philosophical inquiry into the question of sex is tethered from the start to her desire to understand her everyday identity as a woman, any evolution of this question into a different one—let's say, a purely metaphysical one—is, at least, checked. It's as if she's keeping the investigation on track by insisting on its existential as well as its philosophical import—and, wishing to flag my impatience with accounts of Beauvoir's achievement that see it as derivative of that of Jean-Paul Sartre, I'm deliberately putting a spin on the word "existential" to mark Beauvoir's investment of herself in her work.

This is not to suggest, however, that there are particular responses to Beauvoir's question, responses that will look like some of those I've considered here, that are ruled out in advance. It's perfectly possible, for example, that in the course of her investigation Beauvoir might be overcome, like Butler, by a sense that "women" don't in some deep sense exist. But this will not present itself as simply an abstract philosophical discovery, deduced from a fixed picture of our relationship to our concepts. Instead, it will present itself as a concrete discovery about Beauvoir's own life. "What is a woman?" she asks in the passage I quoted from the introduction to *The Second Sex*. Her answer is that *she* is, if anything is. This means that part of the investigation into the question of what a woman is will be an investigation of what it is to claim to be a woman, to claim to be, to put it in a more pedantic way, an instance of a general concept. But it also means that this investigation will have to answer to this particular claim to be a woman, made by this particular woman. In philosophizing as she does, Beauvoir is

laying her own identity on the line, not just by evincing a willingness for philosophy to effect a transformation of this identity, but more important, by offering nothing less than herself as the object of a philosophical investigation. By personalizing the philosophical question of sex difference in this way, Beauvoir is able to avoid the terms of the essentialism/antiessentialism debate. She doesn't ask, Is there an essential similarity among women and an essential difference between the sexes?—but rather, What is to be made of the fact that I'm a woman?

I am claiming that this is both a feminist and a philosophical question. On my reading of *The Second Sex*, the way Beauvoir takes up this question is to begin by showing that we don't find an answer to it in the history of thought, a history the artifacts of which have of course been produced almost exclusively by men. She then goes on neither to use nor to reject these artifacts, these philosophical theses and methods and tools but, rather, to appropriate them in the service of an investigation that is irreducibly personal as well as philosophical. What this appropriation looks like is a main concern of mine in chapters 3 through 7, but I want here, at this early juncture, to sketch out what I mean in using this word. A central example is Beauvoir's reworking of the concept of the "Other," a term previously deployed by the likes of Hegel, Heidegger, Lacan, and Sartre. Beauvoir explores the question of what it means for her to labor intellectually under conditions in which the various conceptualizations of this term in the work of these philosophers—her own partner not excluded—seem invariably to consign beings of her own sex to the position of the "Other," a position in which one is figured merely as an object of use or of fascination to some genuine subject, a subject that seems, always, to be sexed male. Through something like the Cartesian cogito—"I'm *thinking* about being consigned to the status of an object; therefore, I can't, ontologically *be* just an object"—Beauvoir deduces that to the extent she, and, therefore, other women, nonetheless think of themselves as Other, as not fully human, it must be because they employ their agency in part in the service of accepting this status. But why do women do this? In addressing herself to this question, Beauvoir investigates the grounds on which Hegel, for one, reaccents the concept of the slave, one of the manifestations that the Other

takes in his work, so that the position of the slave is seen in certain critical respects to be more desirable, at least from a progressive point of view, than the position of what he calls the master. And then Beauvoir herself reinfects this positive conception of the slave along the lines of her own sexed experience, thus in effect following out Judith Butler's strategies without making use of anything like Butler's untethered metaphysics. Beauvoir's way of reaccenting concepts in response to her own experience as a sexed being, a major strategy in what I call her recounting of woman, provides a model that, I claim, is at one and the same time feminist and philosophical.

This model reconceives of philosophy not as a set of tools or methods or problems or texts or anything else fixed but, rather, as a mode of self-transformation and self-expression that stands or falls at one and the same time on its uniqueness—on, if you will, its originality, or particularity—and on its representativeness: that is, the degree to which its particularity can be taken as an instance of something universal. It serves the interests of feminists insofar as it insists on the rock-bottom importance of the expression of particular voices, something crucial for women if, to hark back to Catharine MacKinnon's words, they are to become human beings both in truth and in social reality. And from the point of view of philosophy, it offers a way to tether one's thought to its motivating origins—to keep it from straying away from its own interests. The model happens to come from a text that begot a political movement. Even if that's not quite an accident, you don't have to take an interest in feminism in order to take an interest in the model. But if you already have such an interest—let's say because you're a woman trying to be a philosopher, and you want to make sense of your hearing the words you are inclined to say echoed back to you by your profession as the words of a woman—then discovering this model might feel, for the first time, like an invitation to speak.

I Am a Woman, Therefrom I Think: *The Second Sex*  
and the *Meditations*

Woman is well placed to describe society, the world, the epoch to which she belongs, but only up to a certain point. Truly great works are those that put the world entirely in question. Now that woman doesn't do. She will critique, she will contest in detail; but to put the world completely into question one must feel oneself to be profoundly responsible for the world. Now she isn't to the extent that it's a world of men; she doesn't take charge in the way the great artist does. She doesn't radically contest the world, and this is why in the history of humanity there isn't a woman who has created a great religious or philosophical system, or even a truly great ideology; for that, what's necessary is in some sense to do away with everything that's given [*faire table rase de tout le donné*]<sup>1</sup>—as Descartes did away with all knowledge—and to start afresh. Well, woman, by reason of her condition, isn't in a position to do that.

—Simone de Beauvoir, “La Femme et la Création”<sup>1</sup>

I shall be glad to reveal in this discourse what paths I have followed, and to represent my life in it as if in a picture, so that everyone may judge it for himself; and thus, learning from public response the opinions held of it, I shall add a new manner of self-instruction to those I am accustomed to using.

—René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*

A wild cry of rage, the revolt of a wounded soul—that they could have accepted with a moved and pitying condescension; since they could not pardon me my objectivity, [my masculine readers] feigned a disbelief in it. For example I will take a phrase of Claude Mauriac's which perfectly illustrates the arrogance of the First Sex. “What has she got against me?” he wanted to know. Nothing; I had nothing against anything except the words I was quoting.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Force of Circumstance*, vol. 1<sup>2</sup>

Suppose that we take seriously Simone de Beauvoir's claim that a mark of (male) arrogance is the refusal to acknowledge that someone's words are uttered on, or from, the side of objectivity. Then to accuse someone of arrogance is to suggest that he or she is unjustly seizing the authority to judge the authority of another person's words. But what is to count as a just claim to the authority to do this judging? Does Beauvoir wish to contradict herself when she speaks of her objectivity in *The Second Sex* and implies that it is fueled by what she has against the words she is quoting—which means, I take it, not just the quotations in it, but *all* of its words, none of which are inherently hers? The issue is not just whether and when someone has a right to don the mantle of objectivity—or refuse it to another person; it's also a question of what it is to try to decide this issue by helping yourself to the very words that have been used to deny you this right.

As I suggested at the end of chapter 1, Beauvoir's seizing of authority in *The Second Sex* takes the form of her claiming to be a representative woman. In this chapter I'm going to investigate this claim. I want to show that Beauvoir means by this gesture to be putting herself forward as no worse nor, crucially, better an instance of the concept than any other woman. In answering "I am" to the question "What is a woman?" she means not to distinguish herself but, to the contrary, to *count herself* as a woman. Here we have an understanding of what it is for a person to claim to represent others that is characterized not by arrogance but by a certain *humility*—a certain abrogation of the significance of one's own singularity. This notion of representation, characterized by humility, is, I'm going to argue, in direct contrast to the notion explicitly or implicitly employed in the work of many (male) philosophers, who tacitly or openly claim to be *better* specimens of genuine humanity—specifically, more *objective*, more *rational*, and therefore less brutish and animalistic, than, at the least, their nonphilosopher fellows. I take Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* to be countering this sort of philosophical arrogance by grounding the authority to speak objectively in an inaugurating act of humility.

And yet nothing could be more obvious about *The Second Sex* than the brazenness of its author. Beauvoir is aware of herself both as

making claims about the way the world is—claims, that is, to objective truth—and as tethering those claims firmly to her own identity, marking them as specifically hers. It's this combination of moves, and the way that the texture of Beauvoir's prose makes them seem deliberate, that opens her, despite my standing claims about her basic humility, to the charge of arrogance. Stanley Cavell has suggested that arrogating the authority to make objective claims when nothing other than your own desire to have a say entitles your words is a hallmark of philosophical work.<sup>3</sup> Cavell wants the word *arrogation* here because the claiming of title to words that on his view is a mark of philosophy inevitably carries with it the danger of appearing to be, not to say being, an act of *arrogance*. For him, assessing an author's entitlement to his or her arrogation of authority, testing its apparent arrogance, is itself an act of criticism, or of judgment, that requires a further arrogation of authority and thus a further risk.

The decision not to investigate the appearance of arrogance but instead to take it at face value—to deny, to put it another way, the possibility of a distinction in a given case between arrogation and arrogance—in effect constitutes a rejection of philosophical conversation. Needless to say, this is a rejection that all philosophical writing courts. The tone of authority that permeates philosophical writing can be off-putting, especially if one is not prepared for it. Indeed, the conventions of academic philosophy—for instance, explicitly situating one's work in an ongoing philosophical debate—often function precisely to attempt to forestall the author's being caught out as a genuine individual. The author draws a lot of attention to the formal structure of his philosophical procedure: he's going to defend *x*-ism against *y*-ism; he'll adduce arguments against *y*-ism; he'll consider objections to his own arguments, objections the reader can test for himself; and he's willing to give up *x*-ism if someone shows he's made an error in his reasoning. Here, moves are being made to divert the reader from noticing the philosopher's personal stake in his positions. It's no surprise, then, that philosophers who abjure these procedures leave themselves even more exposed to the charge of arrogance. Here, one might think, to offer some extreme examples, of Nietzsche, or the young Marx, or the later Wittgenstein. None of these writers attempts

to cover up his arrogation of authority by shying away from a *tone* of authority. Characteristically, this tone of authority so dominates the text that a substantial number of readers judge it to be fundamentally *antiphilosophical*. This is perhaps at least part of the reason why the likes of Nietzsche and the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* have always had to fight for the title of serious philosopher. A central claim of my project is that Beauvoir in her arrogation of authority in *The Second Sex* belongs in the company of such writers, which means that the degree to which her work is regarded as serious philosophy is bound to remain controversial.

It is no wonder, then, that I am in the minority in reading *The Second Sex* as issuing from a posture of humility. The apparent implausibility of this reading is compounded by the fact of Beauvoir's putting herself forward as a test-case instance of the concept "woman," whatever the word should turn out to connote. For many feminists, claiming to be a representative woman constitutes an act of high treason, and so inescapably of arrogance, since the very notion of representation is seen as entailing a reduction of the wide array of women's experiences to the narrow scope of one's own. Criticism of Beauvoir on this front tends to take one of two forms. Less commonly, she is accused of directly mistaking her own life experience, the experience of a white, bourgeois, Western woman, for that of all women.<sup>4</sup> More commonly, this criticism involves the charge that Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* sets herself up as what you might call an *Über*-woman, who through her own special powers of intellect and will escapes what she herself characterizes as the feminine condition. The charge, then, is that she effectively *exempts* herself from the category "woman," exalting herself above her sisters by disassociating herself from them. Typically, this view of Beauvoir's self-styling in *The Second Sex* takes the form of accusing her of acting like a man, of, ironically enough, inaugurating the latter-day feminist movement through a dramatic act of "masculinism."<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter I want to link this accusation of masculinism to what I see as an uncannily similar one directed by feminist thinkers at the man ordinarily viewed as the founding figure of "modern" Western philosophy, namely, René Descartes. I will suggest that the

routine condemnations of Descartes in the feminist philosophical literature overlook what is productively radical about the Cartesian method of doubt. In these aspects, this method, I wish to show, is—not accidentally—exactly that employed by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. This chapter in fact attempts to make good the unusual claim that one of Simone de Beauvoir’s central aspirations in *The Second Sex* is to rewrite Descartes’s *Meditations* from the ground up. The pivotal and emblematic move is Beauvoir’s displacement, in effect, of Descartes’s question “What is a man?”—posed in the second meditation directly after the climactic discovery of the *cogito ergo sum*—by the question “What is a woman?” Beauvoir’s touchstone response to this question, “I am,” is therefore to be read, I suggest, as her version of the Cartesian cogito. My aim is to show how these displacements of the founding moments of modern philosophy constitute both an appropriation of and a fundamental challenge to the philosophical tradition. I argue, specifically, that Beauvoir’s investigations ought to be read as in effect casting doubt on the philosophical priorities of the father of modern philosophy. The power of *The Second Sex* as the founding document of the second wave of feminism, then, issues in substantial part from Beauvoir’s inaugurating call for a reordering of these priorities—as though we cannot think coherently about what a “man” is, cannot make out a coherent sex-neutral sense of the term, until we address the question of what it means to be, to be called, a woman.

In my comparison of the *Meditations* and *The Second Sex*, I focus on the paramount role that philosophical skepticism plays in the work of each text. While Descartes’s doubting of all of his opinions is legendary, one simply doesn’t find commentators acknowledging the philosophical significance of Beauvoir’s stark expression of doubt about whether women exist. The sense of herself as a woman that lies at the heart of Beauvoir’s inquiry is not a sense that is from the first, or at any point, in principle or in practice unassailable. One can see Beauvoir’s work as an inquiry into the meaning and validity of this sense—that is, an investigation into whether and how “women” exist. Her inquiry need be no more dogmatic, therefore, than that of Descartes, who in the *Meditations* is in effect launching just such an investigation into the meaning and validity of his sense of the *world*. In

exploring the parallel between Beauvoir's skepticism and that of Descartes, I argue that Beauvoir interprets the metaphysical solitude that forms the basis of Descartes's epistemological solipsism as an inevitable cost of his revolutionary, and laudable, relocation of philosophical authority from powerful people and institutions to the individual human mind. And I show how her appropriation of this alarming consequence of Descartes's method leads her to develop a powerful philosophical picture of the nature of sex difference.

Beauvoir's appropriation of Descartes begins in her desire to explore the possibility of philosophizing as a woman. Because for Beauvoir to be called a "woman" is to have a female body, she cannot begin to understand what a human being is the way Descartes does in the second meditation: by laying aside the possibility that he is, fundamentally, a "mechanical structure of limbs" (Descartes 1986).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, since her inquiry is rooted in a sense of herself as being an instance of the generic concept "woman," Beauvoir avoids a certain Cartesian threat of solipsism from the start: to call herself a woman is to start with the idea that there are other beings like her—that is, other beings who are called, or call themselves, women. I say a "certain" threat of solipsism is avoided since it is not clear, at least not yet, what the ontological or epistemological ramifications of this fact will be. That she is not the only woman does not of course rule out the possibility that Beauvoir, even insofar as she is or takes herself to be a woman, will experience a profound, Cartesian sense of metaphysical isolation. What I mean to claim on the strength of this observation of Beauvoir's starting point is only that it would bring her to a different place of isolation, as it were, from that at which Descartes arrives in the course of the *Meditations*. In my bolder moments, I think of her as in essence rewriting the *Meditations* from the point of view of someone who finds herself unable to doubt her existence as an embodied person in a world of other embodied people, a point of view that is in principle open to all people but one that those who are not systematically oppressed on the basis of the appearance of their bodies—that is, their superficial social identities—may have the luxury not to take up.

As the “father” of modern philosophy, Descartes is a favorite target of feminist criticism (and not just in philosophy), and his ideas have been attacked from any number of feminist angles, the most common, perhaps, involving suspicion of his signature belief in a fundamental split between the mind and the body and other so-called dualisms.<sup>7</sup> It would of course take me too far afield to try to piece together some sort of overview of feminist concerns about Descartes. But I do need to get a picture of his “masculinism” on the table in order to support my claim that it’s no coincidence that both he and Beauvoir are often indicted by feminists on this front. A representative enough critique of Descartes’s masculinism is to be found in a well-known essay by the feminist philosopher Susan Bordo, “The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought.”<sup>8</sup> In this essay Bordo tries to make out the case that the masculinism she sees all over modern philosophy has its roots in certain key moves made by Descartes, particularly in his magnum opus, the *Meditations*. More specifically, Bordo sees Descartes in this work as developing a concept of objectivity that encodes basic “masculine” values. She aims to show how and why this masculinist concept of objectivity developed.

Relying on historical research by other scholars, Bordo claims that in medieval times people explicitly conceptualized the cosmos as female and felt fundamentally at one with nature, nestled comfortably, as it were, in her womb.<sup>9</sup> The medievals, Bordo claims, saw no sharp distinction between themselves and the rest of the “female” world. But during the transition to the Renaissance, as Bordo describes it, the culture experienced a “kind of protracted birth” (448); for reasons that she does not make entirely clear, people felt pushed out of the womb and underwent the trauma, on a grand scale, of separation from Mother Nature. In describing this trauma, Bordo appeals to the work of feminist object-relations theorists, such as Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein, who claim that individual males in our culture characteristically undergo just such a traumatic separation from their mothers because of the culture’s demands that boys establish a space in which to shore up and demonstrate their masculinity, figured as sharply differentiated from the femininity of the mother.<sup>10</sup> Bordo

suggestively asks, “May not such a process reverberate, too, on the cultural level?” (445). On her view, the second step in the social “drama of parturition” that she is describing takes the form of Renaissance man’s engineering something like a rebirth of himself, this time on his own terms, as a sort of defense against being pushed from the mother-cosmos.<sup>11</sup>

Descartes’s contribution to this process, Bordo claims, was to insist on an absolutely sharp line between the person, or what she often calls “the subject,” and the rest of the world, what she calls “the object.” For Bordo, this line epitomizes the legacy of Cartesian objectivity, which on her view turns on a “differentiation between subject and object, between self and the world.” It entails, she continues, using Descartes’s own language, a “clear and distinct” sense of what she calls “the boundaries of the self” (449). Descartes’s allegiance to objectivity, his “objectivism,” is essentially “a defensive response to . . . separation anxiety” marked by a flight from what she here calls not the female but the *feminine* (441). This flight from the feminine takes the form of a “*re*-birthing and re-imagining of knowledge and the world as masculine” (441). “Here,” Bordo notes, “‘masculine’ describes not a biological category but a cognitive style, an epistemological stance. Its key term is *detachment*: from the emotional life, from the particularities of time and place, from personal quirks, prejudices, and interests, and most centrally, from the object itself” (451). And she concludes that “clearly, the (unmythologizing) articulation of ‘the feminine’—and its potential contribution to ethics, epistemology, science, education, and politics—is one of the most important movements of the twentieth century” (456).

Bordo’s use of quotation marks around “the feminine” in this last quotation is a signal of her caution, not to say her uneasiness, in using this concept. One of her concerns is evidently to avoid “mythologizing”; but I suspect that she is also hedging against feminist critiques of the idea that there is some monolithic thing called “the feminine” to be articulated.<sup>12</sup> In calling for this articulation in the closing lines of her essay, Bordo seems to be advocating a “cognitive style” or “epistemological stance” in which our various detachments are overcome. (Why, again, this is supposed to be a feminine—or even a female—style or stance is something Bordo doesn’t say.) In the

second-to-last sentence of her paper, she refers to the “limitations” of what she calls the “historical identification of rationality and intelligence with the masculine modes of detachment, distance, and clarity.” I imagine that what she wants to signify by these words is her sense—a sense that I think is common to most feminist critics of Descartes and that I will spell out in somewhat more detail below—that something important about human experience, or at least women’s experience, gets lost in the Cartesian picture.

### DESCARTES’S SOLIPSISTIC LEGACY

Although I claim that Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* means to issue a fundamental philosophical challenge to Descartes’s way of proceeding in the *Meditations*, I am no less interested in showing that her challenge is *internal* to this way of proceeding and, thus, to modern philosophy. For Beauvoir, following directly in Descartes’s footsteps, to do philosophy is inevitably to grapple with the threat of solipsism.<sup>13</sup> For Bordo, this threat is a direct result of Descartes’s paradigmatic rejection of Mother Nature and his investment in refashioning her according to the terms of the new science of the seventeenth century.<sup>14</sup> But Beauvoir’s challenge to Descartes stems, I think, not from her distrust of his motives but, rather, from her admiration for his revolutionary relocation of the source of philosophical authority. For her, the threat of solipsism is to be seen as the cost not of masculinism but of a conception of philosophy as critical and dynamic.

To understand the significance of this conception of philosophy for Beauvoir, we need to bear in mind just how radical a shift in the enterprise Descartes’s writings represented. For the vast majority of medieval and pre-Cartesian philosophers, philosophy was a mode of inquiry in which one used forms of logical argument, mostly developed by Aristotle, to apply received doctrine, mostly scripture and Aristotelian texts, to everyday observations and experiments. This meant, of course, that a person who wished to read a philosophical work had to be highly educated—had to know the Bible, for example,

as well as the thought of neo-Aristotelian philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas, whose writings dominated the subject for most of the Renaissance. And of course, in order to be educated in the Europe of Descartes's time, you had to be a man of a certain class. That meant that the practice of philosophy was fundamentally elitist.

Medieval philosophy ends at Descartes's doorstep because he reconceived the subject as something that appealed to the authority not of preexisting doctrine or texts but of the human mind alone. In all of his works, Descartes emphasizes that the rational intellect is to be found in *all* human minds. Indeed, he thought that the reason that some human minds weren't philosophical minds was that they were in effect polluted by dogmatic teaching, which he believed blocked the mind's inherent power to think. To do philosophy, he believed, one must purge one's mind of these bad teachings in order to make room for what he called "good sense." The *Discourse on the Method* begins famously with the words, "Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world. . . . The power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false—which is what we properly call 'good sense' or 'reason'—is naturally equal in all men" (III).

By "all men," we have very good evidence to believe, Descartes meant to include those men who traditionally lacked access to formal education. For example, we know that he taught mathematics to his own servant and that he strongly and vocally approved of teaching the arts and sciences to the artisan class. Whether in averring that "all men" share alike in the capacity for reason Descartes meant to include women is perhaps controversial, although he obviously thought that women such as his longtime correspondent Elizabeth of Bohemia and Queen Christina of Sweden, who summoned him to her court in order to receive philosophical instruction, were more than capable of more than following his thought. As further proof of Descartes's sincerity, we have the fact that he wrote most of his books in the French vernacular.<sup>15</sup>

The *Meditations*, however, was an exception to this practice. It was originally written in Latin, since Descartes wanted to make sure that the clergy would read the book and thus, perhaps, change their minds about how philosophy ought to be done. Because this is Descartes's goal, the strategy of the *Meditations* is to try to get his readers

to free their minds of the prejudicial teaching that has been hammered into them, in order that they might be guided by their own reason and specifically by what Descartes calls “the natural light.”<sup>16</sup> Because his strategy is to disinter good sense from layers of shibboleths, it takes the form not of a treatise but, rather, of a series of *meditations*. One philosophizes not by taking in the teachings of a pedant but by following the example of the meditator and attempting to think for oneself. Gary Hatfield, in his illuminating essay “The Senses and the Fleshless Eye,” observes that in the *Meditations* Descartes is in effect transforming from within the preexisting medieval genre of the meditation: where the old-style meditations asked you to contemplate the great, given truths, so as to strengthen your will to act in accordance with them, Descartes asks you to suspend your belief in such truths in order to free your mind for genuinely philosophical contemplation. In the preface to the *Meditations* he says, “I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions” (8).<sup>17</sup> Genuinely philosophical meditation, Descartes attempts to show, reveals that fundamental to being human is the ability to think for oneself.

Descartes identifies the first and, arguably, most critical of his contemporaries’ wrongheaded preconceived opinions on the very first page of the first meditation: “All that up to the present I have accepted as most true and certain I have learned either from the senses or through the senses.” This rock-bottom tenet of medieval Aristotelianism, Descartes believes, cannot survive the scrutiny of “good sense.” He wants to get his readers to see that human beings do not conceptualize the world solely or primarily by virtue of their sense experience, that is, solely by the way the world bombards their sensory organs. Rather, Cartesian meditation reveals that human beings are creatures who bring a rational perspective to the world. And indeed the success of the *Meditations* as a philosophical document hinges on the truth of Descartes’s faith that this rational perspective is available to every person, that anyone who engages in the deep experiment in thinking modeled by the *Meditations* will discover at the foundation of his or her mind the same basic indubitable beliefs. Descartes is

banking on each serious meditator's experiencing the inexorability, the indubitability, of certain fundamental philosophical propositions.<sup>18</sup>

On the view of Descartes that I'm trying to sketch out, human minds contain certain fundamental intuitions, albeit buried under layers of dogmatic teaching and prejudice, that are the same from person to person. And it is these shared intuitions that underpin the conception of objectivity that Descartes advocates. Objectivity, he suggests, is not simply to be contrasted with something you might call subjectivity, that is, personal opinion; instead, objectivity can be seen as a *form* of subjectivity, a form that is by definition to be found in all thinkers.<sup>19</sup> This conception of objectivity competes not with models of what I suppose Bordo would call attachment but, rather, with *prejudice*, with blind reliance on other people's thinking, with kowtowing to the received order. Objectivity explains how thinking people can come to agree with one another through separate acts of thinking on the part of each individual. And this, surely, is an idea that ought to be congenial to feminists, who seek to ensure that diverse women and men can learn to treat each other respectfully and fairly.

I am claiming, contra Bordo, that Descartes wishes to "detach" not from "the cosmos" or some other mother imago but from the constrictions of received opinion. At the same time, I want to account for Bordo's sense of the philosophical fatefulness of Descartes's writings and, specifically, for her sense that there is something fundamentally hostile to women in this work. On my reading of Descartes, the source of Bordo's consternation is Descartes's revolutionary insistence that philosophical progress demands the *isolation* of the meditator. The solitude of the figure of the meditator is a symbol not only of the possibility of independent thinking, of real philosophy, but also of the conditions under which this philosophy can be done. In the material that prefaces the *Meditations*, Descartes famously stresses, first, that the experiment in deep thinking that constitutes the book is to be undertaken only once in a lifetime and, second, that those who wish to follow him in undertaking this experiment must "withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinion" (8). At the beginning of the first meditation, the meditator specifies that he is fi-

nally prepared to undertake the task at hand—that of doubting all of his beliefs—not only because he has “a clear stretch of free time” but also because he is “quite alone” (12). But this isolation is not just a physical precondition for doing philosophy. For Descartes it is also *metaphysically* basic—indeed, it turns out to be the foundation of each person’s connection with the rest of the world.

In order to elucidate the fundamental role that metaphysical isolation plays in Descartes’s philosophy, I need to take a few lines to review the familiar details of the first meditation. In so doing, I cannot stress enough, I will not be weighing in on those features of Descartes’s magnum opus that a proper *interpretation* of the book would be obliged to address. I will not, for example, draw attention to the enormous, even decisive role that his work on the nature of mathematics, and particular of geometry, plays in his understanding of what he is doing. I will say nothing about the role that God plays in the *Meditations*—even, especially retrospectively, in the first meditation, which is structured around the suspension of certain, but not all, ontotheological tenets. I will ignore aspects of the *Meditations* as important as these because my main goal in this chapter is simply to suggest a certain way of understanding Simone de Beauvoir’s relationship to the philosophical tradition. I wish to show that there is much exciting and potentially productive work to be done in exploring this relationship in the particular cases of Descartes and, as I will be claiming in later chapters, of Hegel—not to mention, potentially, Rousseau, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger, and even Sartre.

Let us begin, then, with Descartes’s announcement at the beginning of meditation 1 that the point of the work is to purge his mind of what he calls the fundamental “falsehoods” on which he fears the “edifice” of his beliefs has been built.<sup>20</sup> The point of doing this is to clear the way for finding and establishing genuine scientific truths. Descartes informs us that he has “put the project off” for a long time because “the task looked an enormous one” and he needed to make sure that he had “rid [his] mind of all worries and arranged for [him]self a clear stretch of free time.” Now that these conditions have been met, Descartes says, “I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demoli-

tion of my opinions.” But since attempting to destroy his opinions one by one might well prove “an endless task,” Descartes says he will instead attempt to undermine the foundations of the whole edifice of his beliefs. This he takes himself to succeed in doing by supposing, first, that he is dreaming and, then, that “some malicious demon of the utmost power and cunning has employed all his energies in order to deceive me.”<sup>21</sup> He imagines that what he has taken to be experience of the actual world is in fact nothing but the dreams that the evil demon has planted in him. He further imagines that the demon has interfered with his powers of thought such that he “go[es] wrong every time [he adds] two and three or count[s] the sides of a square, or in some even simpler matter, if that is imaginable.”

But, as Descartes frequently notes, persisting in this demon-fantasy is “an arduous undertaking,” for he is plagued by what he calls “a kind of laziness,” one that allows his “habitual opinions” to “keep coming back” and “capture” his belief, “which is as it were bound over to them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom.” In the famous passage that ends the first meditation, Descartes writes,

I am like a prisoner who is enjoying an imaginary freedom while asleep; as he begins to suspect that he is asleep, he dreads being woken up, and goes along with the pleasant illusion as long as he can. In the same way, I happily slide back into my old opinions and dread being shaken out of them, for fear that my peaceful sleep may be followed by hard labour when I wake, and that I shall have to toil not in the light, but amid the inextricable darkness of the problems I have now raised.

Even when, at the beginning of the second meditation, the meditator finds himself caught up in the mood of Doubt, as though in a whirlpool that won't let him get his footing, he finds himself tempted by what he has called laziness. “How do I know,” he asks, “that there is not something else which does not allow even the slightest occasion for doubt?” Surely, he cannot doubt the existence of God, since he is hypothesizing that an evil deity has filled his head with falsehoods. But of course it's possible that he himself may be “the author of these thoughts.” In that case, then, he must exist. But he has convinced

himself that his beliefs that he has a body and that his body has senses that provide him at least under ideal circumstances with reliable impressions of a world outside his body are false. So then, “Does it now follow that I too do not exist?” It does not, says Descartes, in the climactic passage of the *Meditations*. For the very fact that the doubt is his, that to deny that it is he who is denying his own beliefs would inevitably be to will *himself* to act, shows that he must exist, even if his train of thought is hopelessly led astray every time by a malicious demon. “So after considering everything very thoroughly, I must finally conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind.”

It turns out that this “I” is essentially “a thing that thinks.” This may seem to follow from the cogito itself, but in the wax example that takes up most of the remainder of the second meditation it becomes clear that Descartes is trying to establish, in direct contradistinction to the reigning Aristotelian paradigm, that human beings’ relatedness to the world depends fundamentally on the intellect and not on the senses or on what Descartes calls “the imagination.”<sup>22</sup> “I know now,” says Descartes at the end of the second meditation,

that even bodies [like the body of wax the meditator has been contemplating] are not strictly perceived by the senses or the faculty of imagination but by the intellect alone, and that this perception derives not from their being touched or seen but from their being understood; and in view of this I know plainly that I can achieve an easier and more evident perception of my own mind than of anything else.

In meditations 3 through 6, of course, Descartes in effect attempts to rebuild the rest of his world, starting with God and ending with his own body, on the foundation of the cogito. While not every reader of the *Meditations* in the past 350 years has judged this endeavor a failure, it is as scandalous a fact as any about philosophy that Descartes’s legacy to the subject was to turn it into an essentially skeptical enterprise.

I want to suggest, however, that this legacy ought to be seen not so much as the product of Descartes’s manifest failure to bring the

rest of the world back along with his own mind but more fundamentally as a corollary to his reconception of the philosophical enterprise. The skepticism that infuses the *Meditations* is established not by some weakness of its post-cogito arguments (although of course this weakness reinforces the skepticism) but on the very idea that a human being's connectedness with the world rests at bottom on what goes on in his head, on his *thinking*. I am not, in Descartes's picture, simply one thing, albeit a thinking thing, among many in the world. Rather, I am the basis of a picture of the world that is fundamentally dependent on what goes on in my mind. In other words, the corollary to Descartes's conviction that the individual human mind is in itself the best source of philosophical authority comes at the cost of a certain solipsism, a certain *metaphysical* solitude. And notice that this is not essentially a *logical* deduction from first principles but what would come to be called a *phenomenological* discovery. I learn that I am fundamentally the basis of my own experience from taking stock of a certain course of my own thought. The picture that founds modern philosophy is thus one in which the very procedures of the discipline figure the thinker as beginning from a position in which he is profoundly, metaphysically, alone.

#### BEAUVOIR'S CARTESIANISM

I don't expect my characterization of the legacy of the *Meditations* to be uncontroversial. Husserl, for one, takes himself to be defeating the idea that the price of Cartesianism is epistemological solipsism. In his *Cartesian Meditations*, Husserl tries to show that when you set out à la Descartes to rebuild the world from your own mind outward, you end up (if, of course, you do things properly) with *the* world, and not just some personal version of it. This is because when you think about yourself, you always think about yourself as situated in a world. In his *Paris Lectures*, Husserl writes, "*To the extent that I apprehend myself as a natural human being, I presuppose having apprehended a spatial reality . . . ; I have conceived of myself as being in space, in which I*

consequently have an outside of myself!” (32, emphasis in original). And I can have knowledge that other people exist since “I experience the world not as my own private world, but as an intersubjective world, one that is given to all human beings and which contains objects accessible to all” (34). But arguments such as these, no matter how successful, cannot defeat the point that the picture of philosophy we get in Descartes, the picture that founds modern philosophy, is one in which the very procedures of the discipline (procedures that I have suggested are in a certain basic respect congenial to the practice of feminism) figure the thinker as beginning from a position in which he is profoundly, metaphysically alone. In fact, that Husserl is forced to address “the problem of the external world” and “the problem of other minds,” far from contesting this point, is evidence for it.

Just as Husserl, as the title *Cartesian Meditations* indicates, regarded himself as in effect rewriting Descartes’s magnum opus in an attempt to ensure that the world as we know it really does come back at the end of the philosopher’s labors, and just as this very work, as I have been arguing, reinforced the skeptical structure of Descartes’s starting point and procedures, so Jean-Paul Sartre, in his early *Transcendence of the Ego* and a little later in *Being and Nothingness* (subtitled *A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*) regarded himself as in effect rewriting Husserl—and in so doing inadvertently carried on the skeptical tradition of modern philosophy.<sup>23</sup> On the early Sartre’s view, which I render in some depth in chapters 3 and especially 4, consciousness is again the starting point, only now the moral of the story is not that the world is returned to the philosopher in the wake of his activities but that the idea of a single world is philosophically naive. For Sartre, breaking out of the metaphysical privacy that inaugurates Descartes’s project is impossible. I make these bare-bones claims about Sartre, and about Husserl, not to single them out as more or less Descartes’s heirs than any other philosophers in the modern era but because their ideas are the ideas that filled the philosophical air breathed by Simone de Beauvoir.<sup>24</sup> As a Frenchwoman, and even more as a companion of Sartre’s, Beauvoir ought to have been even more inclined than the average modern philosopher to position her philosophical work in relation to that of Descartes. But even this set of circumstances is scant preparation for my claim that the author of

*The Second Sex*, no less than the author of the *Cartesian Meditations*, aspires, in effect, to rewrite Descartes's magnum opus from the ground up.

I hedge this claim with the words "in effect" because Beauvoir herself would never have phrased her aspirations this way. Indeed, throughout her life she repeatedly insinuated in her writings, in interviews, and in her speeches that she had never aspired to be—indeed felt herself incapable of being—a philosopher in the sense that in her view Descartes (or, as she was often at pains to observe, Sartre) was. Ordinarily, these disclaimers are taken as evidence of Beauvoir's lack of philosophical aspirations and originality. But it's important to note that what Beauvoir explicitly claims, at least when she talks about this subject at any length, is not that she's not capable of doing philosophical work but, rather, that she's not interested in or prepared to do a certain *kind* of philosophy. Consider, for example, the following passage from the second volume of her autobiography, published about ten years after *The Second Sex*:

The year before [referring to a year in the mid-1930s, when Beauvoir was several years out of graduate school], I hadn't written anything. I was absolutely determined to go back to some serious work. But what? Why wasn't I tempted to try my hand at philosophy? Sartre said that I understood philosophical doctrines, those of Husserl among others, more rapidly and more exactly than he did. Indeed, he tended to interpret them according to his own schemes. It was difficult for him to forget himself and to adopt unreservedly a foreign point of view. In my case I had no resistance to break down. My thought modeled itself immediately around what I was trying to grasp. I didn't accept it passively: insofar as I adhered to it, I perceived in it lacunae and incoherence, just as I also envisioned possible developments for it. If a theory convinced me, it didn't remain external to me: it changed my relationship with the world, it colored my experience. In short, I had solid faculties of assimilation and a well-developed critical sense; and philosophy was for me a living reality. It gave me satisfactions that never paled for me.

Yet I did not regard myself as a philosopher: I was well aware

that the ease with which I entered into a text came precisely from my lack of inventiveness. In this field, the real creative spirits are so rare that it is otiose to ask why I didn't try to take my place among them. What's necessary to explain, rather, is how certain individuals are capable of carrying out this concerted delirium [*délire concerté*] that is a system and from where they get the stubbornness [*entêtement*] which leads to their personal perceptions the value of universal law [*qui donne à leurs aperçus la valeur de clés universelles*]. As I have said before, the feminine condition does not conduce to this species of obstinacy [*la condition féminine ne dispose pas à ce genre d'obstination*].

I could at least have undertaken some study—documented, critical, and perhaps even ingenious—of some limited problem: an author little- or unknown, a point of logic. I wasn't tempted at all. Chatting with Sartre, taking the measure of his patience, his audacity, made devoting oneself [*se donner*] to philosophy seem exhilarating—but only if one were bitten by an idea. To expose, develop, judge, collate, criticize the ideas of others—no, I couldn't see the interest in this. Reading a work of Fink's [Eugen Fink, perhaps Husserl's best-known acolyte], I asked myself, "But how does one resign oneself to be the disciple of someone?" I sometimes, later, consented—intermittently—to playing this role.<sup>25</sup> But at the outset I had too much intellectual ambition for this to satisfy me. I wanted to communicate what was original in my experience. To succeed at this, I knew that it was toward literature that I must orient myself.<sup>26</sup>

In this passage Beauvoir envisions only two possibilities in philosophy. One is "to expose, develop, collate, and criticize the ideas of others." This is work Beauvoir says she for the most part abjured because she wasn't interested in being a "disciple." The other possibility she sees in philosophy is to set out to create a philosophical system, glossed as "concerted delirium," by which she implies both the exhilaration she mentions in the next paragraph and a certain madness or lunacy. This madness, she claims, goes hand-in-hand with a certain stubbornness, or obstinacy, one that in effect transforms the philoso-

pher's personal perceptions into universal law. And this stubbornness, in her view, is at odds with what she calls "the feminine condition."

We find similar notes struck in a speech Beauvoir delivered in Japan several years after she wrote the passage I have just been discussing:

Woman is well placed to describe society, the world, the epoch to which she belongs, but only up to a certain point. Truly great works are those that put the world entirely in question. Now that woman doesn't do. She will critique, she will contest in detail; but to put the world completely into question one must feel oneself to be profoundly responsible for the world. Now she isn't to the extent that it's a world of men; she doesn't take charge in the way the great artist does. She doesn't radically contest the world, and this is why in the history of humanity there isn't a woman who has created a great religious or philosophical system, or even a truly great ideology; for that, what's necessary is in some sense to do away with everything that's given [*faire table rase de tout le donné*]<sup>27</sup>—as Descartes did away with all knowledge—and to start afresh. Well, woman, by reason of her condition, isn't in a position to do that.<sup>27</sup>

This passage, like the one quoted before it, was also written well after the publication of *The Second Sex*; and to understand why "the feminine condition" debar women from philosophical system-building it is necessary to see what *The Second Sex* understands this condition to be—a central task of chapters 6 and 7 of my book. For now, I want to flag Beauvoir's explicit identification of Descartes as the author of a "truly great work," one that, by her definition, "in some sense does away with everything given." Putting this passage together with the one from Beauvoir's autobiography, one senses her ambivalence about philosophical system-building. On the one hand, the idea of it is exhilarating and she strongly admires those men, Sartre and Descartes to name two, who have the wherewithal to imagine that their personal views are, or are manifestations of, universal laws. On the other, Beauvoir identifies this wherewithal with obstinacy and madness and

suggests not just that it is at odds with “the feminine condition” but even that there is something narcissistically maniacal about the attempt to describe the world afresh, from the ground up, on the mere strength of your own belief in yourself and your ideas.

Beauvoir’s ambivalence about system-building in philosophy goes a long way, on my view, toward explaining why she does not take on the *Meditations* directly in *The Second Sex*. And yet there is a wealth of evidence in the introduction to her book indicating that this is precisely what she wished to do. Once one is on the alert for them, one cannot help but notice any number of striking similarities between the opening moves of Descartes’s and Beauvoir’s texts. Indeed, merely putting the texts side by side reveals remarkable affinities between the two. Here, for example, are the inaugurating lines of the *Meditations*:

Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood, and by the highly doubtful nature of the whole edifice that I had subsequently based on them. I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. But the task looked an enormous one, and I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such inquiries. This led me to put the project off for so long that I would now be to blame if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out. So today I have expressly rid my mind of all worries and arranged for myself a clear stretch of free time. I am here quite alone, and at last I will devote myself sincerely and without reservation to the general demolition of my opinions. (12)

And here, again, is how *The Second Sex* begins:

I have hesitated for a long time to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, above all for women; and it is not new. The *querelle du féminisme* has caused enough ink to be spilled. At present it is almost over: let’s not talk about it any longer. Yet one

does speak about it still. And it doesn't seem that the voluminous foolishness spouted during the last century has shed much light on the problem. Besides, is there a problem? And what is it? Are there even women? . . . We don't know any longer whether women still exist, if they will always exist, if it's necessary or not to wish for their existence, what place they occupy in this world, what place they should occupy there. (*LDS* 1:11, TM; see *TSS* xix)

In both cases, it is established in the first paragraph that the author has a long-standing interest in the project that is about to be undertaken and that this project has been deferred for a substantial period of time. And both Descartes and (a little later on) Beauvoir recognize that the special circumstances of their lives have prepared them especially well for the investigations they are taking on. Descartes tells us straight away that he has a specific reason for writing the *Meditations*, namely, a desire to establish a firm foundation for the sciences. This is a reason, notice, that is, as it were, external to the *Meditations* itself, which is figured as essentially a stepping stone. Descartes also points out that he is well placed now, finally, to undertake this exercise, and he lays out the general conditions required for serious meditation: one must have reached a stage of life at which one has plenty of free time as well as what you might call sufficient psychological space to demolish one's entire edifice of opinions. Later in her introduction Beauvoir also reveals that what's driving the writing of *The Second Sex* is a desire that lies outside the range of the work itself, namely a wish to "define" herself (*TSS* xxi).<sup>28</sup> She argues that the project of posing what she archly calls "the woman question" (*TSS* xxxii) cannot be undertaken by just any person: the author must be a woman who can "afford the luxury of impartiality":

Already a number of us have never had to perceive our femininity as a constraint (*gêne*) or an obstacle. Many problems seem to us more essential than those that concern us in particular. This detachment even allows us to hope that our attitude will be objective. Still, we know the female world more intimately than do men because we have our roots in it. We sense more immediately what the fact of being female signifies for a human being, and we

concern ourselves more with knowing (*LDS* 1:29–30, TM; *TSS* xxxiii–xxxiv).<sup>29</sup>

Most critically, from the outset both Descartes and Beauvoir make it clear that their projects are undertaken in the spirit of some kind of skepticism. Descartes will doubt all of his opinions; Beauvoir will doubt whether women exist. Both authors also recognize from the beginning that their doubt is likely to strike the reader as excessive. Descartes observes that he cannot doubt all of his opinions simply on the grounds that his senses occasionally deceive him:

How could it be denied that these hands or this whole body are mine? Unless perhaps I were to liken myself to madmen, whose brains are so damaged by the persistent vapours of melancholia that they firmly maintain that they are kings when they are paupers, or say they are dressed in purple when they are naked, or that their heads are made of earthenware, or that they are pumpkins, or made of glass. (13)

Beauvoir, as we have seen, warns that most talk about women constitutes “voluminous nonsense.” But in a matter of paragraphs both Descartes and Beauvoir provide good reason for us to consider the possibility that we don’t have a firm claim on what we thought we knew. In Beauvoir’s case, various pat (and even not so pat) definitions of “woman” are provided, and each is shown to be problematic: “But conceptualism has lost ground” (*TSS* xx); “But nominalism is a rather inadequate doctrine” (*TSS* xx). In Descartes’s case, the dreaming and evil-demon hypotheses prove difficult to dismiss. So early on Descartes feels himself licensed to doubt that he himself exists, while Beauvoir attempts to earn the right to doubt that women exist, which, since she herself is nominally, at least, a woman, turns out also to be some form of doubting her own existence. Both the question “Do I really know anything?” and the question “What is a woman?” are peculiar: it’s not at all obvious how to go about answering either of them or indeed what would count as an answer to either one. This is because the obvious responses manifestly won’t be pertinent, given the context in which the question is being asked. Descartes asks his

question about knowledge after taking himself to show that what ordinarily looks like knowledge has yet to prove worthy of the name. And Beauvoir asks her question about women after showing that the usual answers to her question—having to do with femaleness, “the eternal feminine,” and so on—are insufficient. In both cases, it is argued at the outset that we lack a clear understanding of a concept we use all the time. To the extent that these texts continue to move us, it appears that, despite the production of many other texts on these subjects, we still feel we lack this understanding. That both texts continue to be read in the wake of these further texts is another feature they share.

Finally, there is the matter of both Descartes’s and Beauvoir’s conceiving of their work in terms of building upon *foundations*, foundations that in both cases prove deeply personal. In Descartes’s case, of course, it will turn out that what undergirds the entire structure of his knowledge is the indubitable fact of his own existence, something revealed to him in every act of thinking. And in Beauvoir’s case, it is the fact of her own identity that is supposed to serve as the foundation of an answer to the question: What is a woman? Immediately after directly posing this question in the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir declares, “I am a woman,” and she declares that “this truth is the background against which all further assertions will stand out.” In both cases, of course, the idiosyncrasies of the authors have nothing to do with the basis upon which they offer themselves as the foundations of their work. Rather, both Descartes and Beauvoir invite the reader to make the same sort of claim. This means that the fact that both authors identify themselves as well positioned to undertake the investigations they undertake is not supposed to imply that they are somehow superior *objects* of investigation. To the contrary: just as the power of the cogito depends entirely on the “I” who comes to see the indubitability of his existence, so the power of Beauvoir’s response to the question “What is a woman?” depends entirely on the “I” experiencing the indubitability of . . . not her sex, exactly, but let’s say her sex-identity, a sense of being what is called a woman.

Here, of course, there is a rather sharp disjunction with the *Meditations*. In principle, your sex doesn’t matter when you’re reading Descartes: the “I” of the cogito is not sex-sensitive. But if I’m correct in

taking Beauvoir's "I am a woman" to be her understanding of the foundation of any understanding of what a woman is, then of course it's going to matter quite a bit whether you find yourself able to make that claim. I do not think that Beauvoir here desires to limit her readership to women. It's not even that a man cannot ask the question "What is a woman?"; it's that to ask this question, a question that is supposed to be irreducibly personal, must constitute for him the asking of a question about his own sex-identity, namely the question "What is a man?" Now, this is precisely the question that Descartes asks in the second meditation, albeit only after he has taken himself to have established the fact of his own existence beyond the shadow of a doubt. But of course in his case this question is supposed to be anything but sex-specific—even though his first pass at an answer is that to be a man is to have "a face, hands, arms and the whole mechanical structure of limbs which can be seen in a corpse, and which I called the body" (17). Descartes's "What is a man?" is a version of the familiar age-old philosophical, not to say religious question. And this "man" is ordinarily assumed to be unproblematically sex-neutral. But it is as though Beauvoir is suggesting that the question about woman must somehow be asked *prior* to the question about man, as though we don't know how to take the word "man" in the question "What is a man?" or in the history of philosophy or for that matter in history in general until we ask what a woman is. I mean to claim, in other words, that Beauvoir's question "What is a woman?" replaces or perhaps displaces Descartes's "What is a man?"<sup>30</sup>

I have claimed that part of the Cartesian legacy that ought to be congenial to feminists, including critics of Descartes such as Bordo, is his revolutionary relocation of philosophical authority from external individuals and institutions to each human mind. But I have also suggested that the cost of this authority is a certain metaphysical solitude, one that is the basis of an epistemological solipsism, which, I conjectured, is a more specific way of naming what Bordo regards as the masculinist "detachment" in Descartes's philosophy. Now, if I have been successful in attempting to draw lines of affinity between the *Meditations* and *The Second Sex*, particularly as regards the stance of skepticism and the appeal to the reader to constitute the "I" of some sort of cogito, then we ought to find something in Beauvoir's work

that parallels or answers to the sense of detachment, of solitude and solipsism, in Descartes's achievement. Here is where it matters that the foundation of Beauvoir's assertions is not some profoundly isolated "I" but, rather, the fact that she is what is called a woman. This fact is her first response to the question "What is a woman?," a question the posing of which, I am arguing, explicitly constitutes a rejection of the priority of Descartes's "What is a man?," showing this question, by comparison, to be far less straightforward, far less unambiguously sex-neutral, than it looks in the light of Descartes's way of posing and responding to it. "I am a thing that thinks," begins Descartes's answer; but this start on a response is very different, in form as well as content, from Beauvoir's stark "I am." Descartes's identification of himself as a thinking thing is a direct result of his reasoning out that he, a representative man, is *not*, at least not in the first instance, his body. This is as much as to say that he is not, at least not in the first instance, a man—in, of course, the sex-specific sense of the word. Descartes's refusal of this identity is precisely the move in the *Meditations* that Beauvoir implicitly rejects. The rejection is implicit in her identifying herself as the foundation of an answer to the question "What is a woman?"; to make this declaration is at once to draw attention to what are for her two necessary starting points in her investigation: first, that she is embodied, and, second, that this embodiment is significant, that she answers, to put it particularly, to the name "woman."

To declare "I am" in response to the question "What is a woman?" ought not be seen, however, as a way of attempting to push the question out of the skeptical space that the Cartesian question I claim it replaces occupied. What this "I am" means is no less a metaphysical mystery than the question itself. Beauvoir's answer simply puts a face, or perhaps we should say a body, on the question. But she is able to personalize the investigation this way by virtue of the fact—a fact she finds unavoidable—that her body *counts as* the body of a woman. That is to say that in Beauvoir's displacement of Descartes's question there is integrally an appeal to a world of other people—the very people (herself included) who count her as a woman. What is implicitly rejected, this means, is Descartes's stance of metaphysical isolation, which of course I have been arguing is a way of specifying

what Bordo means in using the notion of “detachment.” But this does not mean that what Beauvoir is opposing to this stance is some stance of metaphysical *attachment*. It’s not, in other words, that she presumes to contest Descartes, at least here, on philosophical ground. Rather, what Beauvoir finds unavoidable, at the very outset of her work, is the *ordinary* fact of her finding and taking herself to be, in the first instance, a being whose identity is at root (in some sense that it will be an object of *The Second Sex* to spell out) *public*. The problem, after all, with being a “woman” is being *treated* as such by other people (and perhaps internalizing this treatment, so that your sense of yourself is shaped by it). In the introduction to *The Second Sex*, just after she asks what a woman is and declares herself, insofar as she is a woman, to represent the foundation of an answer, Beauvoir writes,

I am sometimes vexed during abstract discussions to hear men say to me, “You think thus and such because you are a woman.” But I know that my only defense would be to respond, “I think it because it is true,” thereby eliminating my subjectivity. It would be out of the question to reply, “And you think the contrary because you are a man”; for it is understood that the fact of being a man isn’t a singularity. A man is in the right in being man: it’s woman who is in the wrong. (*LDS* 1:14, TM; TSS xxi)

In posing the question of what a woman is, Beauvoir is not jettisoning her experience as a woman: this is experience in and on the basis of which she finds that what she is here calling her subjectivity is bound at crucial moments to be erased. Rather, Beauvoir is asking what it means to be called a woman, to be treated like a woman, to think of yourself as a woman, to find, suddenly and often, that your subjectivity, your personhood, has evanesced and that you are—you feel like—nothing more than a representative of your sex.

These are questions, I have claimed, that for Beauvoir are firmly rooted at the level of the ordinary, the level at which she finds herself declaring “I am” to her question. But this appeal to the ordinary, notice, is forced by Descartes’s metaphysical subliming of the question “What is a man?”; that is, Beauvoir’s rejoinder “What is a woman?” and the range of questions it entails must, after the Cartesian revolu-

tion in philosophy, be posed in an “ordinary” space that is created by the metaphysical. This means that her investigation, launched at the level of, or perhaps on behalf of, the ordinary, can engage Descartes’s only dialectically, only, in other words, by managing to move between and thereby transform the registers of the ordinary and the metaphysical. To hear Beauvoir’s questions, questions arising from Descartes’s nonacknowledgment of her ordinary experience, as philosophical questions is to find yourself unable to adopt, at least at the outset, what I have been calling the stance of Cartesian skepticism, of metaphysical isolation. It’s of the first importance that Beauvoir’s rejection of this stance does not come in the form of some abstract, purely intellectually motivated polemic but rather stems, again, from an ordinary fact—indeed, what she in effect tells us is *the* ordinary and therefore *the* unavoidable fact—about her own life. Beauvoir is not just rejecting Descartes’s investigation out of hand, not just kicking the stone that Samuel Johnson kicked in order to “prove” to philosophy that the world in fact really does exist. Rather, she is declaring that, being in the first instance a woman, she has no access, or, better, no obvious or immediate access, to Descartes’s stance of metaphysical isolation. Beauvoir’s “I am” strikes me as a rebuke to Descartes not because Beauvoir sees “detachment” as fundamentally masculinist but because Descartes, in claiming to be in the first instance merely a gender-neutral man, does not see *her*—that is, does not see woman, or more specifically, that a woman, or at least a woman such as Beauvoir, a woman who (to her surprise, remember) finds her gender philosophically unavoidable, cannot deny that she is “that structure of limbs which is called a human body” (Descartes 1985, 18). For Beauvoir to identify herself from the start as a woman, to offer herself up as a representative example of a woman, is to declare that the ontological status of the world cannot be a question for her, that she cannot be a philosopher in a certain sense of the word, at least until she comes to understand what it means to be—to be called, and to call herself—a woman.

This is to imply that Descartes’s skepticism is something of a luxury. At the end of book 1 of his *Treatise on Human Nature*, David Hume famously chronicles the schism between the world of his study, in which the vividness of the philosophical skepticism he conjures so

confounds him that he feels himself to be “in the most deplorable condition imaginable, environ’d with the deepest darkness, and utterly depriv’d of the use of every member and faculty;” and the world in which “I dine, I play a game of back-gammon, I converse, and am merry with my friends,” a world in which his speculations “appear so cold, and strain’d and ridiculous, that I cannot find in my heart to enter into them any farther.”<sup>31</sup> Hume’s skepticism comes alive for him only within the confines of his study, when he has the luxury of Descartes’s “clear stretch of time” to be alone and thinking. But in displacing Descartes’s question and attempting to work dialectically between the everyday and the metaphysical, Beauvoir is rejecting this kind of a flat difference between the two registers. She underscores that there is no place, or at least no specific or well-defined place, in which a woman overcome by the question “What is a woman?” can go to find the kind of relief that Hume describes. There is no place, in other words, in which a woman is no longer a woman (which is not the same as saying that there is no place in which a woman might forget, and for extended periods of time, that she is). Indeed, as Virginia Woolf so perfectly put it, the issue for women is not leaving but finding “a room of one’s own”—where here, of course, I am imagining, as I imagine Woolf did, too, that the room must be psychological, not to say spiritual or philosophical, as well as physical. And here is a place to note, as Beauvoir goes on to do at some length in Book 2 of *The Second Sex*, that under various inflections of the concept “woman”—“wife,” say, and especially, “mother”—the absence of opportunities for solitude can become positively menacing.

The point is not, I hope it is clear, that all men are in a position of luxury, material, philosophical, or otherwise. The point is that the skepticism Beauvoir chronicles and acts out in *The Second Sex* is one that women *live*, not just in some Humean study but all the time, or at least potentially all the time, in this “male world.” In *The Claim of Reason* Stanley Cavell identifies the place that skepticism is lived (as opposed, I might put it, to being merely thought, intellectualized) as in our relation to others, to what philosophers (perhaps over-intellectualizing the matter) like to call “other minds.”<sup>32</sup> Cavell turns the traditional priority within modern philosophy of “external-world”

and “other-minds” skepticism around: it is the case of skepticism with respect to others, he wants to show, that is more fundamental. And this is one way of articulating Beauvoir’s brief against Descartes (which is to emphasize, again, that the brief is supposed to be internal to philosophy, even if one of its issues is where the boundaries of philosophy lie). For Beauvoir, the question of how to tether herself to a world, to *the* world, cannot be answered apart from finding the room in this world, a world whose inhabitants’ judgment of her as (merely) a “woman” threatens to suffocate her, to pose it.

I want to say more at this juncture about the worry that Beauvoir’s acknowledgment of the importance of sex difference threatens to cast her investigation out of the realm of the philosophical, at least insofar as that realm is still defined by the boundaries of the *Meditations*. A hugely important legacy of Descartes’s work is his drawing of a sharp line (the same line that is so dramatically re-sketched by Hume) between the realm of everyday life and the realm of the metaphysical, that is to say of philosophy. The drawing of this line is at least in part a result of Descartes’s vision of philosophy as something that can be done by each human mind, regardless of a person’s particular circumstances, where, again, each human mind is supposed to be imbued with the same powers of rationality and therefore the same potential for grounding philosophical authority as any other. A notorious consequence of the sharp line between the everyday and the metaphysical, at least as I have described it, is of course the so-called “mind-body” split. Now, in identifying sex difference as a starting point for a philosophical investigation, Beauvoir is implicitly denying that, as a woman, she can think within the confines of this split. For it is of course the fact of human embodiment that supports the practice of identifying ourselves and others as male and female, masculine and feminine, men and women. This is not to say that Beauvoir thinks we ought to be sanguine in our understanding of the relationship between thought and the body; to the contrary, this is exactly the sort of issue that she’s undertaking to examine in her work. That this issue is a philosophical issue, so that posing it in the context of finding herself unable to work with or within or around the idea of a mind-body split does not in fact debar Beauvoir’s work from the realm of the

philosophical has to do, I wish to argue, with its being an instance of her interest in establishing what I have been referring to as a dialectic in *The Second Sex* between the everyday and the philosophical.

The medium of this dialectic is the very concept “woman.” A philosophical investigation of this concept is bound to appeal to ordinary experience. And yet what creates the very idea of “ordinary” experience—that is, experience that is not philosophical—is exactly the sort of metaphysics we see Descartes in essence inventing in the *Meditations*, that is, exactly the sort of metaphysics that I have been arguing a person who sees herself as in the first instance a woman will find beyond her grasp (ontologically, as it were, of course; not intellectually). This is to say—isn’t it?—that the line between the metaphysical and the ordinary blurs in the concept “woman.” This fact in and of itself constitutes a philosophical opportunity, but it also complicates the already complicated question of where the authority to exploit this opportunity is to come from. I have claimed that Beauvoir’s method in *The Second Sex* constitutes an inheritance of the Cartesian method of meditation, in which the source of philosophical authority is explicitly the meditating reader. This means that an inquiry into the concept “woman” is inevitably going to demand that the reader bring his or her *own* experience with this concept, which, of course, will be everyday experience, to bear on the investigation. This demand surfaces, however, not in the form of a direct appeal, as it does in the preface to the *Meditations*, but instead in the form of Beauvoir’s claim to be a representative woman. What Beauvoir wishes to do through this claim is to *provoke* the reader into checking her or his experience against her or his own sense of what being a woman comes to (so that the strategy here is rather more Socratic, if you will, than Cartesian). But then of course it’s precisely the meaning of our everyday experience with the concept “woman”—with, that is, the experience of being or of experiencing women—that is under investigation in *The Second Sex* and is shown in the light of the history of women, and of modern philosophy, to require a re-thinking. So the way that what I’m calling a dialectic in *The Second Sex* between the everyday and the philosophical works is that our ordinary understanding of ourselves is revealed to us, through the author’s arrogation of authority, to stand

in need of a philosophical investigation that must appeal to this ordinary understanding in order to proceed.

It is no wonder, then, that this arrogation of authority feels to many readers like a display of arrogance. I suggested earlier that Beauvoir's arrogation of authority, her courting of the charge of arrogance, puts her in the company of certain men who have had to fight for the title of philosopher, men such as Marx and Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. So it should not be surprising that her drawing attention to herself as a (representative) woman, in addition to provoking the reader to follow her in thinking philosophically about sex difference, also has the effect of putting the philosophical possibilities of *The Second Sex* in doubt. Then there is the fact that Beauvoir herself insists that as a woman she is not in a position to challenge the world from the ground up, that the feminine condition is such that she lacks the stubbornness to imagine that her own ideas might be universal laws. But I have been arguing that in launching her investigation by claiming to be a representative woman, Beauvoir is in essence proposing that her own *experience* of the world is in various respects, respects having to do with her sex, universal. If you take it that Beauvoir knows from the start what these respects are, then you may well regard her claim as narrow-minded and arrogant, just as you may well lack a taste for *The Passions of the Soul* or *The Critique of Dialectical Reason*. But if you read her to be attempting to forge a way of investigating her experience, of genuinely exploring her discovery that the first thing she has to say about herself is that she is a woman, a discovery by a philosopher that has formed the foundations of exactly no previous inquiry in the history of philosophy, then perhaps you will be inclined to view *The Second Sex* as a truly great work.<sup>33</sup>

The Truth of Self-Certainty: A Rendering of  
Hegel's Master-Slave Dialectic

Anyone interested in inaugurating an investigation from the inside into the nature of philosophy's relationship with women must be sensitive to the possibility that her very starting points or methods are part of the problem. The question is how to conduct a genuinely *philosophical* investigation into the nature of sex bias in philosophy—that is, an investigation that does not take its own immunity from such bias for granted. I'm going to claim in the course of the next five chapters that Simone de Beauvoir provides an answer to this question. In her work, I want to argue, we find not only the rudiments of a viable internal investigation of philosophical sexism but also a strong argument for the idea that the possibility of radical critique, critique driven by aspirations not just to correct but even to transform the discipline, is closed to anyone who refuses to work from the inside. For Beauvoir, to do philosophy is to appropriate the tradition—that is to say, at least, the text, problems, and methods—of philosophy; and to refuse to appropriate the tradition is to refuse philosophy itself. Her work manifests the belief that to do philosophy well one must be braced for the possibility that one's very attempt to appropriate the tradition may ultimately land one outside it. But it's also Beauvoir's view that the aspiration to ap-

propriate the philosophical tradition demands an openness to the possibility that one's inquiry will issue in a radical critique, that it will call for a sea-change in philosophers' understanding of what they do, or ought to do.

The prospect that philosophical work might lead her to discover that the discipline could not accommodate her demands of it might well have been particularly unsettling for Beauvoir, one of the first women actually accredited in the field.<sup>1</sup> There is in fact a mountain of evidence suggesting that she was daunted by philosophy: most pertinently, first, her repeated denials that she had the wherewithal for it, despite her excellent formal training, and, second, the fact that the preponderance of her published work is not philosophical, at least in any straightforward sense.<sup>2</sup> But I'm interested in this chapter in providing what you might call counterevidence to the view, widely accepted even among her admirers, that Beauvoir, though a success as an "intellectual," did not aspire to, let alone achieve, philosophical originality in her work.<sup>3</sup> It's my view, in fact, that her very worries about whether she was suited for philosophy (and vice versa) led her to find a fresh way of appropriating the tradition, a way of redirecting it from the inside, which itself lies waiting to be appropriated. I am going to propose that Beauvoir's work provides an important and severely underappreciated model for a feminist intervention in, and appropriation of, the philosophical tradition.

Specifically, I'm going to focus on Beauvoir's appropriation in *The Second Sex* of the so-called master-slave dialectic in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, an appropriation that takes place in the light of her dissatisfactions with Sartre's taking-up of the dialectic in *Being and Nothingness*. There is no doubt that in many respects the Beauvoir of *The Second Sex* is indebted to Sartre's early work, particularly in her appropriation of many of the technical terms of *Being and Nothingness* (most of which, however, are themselves appropriations from earlier figures, prominently among them Hegel and Heidegger): "self," "other," "subject," "object," "authenticity," "being-in-itself," "being-for-itself," "being-for-others," and (Sartre's signature concept) "bad faith." Indeed, any study of Beauvoir's work that neglects her indebtedness to Sartre will be seriously distorted. But I argue here that in taking up Sartre's terminology Beauvoir decisively establishes her own kink in

the history of philosophy, a kink, to repeat, that can be seen to provide a model for a new kind of feminist intervention in the discipline.

Beauvoir's philosophical achievement in her appropriation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic is marked by what I call her "domestication" of the dialectic in the context of her exploration of sex difference. That Beauvoir makes reference to the dialectic throughout *The Second Sex* and that she uses some of its terms in developing her conception of relations between the sexes are facts that lie right on the surface of the text. The master, evidently, is supposed to correlate somehow with the man; the slave, the woman. Most readers of Beauvoir have been inclined to imagine that she's borrowing these terms "master" and "slave" from Hegel for what is ultimately a nonphilosophical purpose: to dramatize the simplistic idea that men have all the power in the world and women must do their bidding. But if we take seriously the hypothesis that *The Second Sex* counts as a genuine philosophical appropriation of the master-slave dialectic, a genuine furtherance of philosophy, then this superficial reading comes to look decidedly inadequate. This is because for Hegel, and for Beauvoir in following him, the position of the master is not superior to that of the slave in every respect: *morally*, on Hegel's view, it is the slave, and not the master, who is in a position to aspire to the kind of life a human being is capable of living and ought to aspire to live. Indeed, the ethical attenuation of the master's position is precisely what makes the relationship between the master and the slave fundamentally unstable and thus advances the dialectical movement of *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. In appropriating the master-slave dialectic Beauvoir means to suggest that to the extent that they are systematically oppressed on the basis of their sex women are particularly well placed to achieve what might be called genuine humanity. A basic task of *The Second Sex*, then, is to show how the context of exploring sex difference both calls for and informs, as it were, the master-slave dialectic.

The simplistic reading, as I am calling it, of Hegel's influence on *The Second Sex* also fails to attend to the way Beauvoir takes up the idea that, contrary to appearances, both the master and the slave are ontologically *split*, or as both Hegel and Beauvoir put it, "ambiguous," as between being what they both call "subjects" and "objects." On the surface of things, it may look as though the master, or the man, is fig-

ured as a pure subject and the slave, or the woman, as a pure object. But in fact, according to both Hegel and Beauvoir, this appearance is deceptive; both the master/man and the slave/woman are properly seen as, simultaneously, both subjects and objects. And for both, coming to recognize and accept oneself in one's ambiguity is the necessary precondition of the moral life. This interpretation of Beauvoir's view goes against the grain of the standard interpretation, which is that men are subjects and women are objects and that ending the oppression of women requires that they become subjects (a reigning idea in the early days of the current wave of feminism). Those who interpret Beauvoir as making these claims have in recent years criticized her heavily for holding up man as the standard of what a fully realized human being looks like and suggesting, in effect, that women as they stand are inferior to men, and they ought to try to emulate them.<sup>4</sup> In stark contrast to this understanding of Beauvoir's position, I interpret her as suggesting, once again with Hegel in view, that aspiring to be a fully realized human being requires that a person, man or woman, develop a consciousness of himself or herself as inevitably—and simultaneously—both a subject and object. I emphasize the notion of simultaneity here because, as I will argue at length in chapter 4, Beauvoir's belief that human beings are always both subjects and objects at the same time is directly at odds with Sartre's understanding of what it is to be a person. Further, I want to relate the conception of ambiguity Beauvoir inherits from Hegel to the implicit critique of Descartes's mind-body split that, I argued in chapter 2, is at the heart of Beauvoir's ambitions and achievements in *The Second Sex*. For Beauvoir, to philosophize from the fact of one's experience as a sexed being is to be unable to accept the sorts of splits that characterize both Descartes's and Sartre's most memorable works. But it's also to require a genuine reworking of the Hegelian notion of ambiguity, one motivated by Beauvoir's giving a face—and a body—to the master, and to the slave.

I cannot emphasize this point enough. What interests me about Beauvoir's appropriation of the master-slave dialectic is not just that it puts her in a position to inflect Hegel's notion of ambiguity, nor that it constitutes a certain kind of challenge to various features of the dialectic. Anyone who knows anything about the history of

European philosophy after Hegel can tick off a list of thinkers—including Marx, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Husserl, and Freud—who have explicitly taken the notion of ambiguity and perspectivism (or situatedness) in various fruitful directions. While an ancillary goal of mine is to place Beauvoir squarely in the company of these thinkers (as an equal, not just as a student), my central aim is to show just how the context of her starting her philosophical work in *The Second Sex* with the question “What is a woman?” makes a fateful difference both in the way she writes and in the philosophical conclusions she reaches. The claim is not that Beauvoir’s work is hands-down superior to that of her male forebears. It is that her work stands as a challenge to all of them insofar as her mindfulness of the bearing of sex difference—and, more particularly, her sense of the significance and mystery of her own womanhood—on the phenomena they explore represents a fundamental challenge both to the past and future of philosophy.

If the distortions of the standard interpretation of Hegel’s influence on *The Second Sex* are due in part to a failure to see Beauvoir as appropriating Hegel and not just taking advantage of his terminology, they are also associated, not surprisingly, with the presumption, still commonplace, that Beauvoir’s philosophy, such as it is, is profoundly parasitic on Sartre’s.<sup>5</sup> In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre expressly argues that what we can learn from reading, and criticizing, the master-slave dialectic is that to be a full person is to be a subject while to let yourself be an object is to reduce yourself to a mere thing; and no human being is ever both a subject and an object at the same time. Sartre’s aim in his appropriation of Hegel, as I will show in detail in chapter 4, is to argue that the only way to become a subject is to make oneself a subject, and the only way to make oneself a subject is to turn somebody else into an object. For Sartre, then, to be genuinely human is to aspire to mastery; to be the victim of someone else’s achievement of humanity is to be what Sartre, appropriating Hegel, calls a slave. And for him the master-slave situation is unstable only in the sense that whether or not one is a slave is a standing question whose answer at any given moment depends entirely on whether or not one has the personal fortitude in that moment to assert one’s mastery over someone else—that is, as Sartre understands things, the wherewithal to attain the status of being a subject by transforming another person into

an object. Every human being, on Sartre's bleak view, is always, in all times and places, by definition engaged in a struggle for mastery with other human beings.

That Hegel thought this struggle could itself be overcome results, Sartre claims, from his "failure" to follow out the implications of his best intuitions, such as the intuition that being a subject has to do with one's relationships with other people.<sup>6</sup> Implicit in this understanding of Hegel is the view that appropriating another philosopher's work (as opposed to just offering an interpretation of it) amounts to discerning and correcting his or her errors with an eye toward producing a better, error-free comprehensive theory. This is, of course, a very familiar view of how philosophers can use their interest in other philosophers' ideas to make their own original contributions to the field. But I am going to argue that this understanding of what philosophical appropriation is and why it is worthwhile is not operative in Beauvoir's work. For her, I will try to show, the test of whether a philosopher's work is worthy of appropriation is not whether it is susceptible to correction but whether it provides one with a philosophical *idiom*, a set of terms and concepts that open up a productive way to do one's own philosophical work.<sup>7</sup> According to this way of understanding philosophical appropriation, whether or not a philosopher's best intuitions can be brought to cohere into a theory is beside the point. What matters is their raw intuitiveness, which is to say their ability to gain and hold one's conviction and to spur one's philosophizing regardless of the specific philosophical questions one finds oneself addressing. Indeed, in Beauvoir's view, the richness of such intuitions manifests itself in part in the way they provoke one to think in new philosophical contexts—contexts that may well (and, in Beauvoir's case, do) produce an implicit surpassing (Hegel might say subsuming) of the work appropriated. There's a certain irony in Beauvoir's holding this view of how to appropriate another philosopher's work, a view, I'm arguing, that leads Beauvoir to intuitions—intuitions about the nature and significance of sex difference as well as about what philosophical appropriation can look like—that themselves stand waiting to be appropriated. The irony is that Beauvoir, one of the first formally trained woman philosophers in the West, refused Sartre's understanding of appropriation because she felt

that for a woman of her generation to aspire to be recognized by her male colleagues as philosophically “original” (which would amount to the acknowledgment that she had overturned and rebuilt a great figure’s system) was, in a word, preposterous.

This attitude accounts at least in part, I think, for the relative modesty of the aspirations and achievements of those of Beauvoir’s works generally recognized as straightforwardly philosophical, works in which Beauvoir is at pains to position herself as essentially Sartre’s disciple.<sup>8</sup> But my interpretation of Beauvoir’s aspirations and achievements in *The Second Sex* is going to highlight evidence that she was struggling even in her earlier, straightforwardly philosophical texts and particularly in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), written shortly before *The Second Sex* (1949) to express her disagreements with Sartre and to find a way of producing genuinely original philosophical work. Paradoxically, it took Beauvoir’s investigating something she did not regard as primarily a philosophical topic, namely, the situation of women, to yield her most important contribution to philosophy. Her existential need, as it were, to investigate the nature of inequality between the sexes spawns a genuinely original appropriation of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, one in which philosophy’s silence on the fact of this inequality is philosophically redressed.

In the present chapter I offer a rendering of the master-slave dialectic in order to establish a foundation for understanding both Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s appropriations of it. Then in chapter 4 I explore Sartre’s appropriation of the dialectic as evidenced, mainly, in the section of *Being and Nothingness* called “The Look.” I show that Sartre’s motivation for appropriating Hegel has more to do with his sense of dissatisfaction with the dialectic, his sense that the systematicity of Hegel’s philosophy needs to be shored up, than with his (explicitly averred) recognition of the rich intuitiveness of certain of Hegel’s ideas. I also show how this motivation ironically leads Sartre to put aside parts of the master-slave dialectic that look for all the world as though they might further his overarching aim in *Being and Nothingness* of showing human beings to be radically, existentially free. In chapter 5 I track what I argue is Beauvoir’s attempt in her early, pre-*Second Sex* philosophical work to express her philosophical difference from Sartre, in part through struggling to articulate her fascination

with Hegel's dialectic. Finally, in chapters 6 and 7 I look at Beauvoir's appropriation of the dialectic in *The Second Sex*, focusing on the shift in her philosophizing from the early work. I attempt to chronicle the rich intuitions yielded by Beauvoir's domestication of the dialectic in the context of sex difference, a domestication made possible by her perception of the richness of Hegel's own idiom. And I focus on what I read as Beauvoir's highly intuitive suggestion that our inclination to recognize each other as belonging to one or the other of two basic types of human beings (man and woman) can be seen as a wish to ward off the exacting demands of our inherent ambiguity.

#### THE MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC: A BEAUVOIRIAN RENDERING

The rendering of the master-slave dialectic that I'm about to offer has a very specific purpose: to provide the necessary foundation for making sense of my understanding of Sartre's and Beauvoir's appropriations of it, where making sense of my understanding of Sartre's appropriation is in turn preparatory for making sense of my understanding of Beauvoir's appropriation of Sartre. My claim in all of this, the claim on which the viability of this project rests, is that Simone de Beauvoir is worth taking seriously as an independent philosophical thinker, where the word "independent" is meant to signal the originality and importance of her appropriation of the ideas and concepts she has inherited from the philosophical tradition. My analysis rests, further, on the claim that the history of philosophy can plausibly be characterized as the history of such appropriations, so that the question of what counts, or ought to count, as original and important work in the discipline—of which attempts at appropriation themselves perennially invite further (perennially inviting) appropriations—is also at least implicitly under investigation in this work. That Hegel's writing counts as such is confirmed, or reconfirmed, I'm claiming, by the powerful appropriation of his work that we find in Beauvoir. But to support this claim there's no need for me to provide an independent appropriation of the master-slave dialectic.

Indeed it would be beside the point for me to attempt to do so. Therefore, in what follows I make no effort, for example, to locate the dialectic within the frame of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, let alone the wider body of Hegel's work.<sup>9</sup> I further set aside questions that any genuine appropriation of Hegel's text would need to address: To whom does the dialectic apply? Is it to be taken as a picture of human nature in general? Is it an allegory, a piece of history, an illustration? My goal is to render Hegel so that Beauvoir's answers to questions such as these come to seem philosophically pressing.

I have been helped in this rendering by Alexandre Kojève's famous series of lectures on the *Phenomenology*, delivered in Paris between 1933 and 1939, students' notes from which were published in 1947 (i.e., two years before the appearance of *Le Deuxième Sexe*).<sup>10</sup> The first chapter, "In Place of an Introduction," which comprises Kojève's translation of the dialectic and various elaborations of the text, has been especially useful. Kojève's influence as a reader of Hegel on Paris intellectuals from the 1930s at least through the 1950s is impossible to overestimate. No one thinking about Hegel during those years could possibly avoid having to take account of his interpretations. Indeed, Sartre and Beauvoir were typical of Parisian intellectuals in their lack of pre-Kojévian experience with the *Phenomenology*. Paris before Kojève ignored the book not only because it was not published in French until Jean Hyppolite's translation appeared at the tail end of Kojève's lecture series but also because no prominent French scholar before Kojève and Hyppolite had taken an interest in it.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore not as odd as it might appear that Sartre's own interest in phenomenology in fact predated his reading of Hegel's book by several years; by the time Sartre first encountered the *Phenomenology*, his own *Being and Nothingness*—the subtitle of which is *A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*—was nearly complete.<sup>12</sup>

Beauvoir apparently "discovered" the *Phenomenology* in 1940, during a time when notes from Kojève's lectures were beginning to be published and when Sartre was detained in Germany as a prisoner of war. She first mentions Hegel to Sartre in a letter dated July 11, 1940: "You know, Hegel's horribly difficult, but also extremely interesting. You must know him—it's akin to your own philosophy of nothingness. I'm enjoying reading him and thinking precisely about expound-

ing him to you” (*Letters to Sartre* 314). At the time that she began reading Hegel seriously (at the Bibliothèque National every afternoon from two to five)<sup>13</sup> Beauvoir was working on what was to become her first published novel, *L’invitée*, the epigraph to which is a famous line from the master-slave dialectic: “Each consciousness seeks the death of the other.” The timing of all these events makes it practically impossible to imagine that Beauvoir was unfamiliar with Kojève’s work on Hegel. Eva Lundgren-Gothlin reports that when she interviewed Beauvoir at the end of her life, Beauvoir denied having attended Kojève’s seminars—which makes sense, given that she apparently did not begin reading the *Phenomenology* until the year after these seminars ended. “But,” Lundgren-Gothlin quotes Beauvoir as saying, “I had read what Kojève had written and it had interested me a great deal. Particularly interesting was what he had written about the master and slave dialectic.”<sup>14</sup> It was a persistent sense of this interest of Beauvoir’s in Kojève’s interpretation of Hegel that sent me back to Kojève’s lectures. Kojève’s influence on the way I’m about to render Hegel’s dialectic shows up most directly in my decision at various junctures to use his interpretations of the text instead of stricter translations of the *Phenomenology*.

What moves both Sartre and Beauvoir to appropriate the dialectic, which comprises paragraphs 178 through 196 of the *Phenomenology* (section A of part 4), is the conception of human self-consciousness they see Hegel articulating in these passages, a conception driven by two basic intuitions: first, that the full flowering of human self-consciousness is not, as it were, automatic but instead is the result of a process; and, second, that this process necessitates that human beings recognize each other as capable of this full flowering.<sup>15</sup> In a prologue to the dialectic, Hegel foreshadows what he calls the three “moments” of self-consciousness, which for the sake of explanation I’ll identify as “primary,” “secondary,” and “tertiary” (see para. 176).<sup>16</sup> Primary self-consciousness is, roughly speaking, a simple sense of oneself as a discrete being over and against the rest of the world—independent from what in Hegel’s terms is “other” (para. 186). The independent “I” that is the object of primary self-consciousness takes account of what is “other” only insofar as it has the potential to satisfy the desires primary self-consciousness finds itself experiencing. For primary self-

consciousness, says Hegel, “its essence and absolute object is ‘I’”; and what is “other” is regarded as “unessential” (para. 186). Secondary self-consciousness is marked by the realization that the very existence of the “I” is irrevocably dependent on the existence of independent objects, since the “I,” after all (self-consciousness understands in this moment) is nothing other than what Hegel calls “Desire” (for these objects). This realization of the dependence of the “I” on what appears now to be independent of it raises for secondary self-consciousness a worry that in fact it is the “I” that might be unessential—might be, that is, an “other,” at least from the point of view of the independent object. In this secondary moment of self-consciousness, therefore, self-consciousness perceives a clash between its conception of the “I” as essential (the central conception of primary self-consciousness) and its conception of the “I” as merely “other.” Tertiary self-consciousness is marked by a harmonious unification of these two conceptions of the “I,” when, as Hegel puts it, “the unity of [a being] in its otherness becomes explicit for it” (para. 177). For Sartre and Beauvoir, the significance of the master-slave dialectic lies in great part in the intuitiveness of Hegel’s idea that genuinely human self-consciousness is not a given but is, rather, something that needs to be achieved in the form of a person’s developing and negotiating a sense of being split.<sup>17</sup>

For Hegel this sense of being split is closely tied to two conceptual dichotomies, that between subject and object and that between subjectivity and objectivity. Since these dichotomies are central to both Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s conceptions of the person, it’s important for my purposes to show how these pairs of terms come into play in Hegel’s picture of self-consciousness. To this end, it will help to refigure the differences among the moments of self-consciousness in terms of what Hegel calls “certainty” of oneself (see, e.g., para. 186). Hegel associates genuinely human self-consciousness with “objective” self-certainty and the two previous moments with “subjective” self-certainty. Subjective self-certainty is a sense of oneself as a being whose “essence and absolute object is ‘I’” (para. 186). A being subjectively certain of itself decisively distinguishes itself from the rest of the world, from what is “other,” and it regards the collection of objects that constitute what is “other” solely in terms of their usefulness or

lack thereof in fulfilling the given desires of the “I,” such as desires for food, shelter, and sex. Its life consists in attempting to satisfy these desires, and this is why the “absolute” object for it is its own desiring self. This makes it sound as though any being that is subjectively certain of itself, insofar as it tries to satisfy the desires of itself as absolute object, counts as a “subject.” But it’s crucial to Hegel’s view and to Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s appropriation of it to block this inference. This is because all of them define a subject as a being who *acts*; and action, they claim, is something that goes beyond mere attempts at fulfilling one’s desires as one finds them. Genuine action, for Hegel, Sartre, and Beauvoir, entails deliberately—self-consciously—undertaking to *transcend* one’s given desires by assigning oneself a project the fulfillment of which necessitates the subordination of those desires. So a subjectively self-certain being is not, and is not aware of itself as, a subject; rather, this being is certain of itself merely insofar as it takes the “I” and its desires to be absolutely valuable. The subjectively self-certain being is, to put it the way Hegel does, sure of itself as “being-for-itself” (*Fürsichsein* para. 186).

The transformation from having a sense of oneself simply as being-for-self to a more *human* mode of self-consciousness requires the confirmation, on Hegel’s view, of the *truth* of one’s subjective self-certainty, which is to say that it requires *objective* self-certainty. Objective certainty of oneself is that consciousness of oneself that one achieves only by staking a *claim* to be being-for-self and having the truth of that claim confirmed. Before I articulate my understanding of what Hegel takes this confirmation—and thus “objectivity” and “truth”—to consist in, I want to point out that the very staking of such a claim counts, on Hegel’s view, as a transcendence of one’s given self. This is because the desire to stake this claim is, according to him, not a given desire—where a “given” desire is one that a being has independent of its self-consciousness (of what Beauvoir and Sartre would call “reflection”)—but, rather, one that, as a product of the being’s self-consciousness, transcends, or goes beyond, the being’s given desires. Since transcending one’s given desires counts for Hegel as *acting* and since by his definition a being who acts is a *subject*, a being that stakes a claim to be being-for-itself transforms itself into a

subject regardless of whether the staking of the claim turns out to be successful or not—regardless, that is, of whether or not objective self-certainty is actually achieved.

Now, crucially for Hegel, the eliciting of the desire for objective self-certainty, this transcendent desire that leads to the transformation of a being into a genuine subject, unconditionally necessitates that the being encounter—literally meet up with—another self-conscious being. Here we have one of the most philosophically original and intuitively forceful of Hegel's moves in the dialectic, the moment in which he insists that full self-consciousness cannot be achieved, or even aspired to, in the absence of engagement with another self-consciousness. The idea that one's consciousness of oneself is intimately linked with one's relationships with others plays a central role in the thought of both Sartre and Beauvoir, albeit, as I shall argue, in decisively different ways.<sup>18</sup> For Hegel the encounter with another self-conscious being is the necessary goad to a quest for objective self-certainty, for it is only in the presence of another that a being comes to feel the inadequacy—the merely subjective nature—of its own sense of self. Upon encountering another, the subjectively self-certain being, says Hegel,

is indeed certain of its own self, but not of the other, and therefore its own self-certainty still has no truth. For it would have truth only if its own being-for-self had confronted it as an independent object, or, what is the same thing, if the object had presented itself as this pure self-certainty. (para. 186)

What I take Hegel to mean when he says that a being's subjective self-certainty would have truth (i.e., would also be objective) “only if its own being-for-self had confronted it as an independent object” or, equivalently, “if the object had presented itself as this pure self-certainty” is that this encounter reveals to the being the essential *privacy* of its own sense of itself, which implies that what is necessary for the dissipation of its doubting of this sense and thus its coming to the third moment of self-consciousness is something like its subjecting itself to the conditions of publicity. The need for this subjection would

be obviated only if the other being somehow automatically manifested the doubter's being-for-itself as a (public) object.

The possibility, raised and then immediately dropped by Hegel, that one's being-for-self might somehow automatically manifest itself in another being—the possibility, to put it another way, that the mere presence of the other could spontaneously confirm the truth of one's self-certainty—plays an important role in both Sartre's and Beauvoir's appropriations of the master-slave dialectic. For Sartre this possibility appears in the form of an implicit wish on the part of the subjectively self-certain being that the “other” could be an exact mirror image of himself.<sup>19</sup> On Sartre's view, nothing less than the fulfillment of this impossible wish could suffice to overcome for the subjectively self-certain being the sense of itself as split that is engendered by encountering another self-conscious being. This means that sensing oneself to be split is, for Sartre, an inescapable part of being a socialized human being. For Beauvoir, on the other hand, relinquishing the wish for the other to be, as it were, exactly like oneself—cultivating a willingness to subject oneself to what is genuinely other—opens up a way to see, paradoxically, that the other is, figuratively speaking, *essentially* like oneself (i.e., is a *human* being), insofar as he or she is capable of accepting himself or herself as split (or, more precisely, “ambiguous”). Beauvoir equates risking a certain investment in one's privacy (figured as a wish to automatically be transparent to oneself and others) with a commitment to objectivity, a commitment she regards as demanding an acceptance of oneself as ambiguous and one that she takes to be a prerequisite of any *morally* productive form of human self-consciousness.<sup>20</sup>

Hegel puts the problem posed by the encounter with “the other” in a slightly different way earlier in the dialectic, in paragraphs 179 through 181, when he observes that the encounter reveals to a being its own status as an other for the other. He suggests that when a subjectively self-certain being encounters another self-conscious being, it begins to feel itself to be split in a self-contradictory way between, on the one hand, its status for itself as absolute being-for-itself and, on the other hand, its status for the other as merely other. Hegel's word for this particular manifestation of a sense of being split is of course

“ambiguity” (the German *Doppelsinnes*; see, e.g., para. 180), and it is at the heart of the subjectively self-certain being’s initial response to the encounter with the other. The subjectively self-certain being initially does not, Hegel says, “see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self” (para. 179), figured (in the other’s eyes) as other. The encountered being impresses the subjectively self-certain being only in revealing to it its otherness and, therefore, ambiguity. And it is this very ambiguity that reveals the self-consciousness of the subjectively self-certain being as being-for-itself to be *merely* subjective and therefore inadequate. It follows in this being’s eyes that resolving its identity crisis requires overcoming this sense of otherness—this particular manifestation of ambiguity. And since its sense of itself as other constitutes the entirety of its perception of the encountered being, it follows that overcoming this sense of itself requires overcoming the encountered being.<sup>21</sup>

Before I discuss what this overcoming entails, I want to look briefly at Hegel’s observation in paragraph 180 that the very overcoming of this particular manifestation of ambiguity through the overcoming of the encountered being inevitably produces a *second* form of ambiguity. The inevitability of this second form of ambiguity turns on the fact that the subjectively self-certain being recognizes itself, albeit as “other,” in the encountered being. This fact implies that its overcoming of the encountered being constitutes the overcoming of *itself* (as other). In Hegel’s language, through the overcoming “it receives back its own self” (para. 181). But while it is, therefore, no longer split as between its subjectively certain sense of itself and its sense of itself as other—while it is again, as Hegel puts it “equal” to itself—the nature of this apparently unified self remains ambiguous. This is because the newly incorporated part of the self, the part it saw as its own in the encountered being, is by definition no longer “other.” It is *part* of the self. And yet the self remains split as between its sense of itself as (now) objectively real (as an object) and its new sense of itself as an actor, a subject. In moving from subjective to objective self-certainty through the encountering and overcoming of another being’s sense of itself, the formerly subjectively self-certain being by definition undergoes a transformation the nature of which leaves it with a new, permanent sense of its own ambiguity. Furthermore, the return of the

self under its aspect as “other” to the subjectively self-certain being in effect releases the encountered being from the subjectively self-certain being’s fixating—in this day and age we might say “narcissistic”—perception of it. The encountered being, in other words, is no longer perceived by the formerly subjectively self-certain being as an embodiment of its own otherness. And this implies what Hegel in paragraph 181 identifies as a third ambiguity, or perhaps a third form of ambiguity, which concerns the being’s subsequent sense of the other in the wake of its retreat back into itself, a retreat that also transforms the other insofar as it gives that other back, as it were, to itself. The other is now both the being capable of revealing to the subjectively self-certain being its own objective self-certainty and—something else, as yet, at least, unknown. What’s supposed to be ambiguous for the subjectively self-certain being here, as I understand it, is the way these two identities of the other fit together—which is to say that the other being, too, is perceived as split.

For Beauvoir the relinquishing of a certain form of narcissism in favor of risking an uncertain, unfixed, *ambiguous* relationship with the other is going to play the role that the suppression of inclination in favor of respecting the moral law plays in Kant. That is, it *is* the moral moment. For Sartre, quite to the contrary, the inevitable failure of the quest for objective self-certainty—the inevitable failure of the quest to overcome the other, understood as depriving him of the ability to objectify you—entails the impossibility of relinquishing precisely that form of narcissism that Beauvoir regards as impeding the moral moment. Notoriously, it is still a question even for Sartre at the end of *Being and Nothingness* whether his version of existentialism makes room for something recognizable as genuinely moral relations among human beings. In the last sentence of the book, at the end of a four-page section called “Ethical Implications,” Sartre promises to deliver another book “on the ethical plane” (798), but although he compiled many pages of notes to this end (some of which were published posthumously in 1983 as *Cahiers pour une Morale*), he did not complete such a work.<sup>22</sup>

Hegel’s picture of the encounter with the other is complicated, as he observes in paragraph 182, by the fact that the encountered being must also be a subjectively self-certain being seeking recognition. This

is because in order for the encountered being to be for the subjectively self-certain being something more than an object—more than something, that is, that merely either does or does not attract its desire—this being must make manifest its own desire, stake its own claim for recognition. Hegel observes that this situation of mutuality creates a paradox, namely, that

each is for the other the middle term, through which each mediates itself with itself and unites with itself; and each is for itself, and for the other, an immediate being on its own account, which at the same time is such only through this mediation. (para. 184)

For Hegel it is paradoxically only *through* the “other” that each subjectively self-certain being can hope to experience the truth of its own self-consciousness; only through the mediation of the other can each being hope to achieve, as Hegel puts it, “this pure abstraction of being-for-self” (para. 186).<sup>23</sup>

So how exactly, on Hegel’s account, does one subjectively self-certain being imagine that the other can confirm its sense of itself as pure being-for-itself? Hegel begins to address these questions at the outset of paragraph 187, whose significance, I think, is best brought out through Kojève’s translation:

The *manifestation* of the human-individual taken as pure abstraction of Being-for-itself consists in showing itself as being the pure negation of its objective-or-thingish mode-of-being—or, in other words, in showing that to be for oneself, or to be a man [*être homme*], is not to be bound to any determined *existence*, not to be bound to the universal isolated-particularity of existence as such, not to be bound to life.<sup>24</sup>

What each subjectively self-certain being is seeking in its encounter with another is to resolve its sense of being split by demonstrating that it is *essentially* being-for-itself and only *appears* to be a mere object, a mere chunk of being, a mere *thing*. This is something each being needs to prove to itself as much as to the other, for it’s the way each imagines it can achieve a satisfactory resolution of its sense of be-

ing split. Each needs to evince its willingness to destroy itself insofar as it is an object through an indubitable demonstration of what it wishes to be seen as the *fact* that it is essentially being-for-itself. And since each being's appearance as an object is tied to its particular embodiment, each being must demonstrate that its embodiment—and therefore its very *life*—is dispensable. This demonstration therefore must take the form of the being's resisting the rote demands of the "I" of primary self-consciousness, epitomized by the desire for self-preservation. If the being succeeds in resisting these demands, then it will show itself to be not only essentially being-for-itself but also essentially, existentially, *free*: free not to slavishly do the bidding of the brute desires of the "I." It is therefore through this very demonstration that the being will constitute its freedom. As Hegel puts it:

It is only through staking one's life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the *immediate* form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing present in it which could not be regarded as a vanishing moment, that it is only pure *being-for-self*. (para 187; brackets in the Miller translation)

This intuition—the intuition that achieving the fullest form of self-consciousness amounts to claiming one's freedom; that this claim requires a confrontation between self and world; and that all of this is to be part of the notion of being-for-itself, properly understood—this Hegelian intuition plays for Sartre and Beauvoir the role that the extremely rich intuitive notion of the "thing-in-itself" has played for many readers of Kant. That is, it makes Hegel as unavoidable a thinker for them in considering what a human being is as Kant is for philosophers in considering what an object is.

With the idea that what is required for objective self-certainty is a subjectively self-certain being's publicly acknowledged demonstration of existential freedom, we arrive at the juncture of the master-slave dialectic at which Hegel insists on the absolute necessity of the notorious "life-and-death struggle," in which "each [participant] seeks the death of the other" (para. 187). But why must there be a struggle to

the *death*? Why can't the encountering beings simply acknowledge one another before that point, even, perhaps, from the start? Hegel's answer is that because the other represents that which threatens the truth of a being's self-consciousness as being-for-itself—represents for it, that is, its sense of its status as an object—getting rid of the other is the only way to get rid of itself as other. In Hegel's words, the problem is that what appears to each participant to be its own "essential being" is "present to it in the form of an 'other,' it is outside of itself" so that the task is to "rid itself of its self-externality" (para. 187). Thus the life-and-death struggle is born of each participant's need manifestly to risk its own life (its own status as a mere thing) and to destroy the life of the "other," of, more precisely, *itself* as other.

And yet if one participant succeeds in, literally, killing the other, then it necessarily fails to obtain the truth of its subjective self-consciousness. In its lifelessness—its decisive reduction to the status of mere thinghood—the defeated participant would be manifestly incapable of acknowledging the being-for-itself of the victor. That there is a crucial link between life and self-consciousness is a piece of knowledge that each participant comes to possess only in the course of the struggle against the other; in risking its own life and setting out to kill the other participant in the struggle, as Hegel puts it, "self-consciousness learns that life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness" (para. 189). This discovery has at least two implications. First, each participant sees that it must find some other way to destroy its own otherness as manifested in the other participant. But second, and more important, each sees that its initial desire to confirm the truth of itself as unmediated being-for-self—unadulterated freedom—is unfulfillable. This is true in part because its own embodiment (with its characteristic needs and desires) is absolutely essential to the survival of its self-consciousness; as Hegel puts it, "life is the *natural* setting of consciousness" (para. 188). But furthermore, the other participant as a self-consciousness, and thus as embodied, is also essential to the subjectively self-certain being's quest for objective confirmation of the truth of its self-consciousness. What each participant comes to see, to put the idea in simpler terms, is that it *needs* the other.

This set of circumstances and of discoveries leads each participant

to imagine that the way to obtain the truth of its self-certainty is to kill the other not literally but figuratively—in Hegel’s terms to *negate* the other insofar as it is being-for-itself. Each being sets out to consign the other to the status of existing purely for the victor, of being purely and absolutely “other.” Each wishes, in Hegel’s idiom, to become the “master” and to make the other his “slave.”<sup>25</sup> In this solution, the victor destroys himself as other, insofar as his otherness is a by-product of the loser’s (now destroyed) being-for-self; the winner is no longer “other” in the eyes of the slave but has instead become “the one” (not Hegel’s term, incidentally, but Beauvoir’s). In effect, the winner negotiates his sense of the inevitability of his being split not by living within this split but instead by attempting to cut the difference between being a subject and being an object cleanly between himself and the slave: he tries to see himself as the pure subject, enabled—mediated—in this role by the fact of the slave’s being the pure object. The slave’s willingness to play this role, a willingness produced by his being defeated by the master, suffices to confirm, the master imagines, the truth of his self-certainty.

In order for one of the participants to achieve the status of master and for the other to be relegated to the status of his slave, Hegel implies later in the dialectic, it is necessary for the latter to become resigned during the life-and-death struggle to the fear of death. In other words, the slave-to-be becomes a slave not (just) because the would-be master is stronger or otherwise puts him in a position in which his life is threatened but because he *allows* his fear of death to get the better of his desire to vanquish the would-be master. In order to understand this resignation, it’s necessary to look first at the situation of the master and the slave after the struggle. This may be why Hegel saves his explanation of the resignation for paragraph 193, while he discusses the master-slave relationship in paragraphs 190 through 192. It’s as though during the struggle the future slave has a premonition about this relationship and sees that the position of slave, while materially (physically and psychologically) loathsome, is *morally* advantageous.<sup>26</sup>

Hegel’s strategy in depicting the master-slave relationship is to consider how both parties interact with the things that constitute the objects of the master’s desire. The way that the slave acknowledges

the “for-itself” status of the master is by serving the master, by obtaining for the master the objects of his desire. The objects the slave obtains for the master are representative of the very ones the slave ultimately refused to forswear in the life-and-death struggle. In so refusing, the slave has shown himself to be “chained,” as Hegel puts it, to the object-world, to thingness. The master, on the other hand, has shown himself to be willing to give up this world. He thus possesses an immediate relationship to the object in the form of distance from and power over it; and since the slave has enslaved himself to the object the master can be seen through a sort of syllogism to rule over the slave *through* (the mediation of) the object (para. 190). On the other hand, the master can be seen to mediate his relationship with the *object* through his (immediate) relationship with the slave. He achieves the satisfaction of destroying the object (that is, literally or figuratively consuming it to satisfy his own desire), a satisfaction he saw he could not obtain with respect to the other participant in the life-and-death struggle, because the slave works on the object and prepares it for the master’s enjoyment.

In both of these mediated relationships (master-object-slave and master-slave-object), Hegel observes, the slave “is expressly something unessential, both by his working on the thing, and by his dependence on a specific existence” (para. 191). In foregoing a negating relationship over the world of things (since he only works on things and doesn’t himself consume them or at least control his own consumption of them) and thus a “for-self” relationship with these things, the slave in effect abdicates his being-for-self. Before the life-and-death struggle, both he and the master-to-be had an absolutely unmediated relationship with the world of objects. But now, his relationship to this world is mediated for the slave in every important respect by the master. And to the extent that the relationship remains unmediated (for example, in the slave’s consumption of food), it is one in which the slave’s being-for-self is of absolutely no consequence. But, cataclysmically, this implies that the master has failed to achieve the sort of recognition he needs, that is, recognition freely granted by another being-for-itself. Here’s how Hegel puts the situation at the end of paragraph 192:

The object in which the lord [Miller's word for "master"] has achieved his lordship has in reality turned out to be something quite different from an independent consciousness. What now really confronts him is not an independent consciousness, but a dependent one. He is, therefore, not certain of *being-for-self* as the truth of himself. On the contrary, his truth is in reality the unessential consciousness and its unessential action.

The truth that is confirmed for the master is that there exists a consciousness, that of the slave, that is in its essence *not* essential. But this, Hegel observes in paragraph 193, is an "external" truth, a truth, that is, that concerns not the master's consciousness but the slave's. One would expect, then, that the truth that is revealed to the slave is similarly external, namely the truth of being-for-itself (as manifested in the figure of the master). Yet Hegel claims that on inspection the truth of self-consciousness as being-for-itself turns out, paradoxically, to be an *internal* truth—that is, a truth pertaining to the slave's own life.

For the slave, Hegel says in paragraph 194, "the *autonomous consciousness existing for itself*" is "the *truth . . .*, which, however, *for it*, does not yet exist *in it*" (Kojève's translation 21). In other words, the slave sees the master's autonomous consciousness as the truth, although he himself does not recognize this autonomy as characteristic of his own self-consciousness. Yet, says Hegel, it is in fact the case that this truth *is* in the slave, albeit in a form that he himself may not recognize. For in the fight with the master, the slavish self-consciousness, in Hegel's words

has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned, has trembled in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. (para. 194)

During this moment of intense dread, this "absolute melting away of everything stable," this "unmanning" experienced by the slave during the fight to the death, he becomes pure being-for-itself, since every-

thing given in him is undone. And this is why the truth of self-consciousness is in actuality *in* the slave as well as *for* him (i.e., evident in the form of the master). Here is Kojève's way of putting the slave's experience of absolute negativity:

In his mortal terror he understood (without noticing it) that a given, fixed, and stable condition, even though it be the Master's, cannot exhaust the possibilities of human existence. He "understood" the "vanity" of the given conditions of existence. He did not want to bind himself to the Master's condition, nor does he bind himself to his condition as a Slave. There is nothing fixed in him. He is ready for change; in his very being, he is change, transcendence, transformation, "education"; he is historical becoming at his origin, in his essence, in his very existence. (22)

Furthermore, the slave in effect reenacts something like the moment of disruption of what's fixed with every act of labor he performs: he transforms the objects on which he works, thereby transcending them. The master, on the other hand, has a fixed relationship to the objects the slave presents to him: he merely consumes or otherwise destroys them. To quote Kojève again, "The Slave, in transforming the given World by his work, transcends the given and what is given by that given in himself; hence, he goes beyond himself, and also goes beyond the Master who is tied to the given which, not working, he leaves intact" (23).

It is through work, in fact, that, according to Hegel, the slave "becomes conscious of what he truly is" (para. 195). While the master's relationship to the object, being one exclusively of consumption, or destruction, "lacks the side of objectivity and permanence," the slave's relationship to the object, being one of preserving it albeit through a transforming act of labor, is "*permanent*, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence" (para. 195).<sup>27</sup> The slave transforms the object through his own activity, activity that the object itself manifests through its transformed state. What he does counts as activity—that is, something done by an actor—because in not consuming the object the slave must "check" (Hegel's *hemmen*) or "repress" (Kojève's *refouler*) his immediate desire to do so in favor of

transcending it (and thus transcending himself, raw desires and all, as he stands). And because this activity is a manifestation of the slave's being-for-itself—of his being essentially, that is, an *actor* (at least in part)—the slave through work makes available to himself objective confirmation of exactly what he was seeking through the life-and-death struggle with the master.<sup>28</sup> Although this confirmation was in theory available *during* that struggle—when, of course, he experienced the absolute dread that caused him to surrender to the would-be master—it is only through work, Hegel says, that the slave is able to *see* that being-for-self is his essential nature. On Kojève's interpretation,

Only in and by work does man finally become aware of the significance, the value, and the necessity of his experience of fearing absolute power, incarnated for him in the Master. Only after having worked for the Master does he understand the necessity of the fight between Master and Slave and the value of the risk and terror that it implies. (23)

And again:

This work liberates the Slave from the terror that tied him to given Nature and to his own innate animal nature. It is by work in the Master's service performed in terror that the Slave frees himself from the terror that enslaved him to the Master. (26)

Just as the experience of mortal terror alone is enough only to establish the truth of the slave's humanity but not to make him aware of himself as such, so the experience of work alone, in the absence of this moment of terror, is insufficient for producing genuinely human self-consciousness (para. 196). This is because the moment of terror transforms the slave's relationship to the natural world *überhaupt*: the world becomes not merely "other," not merely a collection of objects that may or may not elicit his desire as given but something that explicitly is not his, something to which his relationship can only be one of transformation and not of consumption or destruction. In the absence of the experience of this moment of terror, a person might

work on an object before consuming it (or, of course, discarding it); but this work is in service merely of his desires as they stand. Thus, the moment of terror—which, of course, leads directly to the slave’s binding himself to the master—effectively allows the slave to see the world, through his being forced only to work on it, as something that he can transform.

This is an insight that is blocked in Sartre’s incomplete appropriation of the dialectic by his attending only to the significance of the moment of terror, the moment in which the self becomes aware of the world as expressly not its own. But for Hegel the dialectic ends only with the observation about the relationship between the moment of terror and the phenomenological significance of work, an observation that looms large in Beauvoir’s appropriation. Famously, it appears at this juncture of the *Phenomenology* that for Hegel the production of genuinely human self-consciousness—of the sense of oneself as, from the point of view of truth, a being whose destiny is “not to be what it is . . . and to be (that is, to become) what it is not” (Kojève 5)—requires something Hegel calls *enslavement* to others (the German is *Knechtschaft*).<sup>29</sup> Now it’s a question, of course, what form this “enslavement” actually takes (if any) in real life. Kojève, for one, seems to see the master-slave situation as primarily a moment in human history, something, therefore, that’s somehow behind us. (Exactly what “a moment in human history” might amount to—a social configuration? part of the mythological past? something we go through as children?—is not, of course, my question, at least not in this context.) But what’s distinctive (although not unique) about Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s understanding of *Knechtschaft* is that it is something that human beings across history not only must experience as individuals in order to achieve something like genuinely human self-consciousness but also must struggle with on a daily basis.

And yet it’s possible to cut the difference between Sartre and Beauvoir, I’m going to argue, precisely along the different lines they draw around the concept of *Knechtschaft*. For Sartre, to anticipate, *Knechtschaft* is to be understood as enslavement in a fairly straightforward sense: it requires the absolute surrendering of the self, of one’s status as a subject, to the other. For Sartre, at least the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*, the threat of *Knechtschaft* in this bleak sense

pollutes every human interaction: every human interaction manifests a master-slave construction. Hence the emblematic line from the end of his play *No Exit*: “Hell is—other people!” (45). Needing to exercise vigilance in our efforts to avoid enslavement by enslaving others, human beings on Sartre’s picture of things cannot, as it were, get beyond the life-and-death struggle in the *Phenomenology*. Our position as beings who wish for the confirmation of our humanity to be an essentially private matter is fixed *ontologically*.

For Beauvoir, quite to the contrary, *Knechtschaft* is to be seen primarily in its enabling aspect, as what leads us, as it were, to bring ourselves to ourselves as human beings; and here Miller’s translation of the German word not as “enslavement” but as “bondage” is more in tune with the note Beauvoir wishes to strike in her interpretation of the idea. For her, appreciating the fact that mastery—our very subjectivity—is achieved only through an acceptance of our bondage to and with one another, through, that is, our willingness to *subject* ourselves as ambiguous beings to something she calls “objectivity,” is the key to achieving the fullest flowering of human self-consciousness.

## The Conditions of Hell: Sartre on Hegel

At the end of his play *No Exit*, written directly after *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre famously has the protagonist, Garcin, come to the scandalous conclusion that “hell is other people!” Although as his thinking progressed Sartre was increasingly at pains to distinguish Garcin’s outburst from his own considered opinion on the role other people play in an individual’s life, I want to argue here that in both content and tone the line accurately emblemizes his appropriation in *Being and Nothingness* of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. For Sartre, the dialectic is to be interpreted as allegorizing the general nature of interaction among human beings, showing it to be structured by narcissism, paranoia, and skepticism, states he takes to be characteristic of genuinely human self-consciousness. The guiding purpose of this demonstration, again, is to fill in a background against which the philosophical originality of Simone de Beauvoir’s appropriations of Hegel and Sartre will stand in relief. What I want to make obvious are certain profound differences from Sartre’s views in her conceptions of, for example, what constitutes a subject, what objectivity is and whether and how it is possible, and how genuinely human self-consciousness is to be achieved. These differences arise precisely *within* Beauvoir’s appropriation of Sartre’s

appropriation of Hegel—within, that is, her own interpretation of Sartre—which is why understanding Beauvoir’s take on Hegel requires knowing something about Sartre’s.

For this purpose, I am going to focus on the well-known section of *Being and Nothingness* called “The Look,” in which Sartre sets up a scenario around which his appropriation of the master-slave dialectic can be seen to coalesce. The scenario begins with Sartre’s asking us to imagine “that moved by jealousy, curiosity, or vice I have just glued my ear to the door and looked through a keyhole” (347). We must imagine, he stresses, that he is not *thinking* about his crouching at the door; he is simply *doing* it. In Sartre’s terminology, his consciousness in this moment is to be seen as “non-thetic” or “unreflective” (347). This type of consciousness, Sartre says,

sticks to my acts, it *is* my acts; and my acts are commanded only by the ends to be attained and by the instruments to be employed. My attitude, for example, has no “outside”; it is a pure process of relating the instrument (the keyhole) to the end to be attained (the spectacle to be seen), a pure mode of losing myself in the world, of causing myself to be drunk in by things as ink is by a blotter. (348)

With the idea of unreflective consciousness, Sartre appropriates Hegel’s primary moment of self-consciousness, a moment characterized in the *Phenomenology*, as I suggested in chapter 3, by a being’s preoccupation with fulfilling his desires as they stand, by a sense of himself as discrete only insofar as he sees the rest of the world in terms of its potential for filling these desires. For Sartre, then, this moment of consciousness is to be taken not as historical (either for the species or for an individual) but as an ever-available option for human beings: a person’s consciousness counts as non-thetic whenever she is unreflectively doing something, whenever she is “lost in the world.”<sup>21</sup> Notice, too, that Sartre implicitly interprets the idea of desires as they stand to include any desires whose ends are sought unreflectively, even if they originated in some previous act or process of reflection. This would imply that what distinguishes a desire-as-it-stands from a transcendent desire is not, as in Hegel, whether the de-

sire is a *product* of reflection but whether this reflection *controls* the desire—whether, to put it another way, the desire is acted upon *deliberately*. This understanding of the early moment of self-consciousness, seeing it as part of the here-and-now and emphasizing the role of deliberation in what is to count as action (and thus as transcendence), is one of Sartre's contributions to Beauvoir's way of appropriating the master-slave dialectic.

In elaborating his keyhole example Sartre specifies, almost in passing, that the particular unreflective emotion that we are to imagine moves the peeper to crouch by the door is jealousy.<sup>2</sup> This jealousy is to be understood as “nothing except the simple objective fact that *there is a sight to be seen* behind the door” (348; Sartre's emphasis). But it turns out that this is not a “simple objective fact” in any conventional understanding of these words. For, as Sartre argues, that there is something identifiable as a *sight* to be seen behind the door is true only *because* he is jealous. And yet it is a “simple objective fact” that there is *something* behind the door and that this something can be seen through the keyhole; in fact, it's the fantasy of this “something,” this scene behind the door, that, intuitively enough, we are supposed to imagine has spawned the imaginary Sartre's jealousy. Thus what Sartre wishes to argue is that his non-thetic consciousness in effect transforms what's going on behind the door into “a sight to be seen,” while at the same time it's this very sight that gives rise to the particular form his non-thetic consciousness takes—that is, his state of jealousy. This paradoxical constellation of circumstances—in which what's going on behind the door both spawns and is spawned by the imaginary Sartre's jealousy—is an example of what Sartre calls a “situation” (348). And by definition a situation (in this special, technical sense) is the situation it is only because of the coincidence of particular “simple objective facts” and some particular state of consciousness of a particular human being. This implies that the “simple objective fact” that something is going on behind the door is in and of itself meaningless and that the “situation” will differ for each person who runs up against any given “simple objective fact,” according to each person's state of consciousness at the time.

Despite his insistence in this discussion on the central role of simple objective facts, at the heart of Sartre's concept of situation is

the idea, emphasized both in the context of this scenario and throughout *Being and Nothingness*, that human beings *always* can control their particular states of consciousness and thus are to be held responsible for the situations they are in. In Sartre's idiom (again adapted from that of Heidegger), "the ensemble exists only in relation to a free project of my possibilities" (348). What's going on behind the door spawns Sartre's jealousy, but only because he does not subject this jealousy to the scrutiny of his own consciousness. It is in principle possible for him *not* to be jealous under these circumstances. And yet because he acts unreflectively, this possibility is not alive for Sartre. In his lack of deliberation, of deliberateness, he fixes himself in his jealousy. His crouching by the doorway is the result of a frictionless momentum toward the door, produced by the spontaneous admixture of his unreflective (in this case, jealous) consciousness and the simple objective fact that (there are signs that) something is happening on the other side. The only thing that would counteract this momentum would be a change in his consciousness. In principle, Sartre insists, a human being is ontologically capable at any time and under any circumstances of willing such a change in consciousness; that is, such changes can occur without any corresponding change in the "simple objective facts." But in reality, he suggests, human beings often pretend to themselves that they are the helpless victims of these facts, thereby exhibiting what Sartre famously calls "bad faith." And the significance of the encounter with the "other," the significance of Sartre's appropriation of the meeting of two subjectively self-certain beings in the master-slave dialectic, is that this encounter is defined as that which can perform the service of rendering impossible, at least for a time, the self-serving rationales characteristic of bad faith.

As unreflective consciousness, the Sartre who is crouching by the door is not, of course, thinking about the metaphysics or moral implications of what he is doing. He is just responding, in his jealousy, to his sense that something he must witness is going on behind the door. But let us imagine, Sartre then suggests, that "all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me!" And so I am "suddenly affected in my being and . . . essential modifications appear in my structure" (349). Specifically, Sartre says, "I now exist as *myself* for my unreflective consciousness" (349). In other words, the fact that

someone else, someone Sartre wants to call the Other, is looking at him forces upon his unreflective consciousness the fact that he is a self, or, as he sometimes puts it, an *Ego*.<sup>3</sup> To understand the significance of this change in consciousness, we need to remember that the unreflective consciousness is by definition totally absorbed in what the self is doing. It is not watching the self do what it's doing; if it were, it would be what Sartre calls reflective consciousness. By definition, if *un*reflective consciousness becomes aware of the self, it can't be as an object of reflection, *per se*. Instead, Sartre says, what's forced upon his unreflective consciousness as a result of the Other's gaze is that what is being gazed at is an *Ego* or self *for that Other*. And what unreflective consciousness also senses—immediately, unreflectively—is that this newly revealed self is expressly *not* for-itself; rather, it is expressly and exclusively “for-the-Other.”

Yet at the same time, Sartre contends, unreflective consciousness automatically identifies with this self that exists exclusively for the Other. It sees that this self-for-Others belongs to it. Crucially for Sartre (and here is where he is at pains to distinguish himself from Hegel, for reasons that will become clear momentarily) this act of recognition is not, or at least not primarily, epistemological. Before the self *knows* itself to be for-the-other, it *experiences* itself as such: specifically, Sartre claims, the Other's gaze effects an *ontological* change in the self that is registered in the self's being instantly—helplessly—suffused with a feeling of shame or pride. In the case of the keyhole example, of course, the form the feeling takes is shame, and it is this shame “which makes me *live*, not *know* the situation of being looked at” (350).

In identifying the feeling of shame as an ontologically (and not, or at least not initially, epistemologically) critical moment in the encounter with the Other, Sartre provides an interesting solution to an interpretive puzzle in Hegel's master-slave dialectic. This is the issue of just how each of the two encountering beings recognizes the other as both desirous and capable of recognition. There is something unsatisfying about the way Hegel sidesteps this question, as though human beings can or could just automatically read each other's psychological demands and capabilities off each other's appearances. At the

very least, Hegel evidently doesn't find pressing the question of how human beings are capable of this automatic reading. With the idea that the Other's "Look" automatically induces in a me a sense of pride or shame that reveals to me my self or *Ego* insofar as it is "for" the Other, Sartre fills in this gap. For him the shame or pride I feel automatically in response to the Look reveals to me not only that I have a self that is for the Other but also that this Other perceives me as being nothing other than this self. And it is the need to alleviate my shame by proving that I am more than just Being-for-Others (to use Sartre's term) that motivates my subsequent relations with the Other—motivates the Hegelian life-and-death struggle.

I want to flag the fact that Sartre's filling in of a Hegelian lacuna at this juncture by appealing to the experience of shame is considerably more compelling than his (mostly passing) acknowledgment that the Other's Look can also produce in me a feeling of pride. This is because his explanation of what gets the fight-to-the-death off the ground turns on the repugnance the looked-at being is supposed to feel for the self revealed to him or her by the Other's Look, insofar as this self is Being-for-the-Other. If my automatic response to this Look is one of pride, then it's hard to see why I will be at pains to prove that I am more than the self I imagine the Other sees. Indeed, while Sartre discusses the phenomenon of shame in minute detail, he spends barely any time at all exploring the mechanics of pride. In the one short discussion of pride he offers (386–387), he seems to suggest that, indeed, experiencing it in response to the Other's Look leads not to a life-and-death struggle with the Other but to a complacent acceptance of oneself as nothing other than Being-for-Others. But because the self that is for-Others is inherently incapable of action—is, as we shall see, nothing other than the fixed object of the Other's perception—to accept oneself as nothing other than Being-for-Others is to deny the fundamental fact of one's own subjectivity, of one's own Being-for-Self. This, for Sartre, is the quintessence of bad faith. It thus turns out that the only "authentic" response to the Other's Look is shame.<sup>4</sup> And this feeling of shame is what propels me to participate in a life-and-death struggle for recognition with the Other.

But why, on Sartre's interpretation of things, must my proving to

the Other that I am more than Being-for-Others—indeed, that I am not, essentially speaking, such a being—take the form of *destroying* the Other, as Sartre, following Hegel, insists it does? The answer to this question turns on Sartre’s understanding of what it is to be an Other. For starters, of course, the Other is that being, any being, who can induce in me a feeling of shame, and specifically of shame in being the being the Other sees. But what kind of a being is this being the Other sees? It is, my shame reveals to me, *my* being, or at least part of my being. But it is my being insofar as I am perceived by an Other. That is, it is my being insofar as I am an *object* of the Other’s perception. “The Other,” Sartre says, “is first the being for whom I am an object; that is, the being *through whom* I gain my objectness” (361). And because the Other’s perception of me is something I cannot control, Sartre claims, in a turn of phrase that signals his desire to link his analysis of the Other with that of Hegel, “we can consider ourselves as ‘slaves’ insofar as we appear to the Other” (358). As Sartre sometimes puts it, the Look reveals to the looked-at person that he or she has a *nature*. And this, according to Sartre, using terminology that reveals his interest in construing the Hegelian master-slave dialectic as an interpretation or appropriation of the myth of Adam and Eve, is why “my original fall is the existence of the Other” (352). Sartre writes,

Pure shame is not a feeling of being this or that guilty object but in general of being *an* object; that is, of *recognizing myself* in this degraded, fixed, and dependent being which I am for the Other. Shame is the feeling of an *original fall*, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault but simply that I have “fallen” into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am. (384)<sup>5</sup>

The Other’s powers to transform the looked-at person, Sartre argues, are not limited to the ability to adduce shame. Rather, the Look brings about “a total metamorphosis of the *world*” (360): the looked-at person feels himself, in his shame, to be just one among many objects in a world that is all, specifically, *for* the Other. This means that for the looked-at person the Look is cataclysmic:

Suddenly an object has appeared which has stolen the world from me. Everything is in place; everything still exists for me; but everything is traversed by an invisible flight and fixed in the direction of a new object. The appearance of the Other in the world corresponds therefore to a fixed sliding of the whole universe, to a decentralization of the world. (343)

All the objects in the world remain precisely the same. But the looked-at person, in his shame, now experiences these objects, just as he experiences himself, as *for* the Other. He experiences himself as one among many objects fixed by the Other's Look. And since the world is now *for* the Other, "the *Other's look* as the necessary condition of my objectivity is the destruction of all objectivity [in any conventional sense of the word] for me" (360). The paradox, in other words, is that my becoming an object (my "objectivity") is the product of something that also destroys my sense of the objectivity of the world. This fact is nightmarish for me, for it implies that the world I know, *this* world, with this keyhole, and this door, and even this Other, both is and is not my world, both is and is not *the* (real) world. Thus, the Other is apprehended by the looked-at person "through *uneasiness*; through him I am perpetually *in danger* in a world which is *this* world and which nevertheless I can only glimpse" (367). What fills the looked-at person with horror, Sartre suggests, is not only the sense that the Other has made him into an object and destroyed his sense of objectivity. It's also that in making the looked-at person into an object the Other has an epistemological advantage over him. For as unreflective consciousness, the looked-at person is an object for the other but not for himself. Furthermore, the accuracy of the Other's Look—its epistemological power—is confirmed by the looked-at person's shameful reaction to it. In other words, the looked-at person feels horror in large part because he feels that the Other in a split second has gained knowledge of who he is, knowledge that he himself lacks. As Sartre puts it,

The Other *looks* at me and as such he holds the secret of my being, he knows what I *am*. Thus the profound meaning of my being is

outside of me, imprisoned in an absence. The Other has the advantage over me. (473)

The Other merely *looks* at me, and he “has the advantage over me.” The Look itself is instantly imprisoning.

There is, however, a way out of this prison, a way to escape this sense of being pinned by the Other’s consciousness. What is necessary is that I explicitly *stake a claim* to being a subject. Now, the Other himself became a subject by employing the Look and thereby turning the entire world into a world of objects for-himself. And since I’m fundamentally no different from the Other, my claiming the mantle of subjectivity (of being-a-subject) turns out to require simply that I Look back at him and thereby reduce *him* to an object in *my* world (see, e.g., 387). In so doing, I instantly reduce his subjectivity to “a simple *property* of the object considered” (384). And “in this way I *recover* myself, for I can not be *an object for an object*” (384). So my claiming my own subjectivity, which for Sartre demands my destroying my sense of myself as an object, also necessitates that the Other be reduced in my eyes to an object.

The problem, of course, is that this reduction isn’t stable, since the Look can always in principle be returned, like a tennis ball during a volley. This means that for Sartre the confrontation between self-consciousnesses is not something that happens once and for all, either at the level of history or of a single human life, nor is it something that concerns only presocial beings. To the contrary, Sartre takes the radical view that the scenario he understands Hegel to be laying out in the master-slave dialectic depicts *the* mode of social relationships among human beings. We are all constantly under siege, constantly at each others’ throats:

My constant concern is to contain the Other within his objectivity, and my relations with the Other-as-object are essentially made up of ruses designed to make him remain an object. But one look on the part of the Other is sufficient to make all these schemes collapse and to make me experience once more the transfiguration of the Other. (394)

The failure of my ruses, the collapse of my schemes, the transfiguration of the Other at my expense—these are the marks and features of what Sartre calls hell. The only way to avoid this hell is ceaselessly to return the Look.

Sartre's idea that, to put things in Hegel's terminology, every person is at every instant in every one of his or her relationships with others either a slave or a master seems to suggest that our ordinary conceptions of ourselves as beings capable of reciprocity, if not friendship—if not love—are grossly inaccurate. But how, then, does Sartre account for our ordinary understanding of the possibilities we have for mutually productive relationships? We find an answer to this question in the third chapter of the section of *Being and Nothingness* entitled "Being-for-Others," the first chapter of which ("The Existence of Others") has been the focus of my explication of Sartre's appropriation of the master-slave dialectic thus far. Let us recall that in that first chapter Sartre suggests that there are two possible responses to the Look, shame and pride, and that the response of pride is by definition a manifestation of bad faith. Furthermore, he suggests, there are two possible responses to the shame provoked by the Other's Look: I can either allow myself to be fixed by the gaze, a caving-in which, in amounting to a denial of my own subjectivity, is also in bad faith; or I can "turn back upon the Other so as to make an object out of him in turn, since the Other's object-ness destroys my object-ness for him" (473). Now, in chapter 3, Sartre identifies another possible response to the Look, a response that is not, or at least not obviously, a product of bad faith. This response is to attempt to "identify myself" with the Other's freedom, a freedom I recognize as grounding the self revealed to me by the Other's gaze (474). For it is in his freedom, his capacity as what Sartre, following Hegel, calls "for-itself"—that is, his capacity as a subject, which for Sartre means his capacity to act—it is in this freedom that the Other has turned me into an object that is for-him.

To "identify" with the Other's freedom involves, first, acknowledging this object to be myself, acknowledging that I am the "in-itself" the Other's Look takes me to be. But I can accept myself as this "in-itself" only insofar as the Other, in his freedom, is himself enamored of it, that is, of me, as he sees me. I therefore try to get the

Other to devote his freedom to me, to be the epitomizing object in his universe, to be the limit toward which his freedom reaches—to *love* me, at least in Sartre’s sense of the word. Indeed, Sartre claims that attempting to identify myself with the Other’s freedom is the “ideal of love, its motivation and its end” (477). If the “me” that the Other reveals through his look is a “me” constituted through and through by the Other’s love, a love that he gives freely, then for me to accept that “in-itself” as myself is effectively for me to identify with the Other’s freedom. And it is thus, says Sartre, that I imagine that

my facticity [that is, my being-an-object, a status that is created and of which I become aware as a result of the Look] is *saved*. It is no longer this unthinkable and insurmountable given which I am fleeing; it is that for which the Other freely makes himself exist; it is as an end which he has given to himself. I have infected him with my facticity, but as it is in the form of freedom that he has been infected with it, he refers it back to me as a facticity taken up and consented to. He is the foundation of it in order that it may be his end. (483)

And Sartre notes that

up to this point our description would fall into line with Hegel’s famous description of the Master and Slave relation. What the Hegelian Master is for the Slave, the lover wants to be for the beloved. But the analogy stops here, for with Hegel the Master demands the Slave’s freedom only laterally and, so to speak, implicitly, while the lover wants the beloved’s freedom *first and foremost*. In this sense if I am to be loved by the Other, this means that I am to be freely chosen as beloved. (482).

Here, Sartre figures love as the lover’s desire for the Other to consign his freedom—to dedicate his subjectivity—to the lover. But just as the master’s fantasy of what the slave can give him turns out to be self-contradictory, so, it seems Sartre is suggesting, what the lover desires of the Other is incoherent. The project of making myself loved by the Other is doomed to failure.

The hopelessness of love, at least on Sartre's construal of the concept, becomes obvious when we try to work out the dialectic between self and Other inaugurated by the lover's fantasy. Let's suppose that I desire that you dedicate your freedom to me—that, in Sartre's argot, you "love" me. What I want is for you to expend all of your freedom as a subject to making the radical, transcendent choice to love me. But if you expend all of your freedom, then you will no longer be a genuine subject and thus, paradoxically, will be unable to love me in the way I want to be loved—namely, as the ultimate object of your adoration.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, by definition your love for me will take the form of your wanting me to make you into my ultimate object. But this requires that I want you to regard me as a subject, in which case, once again, I won't be an object for you, let alone an ultimate object. The fantasy behind an investment in the idea of love, according to Sartre, thus turns on an impossible wish to forego one's own subjectivity in favor of identifying with that of an Other: a wish that, alas, requires simultaneously that I *own* my subjectivity and *deny* that of the other. It's the wish that you make me into an object precisely by figuring me as a subject. So the minute you fall in love with me, you disappoint me.<sup>7</sup>

The failure of love as a project also implies the impossibility of my becoming simultaneously an object and a subject for myself. If I really could identify with the Other's freedom—if myself-as-object were constituted by it (if the Look were one of pure Sartrean love), then I would in effect become simultaneously both a subject and an object. This would have enormous epistemological consequences, Sartre claims, for if I as for-itself (subject) could regard myself as in-itself (object), then I wouldn't need the Other to reveal myself (as object) to myself (as subject) or to reveal myself (as subject) through returning the Look. Since from the point of view of the self these revelations are what the self-Other relationship is all about, it follows that if one could succeed in identifying with the Other's freedom then one would in effect "be other to oneself" (476), thereby obviating the need for a real-life, flesh-and-blood Other. But this, like genuine love (*à la Sartre*), turns out to be impossible. Regardless of the tenor of my relationships with other people—regardless of whether I love or hate or admire or dislike or am fascinated or repelled by them—on Sartre's understanding, I am at any given time *either* a subject or an object but

never both. I am a subject when I am acting (including when I am deliberately looking at another being); I am an object under the pressure of the gaze of the Other. Sartre's picture of the human being turns on the idea that the human being is endlessly capable of finding himself, on an instant's notice, a stranger to himself. And yet it is absolutely crucial to Sartre's picture that this becoming a stranger to oneself is *never* necessary, not in any instant. This is because for Sartre *my* gazing at the Other is *always possible*, under any circumstances. Put in another, perhaps more familiarly Sartrean way, my freedom as a subject is never in principle curtailed.

Sartre was willing to take this extreme view to the farthest lengths: writing at a time when Hitler's abominable treatment of Jews was well known to European intellectuals, even if the extent of the atrocities he was authorizing had yet to be fully revealed, Sartre found himself able to remark,

A Jew is not a Jew *first* in order to be *subsequently* ashamed or proud; it is his pride of being a Jew, his shame, or his indifference which will reveal to him his being-a-Jew; and this being-a-Jew is nothing outside the free manner of adopting it. (677)

Sartre wants to say that to be a Jew consists wholly in the way I respond to the Other's fixing me in his gaze as a Jew. In this sense, I am radically free to decide whether and how I am a Jew—or anything else for that matter. To put the point in more contemporary terms, for Sartre the question of a person's identity turns wholly, at least at the end of the day, on his construal of that identity. To be sure, in the section of *Being and Nothingness* on "Bad Faith," Sartre does suggest that we often succumb to the temptation to construe our identities in bad faith.<sup>8</sup> I might refuse (to employ a clichéd but therefore familiar enough example) to admit that my repeated bouts of drunkenness add up to my being an alcoholic; or I might, swinging to the other end of the spectrum of bad faith, claim that my being an alcoholic is a fundamental, unchangeable part of my identity. But in any event my situation is the situation it is not because of any simple fact of the matter (say, my cultural or ethnic heritage) nor because of any other

person's construal of my identity but always because of my own freedom of consciousness. The abdication of this freedom can come only at the hands of my exercising it in the service of allowing an Other to objectify me. And its employment must entail my willingness to make the Other into an object in what we both recognize to be my world. The fantasy that either of us can be subject and object at the same time is the same one that propels Hegel's proto-master and proto-slave to their effete, lopsided relationship.

At the very end of *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre claims that his ontology "releases to us the ethical meaning of various human projects" (796), which, considered merely in and of themselves, "are equivalent" and "are all on principle doomed to failure" precisely because they all involve human beings' attempts to be subjects and objects at the same time—or, to put it in Sartre's idiom, to effect "a synthetic fusion of the in-itself with the for-itself" (797). The only ethically worthy human actions are those done in the spirit of radical freedom. But since *Being and Nothingness* rests on the idea that everything human beings do is by definition done from radical freedom, it's not at all clear either what exactly Sartre is exhorting us to do in the final pages of the book or how his exhortations relate to moral philosophy as traditionally understood. Notoriously, the last sentence of *Being and Nothingness* promises to explore this sort of question "in a future work" (798)—a work that Sartre ultimately considered a failure and did not publish.<sup>9</sup>

While it is not directly germane to my project to pursue the question of Sartre and ethics very far, it is pertinent to note that what Sartre at the end of *Being and Nothingness* is vigorously denying is possible—the attempt to become at once subject and object—is precisely the moment of reciprocal recognition in Hegel's master-slave dialectic. At this moment, which never transpires during the actual Hegelian dialectic but remains a human aspiration at the end of this section of the *Phenomenology*, I am acknowledged as a subject by another subject. This act of recognition of course necessitates (as Hegel's master learns only too late) that I acknowledge that the Other, as capable of recognizing me, is, indeed, a subject. Thus my being recognized demands my recognition of the Other; and this mutual recogni-

tion consists in our identifying the objects of our perceptions as subjects. In Sartre's idiom, recognition demands that my Look enable you in your being-for-self, and vice versa. Notice, too, that our confirmation of each other's subjectivity has to count, at least on Hegel's understanding of what recognition is, as confirmation of the *objectivity* of each person's status as a subject. But all of this is *ontologically* impossible, on Sartre's view. To "recognize" another person is to confer the Look on him; and to confer the Look on him is to turn him into an object. In this case, "objectivity" will consist exclusively in my subjectivity. The only way the Other can become a subject for me is if I allow him to turn me, in my shame, into an object, in which case "objectivity" becomes *his* subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> But my living under the shaming gaze of the Other, just one among the many objects of his world, is intolerable. Thus, I am ontologically impelled to fight his Look with mine. Human existence, on Sartre's view, *consists in* the fight to the death, all the time, and with everyone with whom I come into contact.

Sartre's considered view of what human beings can be for one another is exceedingly bleak. Were the present study primarily an exploration of his early work, I would spend far more time adducing evidence to show just how grim his vision is. However, since my primary purpose is to make a case for the idea that there is something worth looking at in Simone de Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic and that this appropriation takes place in part via (or at least in the wake of) Sartre's appropriation of Hegel's text, I want now to spend some time looking at one of the less implausible tenets upon which, I claim, Sartre's extreme view in *Being and Nothingness* rests. This is Sartre's belief that there is something not only ontologically impossible but also *morally* problematic about the very desire for recognition. On Sartre's conception, the desire to be recognized by the Other amounts to the wish that the Other be a mirror image of oneself. That is, he sees the desire for recognition as inescapably and hopelessly narcissistic.

This narcissistic dimension of the desire for recognition is right on the surface of his play *No Exit* (*Huis clos*), written directly after *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>11</sup> As *No Exit* opens, a man, the "valet," is escorting a second man, Garcin, into a drawing room. We are given to

understand that Garcin is to reside in this room for an indefinite period of time. After asking the valet some questions about the conditions of his stay—questions revealing that something unusual is going on, since the two discuss the fact that Garcin will not ever sleep again, that the lights will perpetually be on, and so forth—Garcin is left alone in the room, door locked. He panics and tries to resummon the valet, to no success. Moments later, the valet reenters the room, bringing with him another resident, Inès. She is followed shortly thereafter by a second woman, Estelle. For the rest of the play the three are left to one another's devices behind the locked door. Fairly early on in their colloquy, it becomes clear to us that they are, or at least they think they are, in hell. Each of them confesses to having committed a deed that, in his or her own mind and in the minds of the other two, is heinous: Garcin has brazenly cheated on his wife and has deserted the military; Inès has alienated her cousin's wife from the cousin and then seduced the wife merely for the fun of it; Estelle, having become pregnant with her lover's baby, has killed the newborn. And all three are dead as a result of these acts: Garcin has been shot for desertion; Inès has been gassed in a murder-suicide by the cousin's wife; Estelle dies of pneumonia, presumably caught as she drowned her child in a lake. Slowly the three are given to understand that there is no "torturer" in hell, as they expected there would be; instead, they are each other's torturers. Although each of them at various moments attempts not to play this role and appeals to the two others to join him or her, it becomes increasingly apparent that these attempts are doomed. Each insight into their condition initially appears to bring some hope of cooperation, of mutual recognition, but this moment inevitably segues into a fresh polarization of two against one or each against each, a renewed, mutually hostile and fixating destabilization of what had looked to be a potentially liberating and transcendent step. The play thus ends as follows:

INÈS: So here we are, forever. [*laughs*]

ESTELLE [*with a peal of laughter*]: Forever. My God, how funny! Forever.

GARCIN [*looks at the two women, and joins in the laughter*]: For ever, and ever, and ever.

*[They slump onto their respective sofas. A long silence. Their laughter dies away and they gaze at each other]*

GARCIN: Well, well, let's get on with it (46).<sup>12</sup>

That Hegel's master-slave dialectic itself plays a role in this play is not obvious from the plot summary I've just given. But there is evidence of the connection in the actual words spoken by Garcin, Inès, and Estelle. Let's begin with those of Garcin. At the beginning of the play, when he is just beginning to appreciate the hellishness of his predicament, he suggests to Inès and Estelle that the solution to their situation is

easy enough; each of us stays put in his or her corner and takes no notice of the others. You here, you here, and I there. Like soldiers at our posts. Also, we mustn't speak. Not one word. . . . And that way we—we'll work out our salvation. Looking into ourselves, never raising our heads. (17–18)

Although both Inès and Estelle agree to this plan, Estelle quickly, if absentmindedly, thwarts it by asking Garcin if he has a mirror. When he ignores her, Inès fishes through her handbag for her pocket-mirror and then angrily realizes that it has been taken from her "at the entrance." Momentarily, Estelle begins to look as though she's about to faint. When Inès asks her what's wrong, she says, "When I can't see myself I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist. I pat myself just to make sure, but it doesn't help much." This, I take it, is a fairly straightforward announcement of her desire for some sort of objective confirmation of herself, of the truth of the existence of "I." Sartre here uses the mirror, or mirror-gazing, as a synecdoche: it stands for an association, and perhaps even a conflation, of the desire for recognition with a certain species of narcissism. For Sartre the desire for recognition is a wish for another human being to reflect back to you a fixed image of yourself, an image reduced to what you take to be your most flattering aspect (in Estelle's case, her beauty).

But because one human being never straightforwardly reflects an image of another, because this image is always refracted through

the lens of the image-giver's subjectivity—through, you might say, the image-giver's *own* reflection (in the sense of thinking), the quest for recognition is ultimately doomed to failure. This interpretation of the scene under consideration is confirmed in the subsequent exchange between Inès and Estelle. In response to Estelle's panic at her lack of access to a mirror, Inès says coyly, "Suppose I try to be your glass?" At first, this appears to be nothing other than a figurative suggestion. It soon becomes clear, however, that Inès is feigning to offer Estelle what she wants: she's literally offering the use of her eyeballs as a looking glass. But just as the rounded surface of the eye distorts those images it reflects—often by making what's perfectly ordinary look monstrously disfigured—so the eye in its function as an instrument of sight has the power to transfigure the Other, as the following exchange makes clear:

ESTELLE: Oh, I'm there! But so tiny I can't see myself properly.

INÈS: But *I* can. Every inch of you. Now ask me questions. I'll be as candid as any looking-glass (20).

The eye here is both a literal object and a metonymic symbol for the Other: from the point of view of the narcissistic recognition-seeker, the Other's eye both as an *object* of reflection (as mirroring) and as an instrument of a *subject* of reflection (as thinking) is hopelessly distorting. One of the idiosyncrasies of the hell that Sartre has created in this play is that the eyes of the condemned are condemned never to shut, even for blinking. "You can't imagine how refreshing it is," Garcin says to the valet of blinking. "Four thousand little rests per hour. Four thousand little evasions!" (5–6, translation modified).<sup>13</sup>

What's being evaded, of course, is the Look of the Other. In *No Exit* the power of the Look to determine and reveal the truth of who you are is dramatized in two climactic speeches of Inès's, directed at Garcin:

You are a coward, Garcin, a coward because I will it. I will it—do you hear?—I will it! And yet, just look at me, see how weak I am, just a breath; I am nothing but the look that sees you, this formless thought that thinks you. (44, translation modified)

I see you, I see you; by myself I'm a crowd, *the* crowd. Garcin, do you hear it?—Coward (*lâche*)! Coward! Coward! Coward! You flee from me in vain; I'll not let you go (*lâcherai*). (45, translation modified)

It's important to understand that on Sartre's view Garcin is a coward not merely because Inès says he is but because, in his shame, he recognizes himself in her description. Moreover, his response to this sense of shame is simply to rail against it, instead of attempting to do something (something Sartre might call asserting himself as for-itself) that might transform him into a person who does not recognize himself in Inès's words. These words prove doubly galling to Garcin because they identify his reaction to his own sense of shame as itself shameful, itself cowardly. Garcin insists in the wake of Inès's Look that he was not cowardly—that, indeed, until the moment of his desertion from the military he had consistently “courted danger.” Inès, speaking here for Sartre, calls Garcin's rationalizations a “dream.” The following exchange ensues:

GARCIN: I didn't dream this heroism. I chose it. One is what one wills.

INÈS: Prove it. Prove that it wasn't a dream. Only acts decide what one has willed (43, translation modified).<sup>14</sup>

This judgment of Inès's is all the more devastating because she is shown to know intimately what cowardice is: in both her own eyes and Garcin's, she, too, is hopelessly craven (42). For the two of them not to be cowards any more would require acts of self-transformation. But they both think of themselves as dead.

In *No Exit*, then, we find acted out the exceedingly bleak view of “the Other” in *Being and Nothingness*. The play specifies that it is narcissism, taking the form of a fixated wish for another's person's recognition of oneself as one dreams or wishes—or fears—oneself to be, that brings on the conditions of hell. Interestingly, since Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* describes the phenomenon of love in terms of just such a wish, the implication is that the desire to respond to the Other's gaze with something other than self-petrification or the return

of the Look is what makes human life hellish. Later in his life Sartre was explicitly at pains to specify that what's hellish about our relations with one another has to do with a narcissistic desire for self-confirmation—for, that is, a species of recognition—as we see in his answer to an interviewer's question about *No Exit*'s climactic line “Hell is other people”:

“Hell is other people” has always been poorly understood. People have thought that I wanted to say by it that our relationships with others are always poisoned, always hellish. Now, what I want to say is something else entirely. I want to say that if relationships with others are twisted, corrupted, then the other can be nothing but hell. Why? Because others are fundamentally what's of most importance for us for our own self-consciousness/self-knowledge [*connaissance de nous-mêmes*; “*connaissance*” means both “consciousness” and “knowledge”]. When we think about ourselves, when we try to know/become conscious of ourselves, we resort fundamentally to the knowledge/ consciousness of ourselves that others already have. We judge ourselves with the means that others have given us for judging ourselves. Whatever I say about myself, the judgment of others always bursts in (*entre dedans*). Whatever I sense in myself, the judgment of others bursts in. In other words, if my relationships are bad, I make myself totally dependent on others. And then, effectively, I'm in hell. And there are a number of people in the world who are in hell because they depend too much on the judgment of others. But that's to say nothing more than that one can't have other relationships with others [i.e., relationships in which the judgments of others do not burst in on my own self-consciousness]. It simply marks the prime importance of all others for each of us.

The second thing I should have wanted to say is that these people [in *Huis clos*] are not similar to us. The three people in *Huis clos* don't resemble us in that we are living and they are dead. Correctly understood, “dead” symbolizes something here. What I wanted to indicate is precisely that many people are stuck in their own habits and customs—that they suffer from [others'] judgments but don't even try to change them. And that these people

are like the dead, in the sense that they can't get beyond their anxieties, their preoccupations, and their habits; and that they therefore often remain victims of judgments that have been brought against them. From this it's quite evident that they *are* cowards, for example, or bastards. If they started out as cowards, nothing is going to change the fact that they are cowards. That's why they're dead people; it's a way of saying that being fenced in by perpetual worry about judgments and actions that one doesn't want to change is a living death. So that actually I wanted to use absurdity to demonstrate the importance for us who are living of freedom [*la liberté*], that is to say, the importance of changing acts by means of other acts. Whatever the circle of hell in which we live, I think we are free to break it. And if people don't break it, it's still freely that they don't. So that they freely put themselves in hell.<sup>15</sup>

What Sartre seems to be saying here is that if my relationships with other people are "good," then their judgments of me are of fundamental but not decisive importance in shaping my consciousness of myself. The things I say or sense about myself are influenced but not determined, *per se*, by such judgments. But when my relationships with other people are "twisted" or "corrupted," then their judgments of me are of decisive, determinative importance in shaping my consciousness of myself; I necessarily in this case depend "too much" on them. One could raise a number of questions about Sartre's comments on these matters, not least of which are the questions of exactly what constitutes a "good" or "corrupt" relationship and exactly why twisted relationships produce overdependence on the judgment of others. But what's important to emphasize in light of my purposes in looking at this gloss is that what apparently produces twisted relationships are individuals' "anxieties, preoccupations, and habits." If I am obsessed with a certain picture of myself, then my relationship with the Other will consist in the sense of confirmation—or lack or variation thereof—I find myself experiencing in the wake of his Look, and I will be unable to exercise my subjectivity in order to *act*—specifically, that is, to get past or transcend this fixed picture I have of myself.

The form of narcissism that, Sartre suggests, drives a self-

defeating response to the encounter with the Other (the response, that is, in which I try to get the Other to confirm my sense of myself as an object) is closely linked with what I'm going to identify as a structure of paranoia inherent in his description of this encounter. The idea that narcissism and paranoia might go together naturally, as it were, finds indirect support in Sigmund Freud's classic paper "On Narcissism."<sup>16</sup> Freud suggests that all human infants—indeed, in all likelihood, all living creatures—naturally feel a certain love for themselves, a self-love he calls "primary narcissism" (73–74). But just as the encounter with the Other in the master-slave dialectic renders the previously presocial being's pure subjective self-certainty problematic—just as it shows this self-certainty to be lacking an objective dimension—so in Freud's text the infant's inculcation into human society, the society of others, which Freud measures according to his absorption of this society's rules, renders his primary narcissism untenable. This is because the pure self-love of primary narcissism is a self-love oblivious to others; it is a love that turns on a sense of the self as brute, absolute, necessary, and central. Once the infant, through encounters with others, begins to give up this sense of himself, his primary narcissism cannot remain intact.

Of course, as Freud suggests, the absorption of social rules does not simply rob the infant of a sense of self. Indeed, the infant's new sense of himself is precisely as of an entity whose mission is to live up to these social standards. Freud identifies the new set of standards as themselves constituting an "ideal ego," that is, "an ideal by which [the child] measures his actual ego" (93).<sup>17</sup> In Freud's view, the primary narcissism characteristic of infancy, the form of narcissism no longer tenable in the wake of the infant's absorption of social rules, resurfaces in a secondary form as a love of the ideal ego. He writes:

This ideal ego is now the target of the self-love which was enjoyed in childhood by the actual ego. The subject's narcissism makes its appearance displaced on to this new ideal ego, which, like the infantile ego, finds itself possessed of every perfection that is of value. As always where the libido is concerned, man has here again shown himself incapable of giving up a satisfaction he had once enjoyed. He is not willing to forgo the narcissistic perfection

of his childhood; and when, as he grows up, he is disturbed by the admonitions of others and by the awakening of his own critical judgement, so that he can no longer retain that perfection, he seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal. What he projects before him as this ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal. (94)

Freud goes on to suggest that there is a psychic agency that “constantly watches the actual ego and measures it by that ideal” (95) and that this agency is what we ordinarily call the “conscience.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the narcissistic investment we have in the ideal ego inevitably, on Freud’s view, leads us to, as it were, *police* ourselves. Taking things back a step, this means that our encounter with others produces a form of narcissism in which we—all human beings—find ourselves split between a part that we are in-ourselves, so to speak, and a part that constantly surveys the extent to which the in-itself falls short of its own ideal.

It is at this juncture in “On Narcissism” that Freud links the development of secondary narcissism with the phenomenon of paranoia:

Recognition of this agency [the conscience] enables us to understand the so-called “delusions of being noticed” or more correctly, of being *watched*, which are such striking symptoms in the paranoid diseases. . . . Patients of this sort complain that all their thoughts are known and their actions watched and supervised; they are informed of the functioning of this agency by voices which characteristically speak to them in the third person (“Now she’s thinking of that again,” “now he’s going out”). This complaint is justified; it describes the truth. A power of this kind, watching, discovering and criticizing all our intentions, does really exist. Indeed, it exists in every one of us in normal life. . . . What prompted the subject to form an ego ideal, on whose behalf his conscience acts as watchman, arose from the critical influence of his parents (conveyed to him by the medium of the voice), to whom were added, as time went on, those who trained and taught him and the innumerable and indefinable host of all

the other people in his environment—his fellow-men—and public opinion. (95–96)<sup>19</sup>

Notice that far from drawing a sharp line between “normal” people and paranoiacs, Freud says that the paranoiac’s insistence that he or she is being watched is *true*. What seems to distinguish the paranoiac is that he or she is convinced that the Look, as it were, is coming *from the outside*. At the risk of overstretching the bounds of Freud’s thought, I want to suggest that the paranoiac’s problem is something like a *radical* sense of being split, one so extreme that the surveying agency, or consciousness, seems for all the world as if, though “mine” in some sense, it is “not me.” It is mine in the sense that I recognize it as inescapably indicting me. And yet, if I am paranoid, it strikes me at the same time as coming from an entity that is radically Other.

Freud’s understanding of the basic structure of paranoia, in which a certain, inherently human sense of being split becomes radically exaggerated, seems to me to be expressed perfectly in Sartre’s appropriation of the master-slave dialectic. What Freud sees as pathological—the feeling that I am continuously threatened by the judgment of the Other—is precisely Sartre’s picture of the *normal* human predicament. The decisive difference between Freud and Sartre on this point is that Freud identifies the judging agent to be *internal*, inside the head of the paranoid person (which means that the pathological dimension of paranoia lies precisely in this person’s misidentification of the locus of this agent), whereas for Sartre the judging agent genuinely is *external*, which means that a person’s sense of being watched is straightforwardly sane. That there is a decisive difference between Freud and Sartre here is not surprising, given Sartre’s early opinion of Freud. Indeed, in his early philosophical work (up to and including *Being and Nothingness*), Sartre explicitly aspired to develop an analysis of the human mind—a “psychoanalysis,” as he himself called it so as to declare a challenge to the work of Freud—based on the conviction that human beings are in principle capable of achieving perfect transparency of self-consciousness. In other words, Sartre, as a young philosopher writing in the heyday of Freud’s fame, set himself the task of disproving the idea of the Freudian unconscious.<sup>20</sup> I don’t think it’s an exag-

generation to identify this rejection of the idea of the unconscious as a hallmark of Sartre's philosophy, in this period and beyond. There is no place in his thinking for the possibility that the sense of being watched characteristic of what he calls the Look might come from some part of my *self* that is presently not available to me (where this is an inadequate if, I hope, reasonable enough description in this context of Freud's understanding of the role of the unconscious in paranoia). For Freud paranoia is a pathological response to the ongoing dialectic between internal and external that characterizes the phenomenon of conscience: the paranoiac imagines a sharp split between an external social censor and an internal self. I am arguing that in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre in effect identifies the paranoiac view as ontologically basic.

It is tempting to suggest that Sartre's understanding of the Look as genuinely coming from the outside, as it were, is itself a product of paranoia. The text is peppered with strikingly paranoid-sounding passages such as this one: "The original relation of myself to the Other is not only an absent truth aimed at across the concrete presence of an object in my universe; it is also a concrete, daily relation which at each instant I experience. At each instant the Other *is looking at me*" (345). But to reduce Sartre's conceptualization of the Look to a mere diagnosis would be, at least, *philosophically* remiss. For the paranoid structure of the Look—a structure I've linked, following Freud, with a certain form of narcissism—can be shown to be a manifestation of a form, albeit an idiosyncratic one, of philosophical skepticism. And it is in fact Sartre's investment in this form of philosophical skepticism that accounts for the drastic difference between his and Beauvoir's appropriations of Hegel.

The skepticism that infuses Sartre's work stems from his understanding of what it is to be a subject and what it is to be an object and thus, of course, what it is to be a human being. For Sartre, to be a subject requires that one view the world as a collection of objects radically separate from oneself. But, more than this, it requires that I see these objects, this world, as the raw material from and in response to which I am to create myself, as it were, as a human being. And yet in what sense do I stand in need of creation, on Sartre's view? It is pretty much a cliché that at the heart of Sartre's existentialism is the idea that

to be truly human—to create oneself as an authentic human being—is to “transcend” oneself through one’s freely chosen “projects.” But why must I do this, and what exactly does it entail? An answer for Sartre, though perhaps not the only one, is that it is the only way that I free myself from the Other’s Look. In Sartre’s world, I am constantly in danger of being reduced to the status of the in-itself, constantly under siege. The only way to escape from the Other’s fixating gaze is to deliberately undertake to overcome my own sense of shame by asserting myself as being-*for-itself*—as, that is, a form of being that is, literally, at the center of the universe.

Sartre locates the superiority of his philosophy over that of his predecessors (and particularly that of Hegel, Husserl, and Heidegger) in the thoroughgoing ontological character of his descriptive phenomenology. The mistake his predecessors make, Sartre argues, is that they figure the encounter with the Other not as the ontological phenomenon it is but as an event whose significance is to be measured in *epistemic* terms. They focus not on the change in ontological status precipitated for myself and the Other in our encounter but on the question of how I can *know* of and about the existence of myself and the other and the world. What’s perverse about this focus, Sartre observes, is that to be under the gaze of another is to be *overwhelmed* with the fact of the existence of that other, not to mention of oneself as an object in his world. The Other’s power over me through his Look, as revealed through what Sartre regards as genuinely ontological investigation, happens to “disclose to me the concrete, indubitable presence of a particular, concrete Other” (338)—that is, it discloses a piece of knowledge the epistemological certainty of which is, paradoxically, precisely that which epistemology-obsessed and ontology-blind philosophers so eagerly seek.

The Other’s Look has an effect on me that is initially ontological and not epistemological, so that I experience my being-for-the-Other not as a piece of knowledge but in the form of a sense of shame. And yet this sense of shame itself induces a radical shift in my epistemic relationship to the world. Now, suddenly, those objects I thought I knew turn out not to be related to me in the way I thought they were. And yet at the same time my sense of shame constitutes something of a proof for me that I exist, albeit as mere being-for-the-

Other. Thus for Sartre, I wish to suggest, the encounter with the Other performs for the looked-at person a variation on Descartes's performance in meditations 1 and 2.<sup>21</sup> In meditation 1, Descartes brings his existence, along with that of the world, into question, and in meditation 2 he offers up his famous *cogito* as proof to himself that he, at least, indeed exists. In Sartre's version the Look immediately confirms the fact of my existence and yet, at the same time, calls its status, as well as that of the world, severely into question. According to Descartes in meditation 1, to doubt that the ordinary objects around you and that you yourself exist is to court madness, a madness whose threat is extinguished precisely to the extent that the *cogito* indeed puts your skepticism to rest.<sup>22</sup> But the threat of madness is not correspondingly extinguished in Sartre's version. Here, the looked-at person's sense of the world's slipping out of his grasp is not the immediate spur to but, paradoxically, the *product* of the proof of his existence. The Other's Look proves that I exist (something I previously had no cause to think about as such, let alone doubt), but the content of this proof—my being-for-the-Other, and my sense of what I previously took to be the world as now exclusively for-the-Other—fills me with horror. I feel entrapped in some deep ontological way by the Other's Look. This sense that the Other is looking at me and in so doing is somehow opposing me fundamentally, and that there is no obvious way I can permanently extricate myself from this situation, and that I am therefore constantly and indefinitely under siege is, I wish to suggest, the form that Cartesian (i.e., skepticism-induced) madness takes in Sartre's scenario. In other words, it takes the form of paranoia.

On Sartre's view, to experience the certainty of the Other's subjectivity—of, this means for Sartre, the Other's humanity (at least in his sense of the word)—comes at the high ontological cost of relinquishing one's own subjectivity. But it also comes at a high epistemological cost: in Sartre's picture, as I've already suggested, there is room neither for "objectivity" in any standard sense of the term nor for the idea that our judgments can be measured in terms of "warrant" or "truth." My judgments are "true" only in some sort of instrumental sense of the word, insofar, specifically, as they free me from the Other's Look. And the Other's judgments are "true" only in the

sense and to the extent that they are part of a world the weight of which his Look has placed on my shoulders. By the time I am entrapped by the Look, imprisoned in the world of the Other, it is too late to ask questions about warrant. We can speak of another person's judgment of me as warranted only to indicate that the judgment has, as it were, hit home: reduced me to a state of shame, pinned me like a butterfly to his picture of me. There is, to put it another way, no epistemic court of appeal in Sartre's picture.

I have been arguing that Sartre's appropriation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic turns on the idea that the way human beings relate to one another is suffused with a species of narcissism and of paranoia and that these features of Sartre's picture have their roots in his investment in philosophical skepticism about the possibility of what is conventionally called "objectivity." Strictly speaking, one might hesitate to call Sartre's view "skeptical." Sartre never claims that I can't know the "real" world, even though he does deny that there's anything like a god's-eye point of view from which we can describe this world, and even though the way the world is, on his view, undergoes a sea change according to whether I see myself as a subject or an object in it. That I can know the world and the certain presence in it (or at its limits) of a being like myself in all relevant respects (e.g., whatever you might mean by a "human" being) is in fact a rock-bottom truth for the early Sartre. What makes his philosophy skeptical, then, is not some garden-variety species of Cartesian doubt. It's that the only way to be truly human, on his way of figuring things, is to *deny* the existence of the Other and his (version of the) world. To be a Sartrean subject requires that I overcome what is all too plainly and painfully for me the fact of the Other's existence. I must will a radical separation between myself and the Other, and I must abandon any investment I have in the idea of our genuinely sharing a world. So it turns out, perversely enough, that to be a Sartrean subject I actually am obliged to *will* what the traditional skeptic *fears*.

What prompted Sartre to work up such a severely attenuated view of what human beings can be for each other? No doubt a thorough response to this question would demand attention to Sartre's own "situation" as a young philosopher, psychologically, socially, and even geopolitically. But here I am interested in exploring the possibility

that we can make some headway on this question simply by looking at Sartre's conception of what philosophy is supposed to be. Let's start with something that is obvious to anyone who reads *Being and Nothingness*, which is that one of Sartre's aims in the book is to carve out a niche for himself in the history of the subject by constructing his own system of philosophy. This aspiration is evident in Sartre's explicit positioning of himself in relation to two sets of philosophical figures. One set is that of contemporary phenomenologists (or so-called phenomenologists, since Sartre sees all efforts prior to his own to develop an authentic phenomenology to have fallen short), most notably Husserl and Heidegger. The other set of figures in relation to which Sartre positions himself comprises those thinkers he takes to be of most importance in the history of philosophy, including Leibniz and Spinoza but more significantly Descartes, Kant, and Hegel. His positioning in relation to all of these figures characteristically takes the form of announcing where each went astray in his thinking and, specifically, of showing how his system ultimately fails to remain true to the most important insights upon which it is grounded. In discussing Hegel, for example, Sartre praises him for his "brilliant intuition" that I

depend on the Other *in my being*. I am, he said, a being for-itself which is for-itself only through another. Therefore the Other penetrates me to the heart. I can not doubt him without doubting myself. (321)

What Sartre likes about this intuition is that "Hegel has posed the question of the *being* of consciousness" and is therefore concerned with "reality" (322; my emphasis) not just with what a human being can *know* of reality. But Sartre immediately goes on to criticize Hegel for what he sees as an abandonment of this pure concern with "being" and an adherence to an idealist position in which the question of what exists and the question of what a human being can know are conflated. Specifically, Sartre claims that for Hegel knowledge "is still the measure of being," so that in the master-slave dialectic, for example, to *know* that the other sees me as an object implies that I *am* an object and to *be* an object as such is to *know* that I am one. For Sartre this

conflation between being and knowing eventually produces something he calls “Hegel’s failure” (338).

Sartre’s assessment of Hegel as having *failed* marks his appropriation of the master-slave dialectic as an explicitly polemical one. His treatment of Hegel is typical of his treatment of the other major philosophers whose work he discusses: he sees himself as resuscitating and remaining faithful to these figures’ most brilliant philosophical intuitions, intuitions that, in his view, they themselves have abandoned to the detriment of their own theories. What Sartre is trying to do, to put the matter in very simple terms, is to *get it right*. The motivation for doing this is just the conviction that other people have ultimately gotten it wrong. This conception of what philosophy is, with its implications of who and what it is *for*; far from being peculiar to Sartre, has been widespread for centuries. The view is predicated on the assumption that it is important—in some brute, absolute, uncontextualized sense—for human beings to know the answers to the “big” questions. But of course this very assumption implies that our “failure” to do so is in some unspecified sense terribly problematic. The history of philosophy is thus to be seen as a terribly problematic history of failures.

But let’s look more closely. Why is it terribly problematic? Why, in other words, must we have answers for these “big” questions? Why must we even ask ourselves such questions? The standard answer is that we need the kind of knowledge philosophers such as Sartre seek in order to add to or shore up our knowledge of the world, that without posing and answering questions such as those he explores in *Being and Nothingness* we are epistemically impoverished. There must be some information that we are lacking about ourselves or our world, information that would ultimately provoke some sort of change in our lives (else gaining it would be unimportant). Thus, to the extent that a philosopher’s work is regarded as marked by “failure,” it serves as a painful reminder that there is something of the first importance about how human beings should live that we in principle could but in fact do not know. We are doing something—what that something is remains to be seen—wrong.

*Being and Nothingness* suggests that what we are doing wrong is imagining that reciprocal relationships with other human beings—

that is, relationships of mutual respect, of genuine friendship, of real love—are possible. That they are not is a fundamental truth that previous philosophers have heretofore failed to make manifest. But what are we to *do* with this truth? Should we stop trying to forge relationships of reciprocity? Should we revel in being constantly at each other's throats? Clearly, this is not what Sartre had in mind, despite his memorable definition of hell. I would argue, indeed, that his promise of—and failure to complete—an ethics based on his ontology is a sign of his own ambivalence about the position he develops in *Being and Nothingness*, a position that seems to leave no room at all for a serious moral stance. And my suggestion is that Sartre was led to appropriate Hegel as he does in *Being and Nothingness* because he was motivated simply by a desire to get it right and thus gives his writing over to a certain inexorable logic.<sup>23</sup> I am not arguing, I hope it is clear, that Sartre has himself failed to do what he set out to do. I am claiming, rather, that Sartre's attenuated view about what human relationships can be like is at least in part a product of his attenuated view of what philosophy is.

A central goal of mine in the next two chapters is to show not only how Beauvoir's conception of philosophy differs from that of Sartre but also why this difference is philosophically significant. To the extent that Sartre's conception is typical, as I have claimed it is, then Beauvoir's work, to the extent that it's compelling in its own right, will provide an alternative model for how to write philosophically. In chapter 5 I show how from the beginning Beauvoir was dissatisfied with Sartre's conclusions in *Being and Nothingness* even as she struggled to put this dissatisfaction into words. And yet it was not until she came to write *The Second Sex* that she was able to move away from the standard conception of philosophy and turn from attempting to correct Sartre's errors, as it were, to finding a way to articulate her own interest in the same Hegelian intuitions that, as I have argued, Sartre saw himself as salvaging from the *Phenomenology*. This new model for philosophical work, I will argue, results from Beauvoir's finding herself moved to philosophize from within the context of a specific question—What is a woman?—the addressing of which has *specifiable* importance to her. In response to her posing of this

question, Beauvoir finds herself in the position not of correcting others' "failures" but of mustering all the resources she knows, including the writings of Hegel. What she produces is therefore not a polemical retheorizing of old problems but instead a constructive *recounting*, as I call it, of earlier philosophers' most compelling intuitions.

Reading Beauvoir Reading Hegel: *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*  
and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

I remember having experienced a great feeling of calm on reading Hegel in the impersonal framework of the Bibliothèque Nationale in August 1940. But once I got into the street again, into my life, out of the system, beneath a real sky, the system was no longer of any use to me: what it had offered me, under a show of the infinite, was the consolations of death; and I again wanted to live in the midst of living men.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*

**M**y task in this chapter is to begin to indicate why I believe that it is not until Beauvoir goes through the process of writing *The Second Sex* that she hits her philosophical stride. Unlike many early readers and critics of *The Second Sex*, however, I wholeheartedly embrace the view, espoused by most contemporary revisionist readers, that it is ludicrous to see Beauvoir, even in her pre-*Second Sex* philosophical writings, as simply parroting or in some minimally creative way defending the views of Jean-Paul Sartre. Any serious reader of Beauvoir cannot help but notice that much of what Beauvoir has to say about the second-class status of women and other groups and types of people is not only foreign to but even at odds with the views of at least the early Sartre, whose work is incompatible with any robust conception of oppression.

And yet Beauvoir's self-presentation almost always appears to reinforce the view that she is merely his disciple. In the climactic moments of the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir announces that her "perspective" is "that of existentialist ethics" (xxxiv). This line is routinely read as an unmistakable sign of Beauvoir's allegiance to the Sartrean party line: she's doing nothing more, philosophically, than applying Sartre's ready-made theory to what she calls the "situation"

of women. The feminist philosopher Andrea Nye, for example, accuses Beauvoir of adopting wholesale “the framing metaphysics of the human condition as laid out by Sartre,” and she is presumably thinking of the above line in claiming that “in her introduction, Beauvoir explicitly positioned herself not as a woman or as a feminist, but as an existentialist” (82).<sup>1</sup> Beauvoir herself seems to confirm this interpretation of the line in the existentialist-sounding formulas that follow it:

Every subject concretely poses himself through projects as a transcendence; he achieves liberty only through his perpetual surpassing toward other liberties. There is no justification for present existence other than its expansion toward an indefinitely open future. Every time transcendence falls back into immanence there is a degradation of existence into the “in-itself,” of liberty into facticity. (xxxiv–xxxv, TM; *LDS* 1:31)

There’s no doubt that these lines *sound* like warmed-over Sartre. But a closer look shows that there’s something else going on here. For one thing, Beauvoir does *not* say that her perspective is that of existentialism; she says it’s that of existentialist *ethics*. This might seem like hair-splitting, until one recalls that for the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness* the question of what counts as an “existentialist ethics” is explicitly left open at the end of the book. This means that he never speaks, as does Beauvoir in the above lines, of the question of what counts as “justification for present existence.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, although Sartre in the 1940s was laboring over the construction of an ethics, a project with which he was never satisfied and that remained unpublished until after his death (as *Notebooks for an Ethics*), it was Beauvoir who during the same period actually published three books on the subject: *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944; never translated into English in full); *Pour une Morale de l’Ambiguïté* (1947; published in English as *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in 1948); and *L’Existentialisme et la Sagesse des Nations* (1948; various essays available in English). These facts of history indicate that Beauvoir’s announcement in *The Second Sex* that her perspective is that of existentialist ethics ought to be read not, or not simply, as a declaration of her indebtedness to Sartre but as a suggestion that this book be read in light of her

own earlier work.<sup>3</sup> That Beauvoir is doing something significantly different from Sartre is also indicated by the sentence that follows the existentialist-sounding formulas: “This downfall [of, to repeat, transcendence into immanence] represents a moral fault if the subject consents to it; if it is inflicted upon him, it spells frustration and oppression. In both cases it is an absolute evil” (xxxv). The idea that the choice of “immanence” over “transcendence” might be *inflicted* on a person—that oppression can be, as it were, genuinely oppressive—is entirely absent in the early Sartre. And yet without this idea, the very notion of a “second sex,” that is, a whole group of people who are systematically deemed inferior to another whole group simply by virtue of being female, is incomprehensible.

Because Sartre’s system can’t make sense of much of what’s in *The Second Sex*, competent critics of the book recognize that in respect of its philosophical dimension Beauvoir’s thought cannot be characterized as exactly identical with that of Sartre. But because her “new” idea—the idea that a failure to achieve transcendence might not be an individual’s fault but rather an effect of systematic oppression—is so alien to Sartre’s way of thinking, such critics virtually always state or imply that Beauvoir’s philosophical outlook is fundamentally incoherent or otherwise disingenuous.<sup>4</sup> Alternatively, they try to argue that her greatest philosophical debt is not to Sartre but to another philosopher, characteristically identified as one of Sartre’s role models (ordinarily Husserl) or colleagues (most often Merleau-Ponty).<sup>5</sup> It’s as though even her admirers cannot seriously entertain the possibility that Beauvoir’s work is somehow genuinely original. By looking at the history of Beauvoir’s appropriation of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, I begin here to indicate why I think that what’s of most importance in her philosophical relationship to other philosophers is the *way* she appropriates their work. And I’m going to begin to show why and how I think this kind of appropriation is decisively different from the way Beauvoir “uses” the work of other philosophers in her earlier work, specifically *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

That there is important interpretive work to be done on this front is indicated by the fact that two of Beauvoir’s most thorough, sensitive, and serious readers—Debra Bergoffen and Michèle Le Doeuff—are diametrically opposed on the question of how to understand *The*

*Second Sex* in relation to Beauvoir's previous philosophical writings. For Le Doeuff, Beauvoir's three early philosophical books as well as her gestures to existentialist thought in the early pages of *The Second Sex* ought to be seen as tragic artifacts of her misguided sense of loyalty to Sartre. In Le Doeuff's view, what really got Beauvoir's philosophical juices flowing was her self-guided and independent reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology* in 1940, during a period in which Sartre was interned in Germany as a prisoner of war. Her reading of Hegel, Le Doeuff claims, guides Beauvoir's construction of her earliest published novel, *L'Invitée*, which appeared in 1943, the same year that saw the release of *Being and Nothingness*. While Beauvoir's novel, which Le Doeuff sees as containing "the thread that would lead her directly . . . to *The Second Sex*," was well received, Sartre's book, of course, became *the* force to be reckoned with on the French philosophical scene.<sup>6</sup> Therein followed what Le Doeuff regards as a series of maddening interruptions of Beauvoir's own true work in the form of her penning apologetics for Sartre's system, the most egregious (and widely read) of which is *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. Le Doeuff offers as evidence for this view Beauvoir's negative assessment in her autobiography of the *Ethics*: "Of all my books, that is the one that today irritates me the most."<sup>7</sup> Le Doeuff comments:

It rests with her male and female readers of today to say whether they subscribe to this judgment, which for me testifies finally to the taste of ashes left by a book written on the side or against the grain of that which one had begun to elaborate oneself. To say it straight out: Why did she have to get involved in this existentialism business, when, from July 1940, she held the thread that would lead her directly from *She Came to Stay* to *The Second Sex*?" (64)

For Debra Bergoffen, the answer to this question is that "this existentialism business" is integral to Beauvoir's work. As Bergoffen sees it, "*The Second Sex* develops, in the sense of making concrete, the themes of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*." It therefore "sets *The Ethics of Ambiguity* in new directions."<sup>8</sup> And the *Ethics* itself, Bergoffen argues, ought to be seen as developing, within a fundamentally existentialist

framework, Husserl's conception of intentionality, especially in relation to "the other" and as articulated in the *Cartesian Meditations*. And yet ultimately, on Bergoffen's view, *The Second Sex* pushes past the *Ethics* insofar as it develops something Bergoffen calls a "philosophy of the erotic." Specifically, Bergoffen tries to show, in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir "work[s] through the more radical implications of Husserl's ideas of intentionality" (185) to show how erotic relationships allow human beings to transcend themselves in a way that "embraces the otherness of the other" (89). Her philosophy of the erotic thus opens up possibilities of human relatedness that Sartrean existentialism cannot entertain.<sup>9</sup>

My own view is that while both Le Doeuff and Bergoffen are picking up on genuine tendencies in Beauvoir's early writing, they each ultimately mischaracterize both the nature of Beauvoir's philosophical originality and her relationship to other philosophers. For Le Doeuff, Beauvoir's early philosophical writing is just watered-down Sartrean existentialism and is unrelated to the decidedly un-Sartrean *Second Sex*, whose most direct philosophical forebear is Hegel. For Bergoffen, *The Second Sex* is the capstone in Beauvoir's project to take not *Being and Nothingness* but Husserl's philosophy in a decisively important new direction. In my view, Beauvoir is struggling to appropriate intuitions she has picked up from Hegel and Sartre and Husserl (not to mention Merleau-Ponty) from the earliest work on. But it is not until she comes to write *The Second Sex* that she finds a satisfying, genuinely original way to do so. In the pre-*Second Sex* material, I am going to argue in this chapter, Beauvoir has not found her philosophical voice. She cannot articulate clearly why she finds herself attracted to the thinkers whose works inspire her to write. For this reason, the early works are marked by a certain vagueness, an imprecision of thought that disqualifies them, on my view, contra Bergoffen, from serious independent philosophical consideration. But this is not, contra Le Doeuff, because they constitute some sort of detour from Beauvoir's "real" work. Rather, it's because Beauvoir's philosophical sympathies do not change so drastically over time that a retrospective look at this early material helps one pinpoint exactly what it is about *The Second Sex* that is philosophically important. It turns out that the way Beauvoir learns to appropriate the work of others—a way, as I

will argue, she does not discover until she is motivated to write *The Second Sex*—is her most decided original contribution not only to philosophy but also to feminism.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First, in agreement with Le Doeuff, I characterize Beauvoir in her three earliest philosophical works as writing essentially from within the shadow of Sartre's system, although I show, now in agreement with Bergoffen, that her motivation stems as much from her dissatisfaction with the ethical implications (and silences) of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* as it does from her zeal for the book. I indicate how from the earliest of these works Beauvoir is trying to express a certain strong disagreement with Sartre's views, a disagreement to which she alludes in slipping that unexpected distinction between bad faith and genuine oppression into the introduction to *The Second Sex*. Finally, I suggest (contrary to both Le Doeuff and Bergoffen) that with *The Second Sex* Beauvoir's earlier philosophical works are not so much put aside or continued or gone beyond but directly *transcended* in a sense that Beauvoir herself, exploring her understanding of conceptions of transcendence in both Sartre and Hegel, attempts both to thematize and to act out.<sup>10</sup>

#### PYRRHUS ET CINÉAS

In all of her philosophical works that precede *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir is always, and often explicitly, at pains to correct what she saw as misapprehensions about existentialism that began to proliferate after the publication of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. What I'm claiming she identified as misapprehensions are the familiar charges leveled against Sartre's philosophy, now and then: that it is solipsistic, nihilistic, amoral (if not immoral), pessimistic, and so on. Of course it's impossible to say anything definitive about why Beauvoir took this task upon herself, although given what is known about her close personal relationship to Sartre it would be preposterous not to suppose that it stems in part from some sort of brute desire to defend

him. But what I'd like to suggest in the next few pages is that the anxiety Beauvoir clearly felt on Sartre's behalf is at least in part motivated by her sense that in *Being and Nothingness* he did not provide the resources to answer some of his harshest critics. It's not clear to me whether she believed that this was a superficial problem—that is, that Sartre hadn't explicitly drawn out the countervailing points he needed to make—or that *Being and Nothingness* was more fundamentally vulnerable. What is clear—and here I am relying on the credibility of the interpretation of Sartre's views I offered in chapter 4—is that the views Beauvoir expresses in Sartre's defense often do not jibe with what's in *Being and Nothingness*. Regardless of what she believed herself to be doing, in order to answer Sartre's critics Beauvoir paradoxically had to move increasingly far away from exactly those of his views that she was undertaking to defend. The process of living out this paradox—a paradox that was a function, to be explicit, of her subscribing to a familiar conception of philosophy driven by certain familiar standards of failure and success—helped prepare Beauvoir for discovering a new way of relating to philosophy and thus a new way of being a philosopher.

In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, the first of the works in which she undertakes to defend Sartre, Beauvoir sets out to show how existentialism can counter the view that it is a nihilism according to which no human activity is more worth doing than any other. This is a charge, as I observed in chapter 4, that Sartre invites when he claims at the very end of *Being and Nothingness* that “all human activities are equivalent . . . and that all are on principle doomed to failure.” Thus, he infamously continues, “it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations” (797). Beauvoir uses one of Plutarch's exchanges between the warrior Pyrrhus and his comrade Cineas to frame her understanding of what's at stake in the charge that existentialism is a nihilism:

“We are going, first, to bring Greece to its knees,” [Pyrrhus] said.

“And then?” asked Cineas.

“We are going to Asia to conquer Asia Minor and Arabia.”

“And then?”

“We are going to the Indies.”

“And after the Indies?”

“Ah!” said Pyrrhus, “then I’m going to rest.”

“Then why,” asked Cineas, “don’t you just rest straight off?”<sup>11</sup>

What’s the use of doing something over and over again, especially something that’s going to produce untold pain and destruction, if all you’re going to do with yourself in the long run, all you’re looking forward to, really, is rest? Why *do* anything?

As a start on an answer Beauvoir appeals to one of the more famous aphorisms of Voltaire’s *Candide*: “One must cultivate one’s garden” (11). But which is *my* garden? For Beauvoir this question constitutes a variation on the disciples’ “Who is my neighbor?” (12), and she finds Christ’s answer compelling:

When the disciples asked Christ, “Who is my neighbor?” Christ did not respond with a list. He told the parable of the good Samaritan. The neighbor of the man abandoned on the road was the one who covered him with his coat and came to his aid: one *is* not the neighbor of anyone, one *makes* another a neighbor through an act. (17)

What Beauvoir likes about Christ’s response is that it suggests that there is no set answer to a question such as “Who is my neighbor?” or “Which is my garden?” Following Sartre, Beauvoir subscribes to the idea that we do not *discover* our neighbors, or gardens; rather, we *forge* them through our actions. This of course still leaves the question of what sorts of actions we ought to perform. Why make one particular person as opposed to another your neighbor? A familiar answer, an answer in fact suggested by the parable of the Good Samaritan, is that we ought to become neighbors to those who need our help. But Beauvoir thinks that there’s often a danger in selecting our neighbors this way, a danger that has to do with how one conceives of the person in need. “Let us suppose,” Beauvoir fantasizes for us,

that the other needs me; suppose that his existence possesses an absolute value: then I am justified in existing since I exist for a being whose existence is justified. I am delivered from risk, from an-

guish; in posing before me an absolute end I abdicate my liberty. No question is posed any longer. I no longer want to be anything but a response to this call that needs me. (70)<sup>12</sup>

Here we find the familiar existentialist warning that we must not “abdicate” our “liberty” under the guise of doing something good—a quintessential form of bad faith. But this warning depends on certain notions that Beauvoir leaves in decidedly vague form. First, there’s the idea that “[the other’s] existence possesses an absolute value.” It may help to imagine that Beauvoir is alluding here to the Kantian view that rationality demands that we regard and treat other rational beings as ends-in-themselves.<sup>13</sup> The problem with so conceiving of others, evidently, is that it allows me to imagine that I’ve “justified” my existence once and for all. This notion of “justification,” which looms large in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, is also less than transparent. But Beauvoir seems to find it necessary in her attempt to rescue Sartre’s metaphysics from the charge of nihilism. If, contra Sartre, it makes sense to speak of my having a garden, of my having *reasons* to choose to do something rather than another thing, then some sort of question about justification is going to arise.

But if this idea of justification is going to jibe with Sartre’s basic picture of the human being as radically free, metaphysically speaking, then it’s going to be impossible to justify myself once and for all. I’m going to be continually in the position of having to choose, continually dogged by “anguish” and “risk.” For both Sartre and the early Beauvoir, this is simply a brute metaphysical fact. To devote myself to another human being because I imagine that he or she is an “absolute end” is to abdicate my freedom of choice, and fantasizing that there is something morally good about this sort of devotion is therefore a quintessential expression of “bad faith.” Beauvoir’s basic position in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* thus far is that I *do* have a garden (as opposed to some sort of haphazard collection of plants)—I do have reasons to decide to do some things and not others and to aim at a certain order in my life—but that the question of what my garden, or who my neighbor, is can never be settled once and for all. So then we are still left with the question of what counts as “justification” for my actions, and of how I know or decide that something I do is or was or will be jus-

tified. Again: how am I to forge my garden? More than two-thirds of the way into *Pyrrhus*, Beauvoir has yet to answer the question she posed for herself at the beginning. What she has established is only that, according to existentialism, one cannot—ever, under any circumstances—escape one’s own freedom and thus one’s responsibility for one’s own existence. Her insistence on the real-life importance of this stark metaphysical position is as extreme as Sartre’s in *Being and Nothingness*, as we see in the following two passages:

A man cannot ever abdicate his liberty; when he feigns to renounce it, he does nothing but mask it, and mask it freely. The slave who obeys chooses to obey and his choice must be renewed at each instant. (72)

You can throw a man in prison, leave him there, cut off his arms, lend him wings; but his liberty remains infinite in every case. The automobile and the airplane do not change anything with regard to our liberty, and neither do the chains of the slave. (86)

The idea that all human beings are forced by the fact of their unimpeachable metaphysical liberty to select and cultivate one garden or another, the idea that Beauvoir has been at pains to elaborate and defend for almost all of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, is pure Sartre. But of course this idea does not in and of itself provide the resources for Pyrrhus to give Cinéas a compelling answer. It doesn’t *justify* Pyrrhus’ choice of one sort of life over another. And yet showing that existentialism can come to Pyrrhus’ assistance here was precisely Beauvoir’s goal in writing this defense of Sartre’s system.

Ultimately, in the last quarter of the book or so, Beauvoir does undertake to provide Pyrrhus with a way of answering Cinéas. But she does so by characterizing the relationship between a self and what she calls, of course following *Being and Nothingness*, “the Other” in a way that is not at all obviously Sartrean. Indeed, I’m going to argue that even in this stage of her philosophical development, when she takes herself to be little more than Sartre’s philosophical handmaiden, Beauvoir is more indebted to Hegel’s way of understanding self and other than she is to that of Sartre. Regardless of how one decides the

question of Hegel's influence on Beauvoir, one cannot deny that her thought veers decidedly from Sartre's in the suggestion she explores near the end of the book that for a person to act, to assume her subjectivity, to *exist* as opposed to merely *being* (to employ the existentialist jargon) one must "assume" one's acts, insofar as they create a new situation for the Other:

A first analysis of my relationships with the Other has led me to this result: the Other asks nothing of me; he is not an emptiness that I have to fill. I can discover in him no ready-made justification of myself. [So far, so Sartrean. But then:] And yet each of my acts in falling in the world creates for him a new situation. I must assume these acts. (90)

What does it mean to say that I must "assume" my acts, acts that create for the Other a new "situation" as they "fall in the world"? Again, Beauvoir's unbridled use of existentialist, or existentialist-sounding jargon, sometimes her own ("assume"), sometimes Sartre's ("situation") and sometimes other philosophers' ("falling in the world," which has its origins in Heidegger's *Being and Time*) does nothing to clarify her thought.<sup>14</sup> It might sound as though she is suggesting that I have some sort of metaphysical, preordained duty to the Other to take responsibility for the "situations" I create for him. Leaving aside for the moment the question of what Beauvoir means by "situation" here, and just how a "situation" could be "for" the Other, I think we can safely infer that this understanding of what she means by "assume" is incorrect. Hers is decidedly *not* a Kantian view in this respect, as Beauvoir is frequently wont to observe: "The mistake of Kantian morality," she says, "is to have attempted to make an abstraction of our own presence in the world and to result in abstract formulas" (91). So if there's no hidden abstract formula here, then what could Beauvoir be saying when she demands that I "assume" my acts?

The answer turns, I think, on Beauvoir's way of interpreting Sartre's understanding of what the Other person can be for me. Now, for Sartre, recall, there is a fight for subjectivity between the Other and me. I act; the Other acts; and at any given moment whoever is

not acting becomes a mere object in the other person's world. So for Sartre what's important to me about the Other is purely that he is capable, via the Look, of turning me into an object. (My turning him into an object is of course regarded by Sartre as something like a defensive act; it's not that I actively desire him to be an object; rather, his being so is a condition of my own subjectivity.) But what Beauvoir pays attention to is not just the question of what my phenomenological status is at any given moment but also how the Other's response to me, as a being whose very Otherness consists in his having revealed his capacity for subjectivity by Looking at me, influences my choice of what to do. What is of interest to Beauvoir, in other words, is that what I decide to do, how I find and cultivate my garden, is necessarily conditioned by how the Other responds to me.

To see how this is supposed to work, we need only return to Sartre's keyhole example. Here I am, squatting by the door. If you don't happen by, I continue to spy. But then, suddenly, there you are. You are Looking at me. For Sartre's purposes, what's important at this juncture is that I have now become an object in your world and can only recover by Looking at you. But to Beauvoir what's most important is that your catching me in the act shapes my further behavior. I get up and look guilty. Or I—deliberately—ignore you and continue peering through the door. Whatever I do inevitably constitutes a *response* to your Look. Of course, my doing something that counts as a "response" does not require that I encounter another subjectivity. If the electricity fails, I may be provoked to stand up and grope my way back to the kitchen. But this sort of response differs from my response to the acts of another person because when I respond to a mere objective change in my circumstances I need not worry that those circumstances will respond in kind. As I stumble along the hallway in the darkness, I do not expect the electricity to go back on or to stay off as a result. But when I decide to ignore you and continue peering through the doorway, I know that you may intrude on me again, that my digging in my heels creates a new "situation" for you, to which you are going in one way or another to respond, perhaps so as to alter the course of my project once again. In emphasizing the Other's way of influencing not my phenomenological status but my future course

of action, Beauvoir suggests that the Other's presence in my life is more than just a threat to my subjectivity: at least as important for her, it's a spur to my course of action.

Indeed, even as early as *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, Beauvoir wants to go further than this. Not only on her view *might* the Other's response decisively discourage or encourage me in what I go on to do; the responses of others are positively *necessary* for me to keep acting. This is because it's the fact of others' reactions to me, reactions that, phenomenologically speaking, I cannot help but be affected by, that forces me not to simply rest content with any one of my actions. The fact of others, to borrow Rousseau's language in *The Social Contract*, is what, on Beauvoir's view, *forces* me to be free. And this is true regardless of the tenor or shape of the Other's response. Suppose, for example, that another person expresses disgust at what I do. I might, of course, stop doing it. But even if I make a conscious decision not to allow the Other's response to "get to me," my future behavior will be altered. I might no longer do what I did within the range of the disgusted person. Or I might find I get a peculiar and remarkable frisson of sadistic pleasure from her disgust, so that I seek to recreate it. Regardless: I will find myself responding, somehow, to the response of the Other. It's this counterresponse that denies (if not disabuses me of) the fantasy that something like the rest Pyrrhus ultimately aims for is just around the corner, just one act away. As long as there are other people on the earth, I cannot and will not rest. For the Beauvoir of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, I think, morality consists in "assuming" this fact for oneself.

And yet Beauvoir seems unable to say anywhere in the book what this "assuming" is actually supposed to look like. Do I try to predict the Other's reaction when I act? (This seems decidedly too consequentialist for Beauvoir's tastes.) Or is it that I'm supposed to take responsibility for my actions *ex post facto*? But then what would this "taking responsibility" look like, exactly? These are important questions, and it is an important fact about *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* that it doesn't appear to have the resources to answer them, important not just in evaluating the book as an independent object but in tracing a trajectory from it to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, in which, as we shall see

below, the concept of “assuming” begins to take a clearer shape, and finally to *The Second Sex*, in which Beauvoir gives herself the resources to develop the intuition behind the idea of “assuming” into a full-blown picture. But just as important, I think, is Beauvoir’s new angle on Sartre’s picture, an angle that reveals that a condition of my freedom, or at least of my being forced to exercise my freedom, is that the Other also be free. Put otherwise, the Other’s freedom is to be seen as not just a threat to my subjectivity but a necessary condition of its being regularly exercised. That there is something positive about the Other’s freedom is a possibility never raised by the Sartre of *Being and Nothingness*. That Beauvoir thinks we might see it this way is a function of her figuring my actions not as attempts to freeze the Other, along with his threats, in my world, but as “calls” or “appeals” (*appels*) (see, e.g., pp. 109, 113).<sup>15</sup> For her, everything I do counts as an invitation to the Other to respond, not just as an object but, far more important, as a fellow subject. Beauvoir does not say flat out in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* that my “appeals” are appeals to beings I can recognize in my subjectivity as subjects themselves. Instead, she faithfully recites such Sartrean maxims as this: “Other men exist only as objects; I alone take hold of myself in my intimacy and my liberty: a subject” (94). But I am arguing that Beauvoir implies that this maxim is inaccurate as it stands in insisting, in myriad ways, that “my essential need is . . . to have free men opposite me” (96), to appeal to persons who are naturally inclined to hear and react to the calls I issue, reactions that in their turn constitute appeals to me in my subjectivity.<sup>16</sup>

But what do I mean when I say that Sartre’s conception of how I can experience the Other’s subjectivity is inaccurate “as it stands”? Why isn’t it just flat-out false by Beauvoir’s lights? We get something of an answer if we put Beauvoir’s conception of action as call or appeal next to the straightforwardly Sartrean idea that in acting I am turning the other into an object, an idea that, as I’ve just documented, Beauvoir explicitly intones in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*. Are these two ideas obviously incompatible? They are only if one denies that another person can be, for me or for herself, simultaneously an object and a subject. But suppose that this is false. Suppose that in asserting my subjectivity in the world, that is, in acting, I engender or found, as it

were, not one type of object but two: the first, of course, is the Other-as-object; the second—a second unacknowledged by Sartre—is whatever situation results from my action. And indeed this idea of situations as in effect *objects* created by action is, I think, what Beauvoir intends by her use of Sartre's term "situation" when she claims that "each of my acts in falling in the world creates for [the Other] a new situation." This situation does not strike the Other as something that just incidentally results from my actions; it's something that the Other, the Other as subject, automatically, phenomenologically, regards as *mine*.<sup>17</sup> The situations I create by my actions automatically become, in other words, phenomena open to and even inviting her judgment. The idea here is that my acting, while it may have the immediate consequence of figuring another person both in my eyes and hers as an object, also produces an incarnation of *myself* as object incarnated in the situation I create. Insofar as what I do becomes an object of the Other's judgment, it in fact is an invitation, a call, not just generally to the Other but specifically to her in her subjectivity, to her as she is "for-herself." In this way, to act is *both* to treat the Other as an object and to issue an appeal to her as a subject. It is also to force myself on the world as both a subject—an actor—and an object, that is, that "situation" created by my action in which I am necessarily represented and, at least for the moment, fixed.

There are at least three ways in which my acting, insofar as it is construed as an expression of my existence, of myself as I figure myself to be for-myself, is an inherently risky business. Beauvoir can be credited with having recognized all three of these sorts of risks in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, even if she does not give equal regard to all three. One risk, the one to which Beauvoir seems to pay the least amount of attention, is that if my appealing to the subjectivity of the Other must take the form of my objectifying myself, through the creation of a situation that will be recognized as mine, or even as me, then in acting I automatically risk misjudgment. In order to avoid this exposure of ourselves, something Beauvoir calls our "completely staking" ourselves (107), we often either attempt to please the Other—that is, we kowtow to the conventional—or else we profess contempt for all but those people who are receptive to the situations we create. But both

of these responses, Beauvoir insists, are signs of cowardice, which insofar as it involves an abrogation of one's freedom, an attempt to achieve a state of eternal rest (a death-in-life), is taken by her to be a moral fault. Of contempt, for example, she writes,

It would be convenient to be able to use contempt like a weapon: one would try to do so often. A child, a young man esteemed by his entourage, chooses not to confront an unfamiliar judgment; he shuts himself up in his sphere and in order not to run any risk disarms in advance the opinion of the rest of the world; he walks in life with a sure step: whoever condemns him condemns himself. But in so doing he renounces his liberty. To be free is to throw oneself into the world without calculation, without stake; it's to define oneself as completely staked . . . whereas the overly prudent man must take care not to found a project other than that which valorizes those who valorize him. (107)

But Beauvoir does not spend much time in this book—and how could she, given its overriding purpose?—exploring the ramifications of the self-objectification that, she implies, is a necessary consequence of the exercise of subjectivity that both she and Sartre so strongly advocate. It is not until *The Second Sex*, I'm going to argue, that she finds a way of exploring this consequence head-on.

The two other risks I undertake in exercising my subjectivity, two to which Beauvoir devotes considerably more words than the first, have to do with her understanding of genuine acting—that is, the complete staking of oneself—as requiring the undertaking of certain daunting political commitments. This requirement drops right out of what Beauvoir sees as the conditions that must be in place for genuine action to be possible. The first is, as she puts it, that I “be allowed to call” (113), where “allowed” means, literally, politically permitted to speak. “I will fight, then,” declares Beauvoir, “against those who would like to stifle my voice, prevent me from expressing myself” (113). The second, closely related requirement is that other human beings be free both to hear and respond to my appeal. Thus my own ex-

istential freedom demands that I fight for the political freedom of others. Beauvoir writes,

The sick person who exhausts himself fighting against his sickness, the slave against slavery, doesn't worry about poetry or astronomy or the perfection of aviation; they first need health, law, security, the free disposition of themselves. . . . I demand [*Je demande*] for men health, knowledge, well-being, law, so that their liberty does not consume itself in combating sickness, ignorance, misery. (114, 115)

It is true that fighting to cure disease is not necessarily a political act. But I think that Beauvoir mentions the sick person and the slave in one breath because she is imagining that the fight to cure disease takes place not only on the clinical level but also at the political level, where decisions are made about how to allocate resources. For Beauvoir our responsibility to care for each other extends beyond the ways we are able to minister to one another personally, although these are necessary too. What she is trying to account for is our hesitancy to throw ourselves into the world, to stake ourselves completely, to own up to our freedom, to *act*. And she is trying to explore the idea that we are fearful of just how much of the world we will, in principle and in fact, have to take on in order to achieve something we can authentically recognize as subjectivity.

I said earlier that in her understanding of the relationship between self and other Beauvoir can be seen to be more indebted to Hegel in key respects than to Sartre. That Hegel is on Beauvoir's mind is clear from the fact that she drops his name more often (in this book in which few names are dropped) than that of any other philosopher, including Sartre. Virtually all of the handful of instances in which she mentions Hegel are polemical, and I will look explicitly at one of them in a moment. But I bring in Hegel at this particular point because I want to claim that he is in the background of Beauvoir's discussion of political "struggle" as an absolute, even metaphysically absolute, moral necessity. I want to demonstrate this by looking at the following remarkable passage from the final pages of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*:

We are condemned to failure because we are condemned to violence. We are condemned to violence because man is divided and opposed to himself, because men are separated and opposed to one another: by violence one will make of the child a man, of the horde a society. To renounce the struggle [*la lutte*] would be to renounce transcendence, renounce being. And yet no success will erase the absolute scandal of each singular failure. (117)

Because there are only certain social conditions under which I and others can be free to make our own appeals and to acknowledge those of others, I must be prepared, Beauvoir is arguing, to fight for these conditions. And I must be prepared for the possibility that this fight will require the perpetration of violence, the physical harming of other people. But this is not the type of violence to which Beauvoir claims I am *condemned*. Rather, in speaking of our being condemned to violence Beauvoir is referring to the fact that waging war against those who would curtail the freedom of others or even of themselves requires that I treat those people as objects, specifically as objects of my contempt, as beings-in-themselves whose judgments of me I cannot “assume” but must instead be at pains to avoid and repel. I fight against the Other in, as Beauvoir puts it, his “facticity”; but “precisely in choosing to act on this facticity, I renounce taking the Other as a liberty and restrict proportionately the possibilities for expansion of my own being; for the man against whom I do violence is not my peer, and I need men to be my peers” (116). And yet I undertake to do violence to others precisely in the name of liberty. This is why I am, as Beauvoir puts it above, “condemned to failure”: I cannot free one person without doing violence to another. And this is nothing less than an “absolute scandal.”

We can think of her remarks on violence as Beauvoir’s interpretation, at this early stage in her thinking, of Hegel’s understanding of the cost of subjectivity. But perhaps “interpretation” is the wrong concept here, since Beauvoir explicitly understands herself to be working *against* Hegel in her remarks on this subject. What bothers her about Hegel’s understanding of what subjectivity requires is that he doesn’t acknowledge the cost that subjectivity actually demands in the real world, the violence that is, paradoxically, an absolute moral necessity.

She accuses both Hegel and Kant of an “optimism” (117) borne of a denial of what concrete individuals are forced to do in the name of living out their existential freedom. The charge, then, is that Hegel’s depiction of the “fight to the death” is, in a word, too abstract. “It’s not a matter, as Hegel believes, of making people recognize in me the pure abstract form of the me,” claims Beauvoir; “it’s my being in the world that I intend to save, insofar as it realizes itself in my acts, my works, my life” (96).

Beauvoir’s charge against Hegel, put simply, is that his philosophy, in its abstraction, is massively in bad faith.<sup>18</sup> What Beauvoir doesn’t see here—but will by the time she comes to write *The Second Sex*—is that her gripe is not just against Hegel, or even Hegel and Kant, but against a certain conception of *philosophy*. Indeed, she doesn’t see that her *own* writing in this book is subject to the same criticism to which she subjects Hegel. While she does express what might turn out to be an important sort of dissatisfaction with a certain familiar set of philosophical ambitions and methods, she ironically works from just these ambitions and methods and therefore can appear to be engaging in a massive *reductio ad absurdum* to make the point that they ought to be abandoned. The abstractness of her own work would thus constitute a form of self-incrimination.<sup>19</sup> This is precisely the criticism that Beauvoir herself would launch at this early work after having written *The Second Sex*.<sup>20</sup>

Beauvoir’s broadside against Hegel belies her obvious interest in appropriating the master-slave dialectic to help defend Sartre against his critics. What Beauvoir wants from Hegel’s work is a way of articulating the idea that rationalizing the curtailment of another person’s freedom, something we can all recognize as morally unsavory, is a paramount act of bad faith, so that there is a natural link to be seen between Sartre’s concept and an ordinary moral notion. Here is what she has to say about the master’s refusal to acknowledge the humanity of the slave and thus the horror of enslavement:

Despite taboos, prejudice, and his willful blindness, the master knows that he must speak to the slave. One cannot speak except to human beings. Language is an appeal to the liberty of the

Other, since the sign is not a sign unless it's grasped by a consciousness. The master senses on himself the look of the slave. As soon as he's looked at, it is he who is the object [here there is a reference to the section of *Being and Nothingness* called "The Look"]: he is a cruel or timid tyrant, resolute or hesitant. If he tries to transcend this transcendence, thinking, "These are the thoughts of a mere slave," he knows that the slave also transcends this thought. And in the fight that unfolds here the liberty of the slave is recognized by the master even as he opposes it. All men are free, and as soon as we interact with them we feel their liberty. (104–105)

Here we see Beauvoir using Sartre's idea of the Look to explain why the master's regarding the slave as ontologically inferior to himself is in bad faith. Because the slave is a human being, he is, at least in principle, just as able to Look at the master as the master is to Look at him. And when the slave does Look at the master (as a "cruel or timid tyrant, resolute or hesitant"), the master responds automatically, ontologically; presumably, he feels what Sartre calls shame or pride. In this moment, the master has become an object in the slave's world. If he tries to deny this moment, then he is in bad faith. His only "authentic" response is to fight back, by returning the Look and thus objectifying the slave. Notice that Beauvoir, in accord with Sartre's way of understanding human relationships, identifies this return of the Look by the master as the beginning of a (or, a *new*) fight.

But of course Beauvoir is doing more in this quotation than simply pointing out that Sartre's notion of the Look shows master-slave relations between human beings to be in bad faith. In revisiting the Hegelian fight-to-the-death, Beauvoir notices not only that the slave, as a human being, inherently has the power to turn the master into the Other but also that the master in his very issuing of orders to the slave, in his very attempt to objectify him, must *appeal* to his liberty. This is because he issues his orders in language, which, as he well knows but in bad faith denies, is comprehensible only to a being who is capable of grasping the signs he makes, that is, to what Hegel and Sartre and Beauvoir wish to call a subject (a being who acts on the

world, in this case by judging the meaning of the master's signs). Paradoxically, in order for him to be able to treat the slave as a slave, then, the master needs the slave to be free. In identifying language as the source of the contradiction, Beauvoir specifies a way to understand the terrible tension to which Hegel alludes, as the master-slave dialectic begins to push beyond itself, between the conditions under which the master assumes mastery and the very notion of what it is to be a master.

But it's perhaps even more telling that her understanding of the significance of the master's use of language is seriously at odds with the Sartrean picture that she has set out to defend. For what Beauvoir implies in her appropriation of Hegel's description of master-slave relations is that to regard another person at whom you are Looking (say, in the form of speaking to this person) as merely an object is itself an act of bad faith. And yet on Sartre's view, regarding the Other as a pure object is part and parcel of what the Look *is*. It's hard to overestimate the depth of the conflict between Sartre and Beauvoir on this point. For Sartre, my only weapon against the Other's Look is to Look back; the only way to avoid being an object in the Other's world is to make him an object in mine. But Beauvoir is in effect arguing that at least insofar as it involves language, as most human interactions do, the Look in fact can be seen to constitute an acknowledgment of the Other's *subjectivity* and that denying this by imagining that I have simply *objectified* the Other through my Look is squarely an act of bad faith—which is of course to imply that Sartre himself, in his description of the Look in *Being and Nothingness*, is acting in bad faith.

That Beauvoir evidently does not see that her appropriation of Hegel in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* is in fact severely at odds with precisely those notions of Sartre's that she's trying to defend is, I think, also a function of her not having found her voice in philosophy, not having found a way to do her work. This may be why in her allusions to the master-slave dialectic she avoids addressing Hegel's own insistence on the salvific power of work—of transforming what's given into something that represents one's subjectivity. Indeed, I'm going to argue that it's Beauvoir's refusal to construe her own writing as a form

of work, to (in her terms) *assume* it as work, that allows her to figure it as a “mere” defense of Sartre. One of the features that secures the singularity of *The Second Sex* is the way that Beauvoir conveys the idea of her writing as work, and of work as integrally related to issues of subjectivity and objectivity, and therefore (given who Beauvoir is) of ontology and epistemology and morality, in practically every sentence of the book.

A dozen or so years after the publication of *The Second Sex* had made her internationally renowned on her own merits, Beauvoir came both to recognize and to lament the abstractness of her early works, from *Pyrrhus* through *L'Existentialisme et la Sagesse des Nations* to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. She writes of her disgust with this feature of her early work in the third installment of her autobiography, *The Force of Circumstance* (*La Force des Choses*, published in 1963, when she was fifty-five years old). These are the passages from which Michèle Le Doeuff draws evidence for the idea that Beauvoir's pre-*Second Sex* philosophical works amount to little more than an unfortunate detour. But it's important to see that what Beauvoir is explicitly dissatisfied with in her early works is not their existentialist or Sartrean character but, again, the abstractness of her approach. Of the four essays that constitute *L'Existentialisme et la Sagesse des Nations*, for example, Beauvoir writes,

I find nothing surprising . . . in my concern with moral questions. What I find hard to understand is the idealism that blemishes these essays. In reality, men defined themselves for me by their bodies, their needs, their work; I set no form, no value above the individual of flesh and blood. . . . In *Ceil pour Ceil*, I justified the purges after the Liberation without ever using the one solid argument: these mercenaries, these murderers, these torturers must be killed, not to prove that man is free, but to make sure they don't do it again; for one Brice liquidated, how many lives would have been spared! I was—like Sartre—insufficiently liberated from the ideologies of my class; at the very moment I was rejecting them, I was still using their language to do so. That language has become hateful to me because, as I now

know, to look for the reasons why one should not stamp on a man's face is to accept stamping on it. (*Force of Circumstance* 68; see *La Force des Choses* 99–100)

And in explanation of her saying of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that “of all my books, that is the one that today irritates me the most,” Beauvoir writes,

The fact remains that on the whole I went to a great deal of trouble to present inaccurately a problem to which I then offered a solution quite as hollow as the Kantian maxims. My descriptions of the nihilist, the adventurer, the esthete, obviously influenced by those of Hegel, are even more arbitrary and abstract than his, since they are not even linked together by a historical development; the attitudes I examine are explained by objective conditions; I limited myself to isolating their moral significance to such an extent that my portraits are not situated on any level of reality. I was in error when I thought I could define a morality independent of a social context. I could write an historical novel without having a philosophy of history, but not construct a theory of action. (*Force of Circumstance* 67; see *La Force des Choses* 1:99)

In the section that follows I want to show why and how Beauvoir's self-criticism here is integral to her own understanding of the philosophical achievements of *The Second Sex*. I also want to continue to argue that this charge of abstractness is related to Beauvoir's understanding of herself in her early philosophical works as in the main defending Sartrean existentialism against its critics. But what's most important to me in the pages that follow is to continue to show why and how Beauvoir could not find a way to say what she wanted to say—and therefore, in effect, did not know exactly what she wanted to say—in the context of trying to write an abstract philosophical essay.

In 1945, two years after the resoundingly successful publication of *Being and Nothingness* and in the wake of the liberation of France from several years of Nazi occupation, Jean-Paul Sartre founded *Les Temps modernes*, a monthly journal on whose editorial board he and Beauvoir were to serve for the rest of their lives. In the early days the journal not surprisingly took a decidedly existentialist stance, and it is in her articles in its first issues that we find Beauvoir more explicitly at pains than anywhere else in her body of work to defend Sartre against his critics. Between October 1945 and April 1946 Beauvoir published four such pieces in *Les Temps modernes*: “Idéalisme moral et Réalisme politique” (“Moral Idealism and Political Realism”); “L’Existentialisme et la Sagesse des Nations” (“Existentialism and the Wisdom of Nations”); “Œil pour Œil” (“An Eye for an Eye”); and “Littérature et Métaphysique” (“Literature and Metaphysics”).<sup>21</sup> These essays were collected in a single volume and published as *L’Existentialisme et la Sagesse des Nations* in 1948. Perhaps because *Les Temps modernes* gave Beauvoir the security of knowing that anything she wrote would be published, the four essays that this book comprises are considerably less original and considerably more defensive in tone than *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*. It may be for this reason that lists of Beauvoir’s philosophical writings often exclude this collection; at the end of her life, Beauvoir herself, in a conversation with a biographer, does not mention it in response to the question of “which of her works she considered the important starting point for any interpretation and evaluation of her *oeuvre*.”<sup>22</sup> For my purposes it is telling that the first pieces of writing Beauvoir mentions in response to this question are not *The Second Sex* and her autobiography or novels but *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and her only other book-length philosophical essay, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. While it would be rash to put much stock in this remark, I take it as another piece of evidence that in her reference to “existentialist ethics” in the introduction to *The Second Sex* Beauvoir is alluding to both of them. But the best evidence for the idea that these works are integral to understanding Beauvoir’s aims and achievements in *The Second Sex* can only be mustered, of course, through actual discussions of them. I turn, then, to *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

Like *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *L'Existentialisme et la Sagesse des Nations*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*—which began life in the form of two long essays published in *Les Temps modernes* in 1947—has its roots in Beauvoir's wish to explain existentialism to its critics. But there's a marked difference in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*: in this work Beauvoir seems everywhere aware that what she is doing goes beyond and may even conflict with Sartre's philosophy. In another interview with biographer Deirdre Bair, Beauvoir calls the book “a frivolous, insignificant thing, not worthy of attention”: “She attributed its inadequacy to the fact that ‘it's neither one thing nor the other. It's supposed to be a defense of Existentialism and a definition of morality, but at the time I wrote it I was too conscious of myself to think objectively’ ” (Bair 321). In the pages that follow I'm going to suggest that what Beauvoir means here by thinking “objectively” is thinking *abstractly*. Thus this criticism of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*—a book, let's remember, that Beauvoir nonetheless recommended as a starting point in understanding her life's work—would be linked with the criticism she makes of it in *The Force of Circumstance*, namely, that it is *hopelessly* abstract. This means, further, that for Beauvoir, being too conscious of oneself to think objectively is not necessarily a fatal shortcoming. Rather, I'm taking Beauvoir's curious remark to suggest that the flaws of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* stem from a clash between her state of self-consciousness and her sense that the only way to write philosophically must be to write “abstractly.” This would imply that the great achievement of *The Second Sex*, to the extent that it succeeds as a work of philosophy, lies in Beauvoir's finding a nonabstract and yet recognizably philosophical mode of self-conscious expression.

Like *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* turns on the idea—an idea I've already argued is seriously at odds with Sartrean existentialism—that (in Sartre's terms) human beings are never exclusively either “for-themselves” or “in-themselves,” never purely subjects or objects. In *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, this idea shows up in Beauvoir's figuring of the Look, especially when it involves language, as a call or appeal: to issue such an appeal is not just to perform an action as a subject but also to invite the Other's judgment of me (as an object); and it is to view the Other not just as a piece of my world, an object, but as a being capable of responding to my appeal (as a subject). In the

*Ethics* Beauvoir marks the idea that human beings are never exclusively subjects or objects by the use of the term “ambiguity.” One of the major claims of the book is that most philosophers (and so not just, she implies, Sartre) have incorrectly identified the ambiguity of the human condition as some sort of radical *split*: as between body and soul, or phenomenon and noumenon, or interiority and exteriority (see, e.g., 7–8). The ethics that issue from this fundamentally distorted picture, claims Beauvoir from the start of the book, always consist in recommending that human beings cleave either to one side or another of the split, so that effectively their goal is to “eliminate” ambiguity (8). Kant, for example, saw a sharp split between reason and inclination; for him, to be ethical is to act purely out of respect for the moral law, which is divined exclusively by and within reason. On Beauvoir’s view, which she sees as fundamentally opposed to that of Kant, *the* ethical task is to “assume” (as, *pace Pyrrhus*, she puts it) our ambiguity (see, e.g., 9). And most of her *Ethics* consists in her attempting to articulate what this assumption looks like.

One confounding feature of the *Ethics* is that Beauvoir insists from the beginning that the acknowledgment and assumption of human ambiguity are fundamental to all forms of existentialism, from Kierkegaard on (9–10). Indeed, she goes so far as to claim that ambiguity is the defining feature of the human being as it is described in *Being and Nothingness*. And yet the first concern of the *Ethics* is to defend this claim against obvious objections, primarily Sartre’s explicit pessimism in *Being and Nothingness* about the possibility of any synthesis between the in-itself and the for-itself, a pessimism so pervasive that Beauvoir herself acknowledges that it accounts in large part for Sartre’s failure to produce an ethics of his own (see, e.g., 10–11). Beauvoir sets for herself the contradictory task of vindicating Sartre’s pessimism—a pessimism that looks for all the world as though it flies in the face of the idea that human beings are in any deep sense “ambiguous”—and justifying the idea that ethics consists in “assuming” one’s fundamental ambiguity.

In attempting to carry out this task she positions her view explicitly against that of Hegel, whom she, on the one hand, commends for trying “to reject none of the aspects of man’s condition and to reconcile them all” and, on the other, criticizes for being too “optimistic”

about human beings' prospects in this endeavor (8). As in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, Beauvoir will link Hegel's optimism with his commitment to abstraction, in particular to his idea that the history of the human being is essentially the history of *Geist* (Mind, or Spirit).<sup>23</sup> But at the same time she will imply that human beings have reason for optimism—which means for her that they have reason to attempt to be ethical (that is, on her understanding, to try to “assume” their ambiguity). The goal, then, is effectively to detach Hegel's optimism from his abstractness. This is a goal that, by her own lights, Beauvoir will fail to meet. And I'm trying to suggest that she fails to meet it precisely because she has not yet found a way of exploring these matters that is not itself abstract. In her observation, which I quoted at the end of the *Pyrrhus* section above, that parts of the *Ethics* are even more abstract than the parts of Hegel's writing that serve as a touchstone for this book, Beauvoir does not mention that her own abstractness pales in comparison with that of Sartre. In once again explicitly taking on for herself the task of defending her partner, Beauvoir condemns herself to writing at a certain level of abstraction that, I'm arguing, is going to prevent her from articulating her sense that one can aspire to “assume” one's ambiguity in a way that is itself neither ambiguous nor overly optimistic.

The commitment to abstraction that constrains the *Ethics* is evident in the peculiar way Beauvoir frames her aspirations in this book: “An ethics of ambiguity,” as she defines it, “will be one which will refuse to deny a priori that separate existants [sic] can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their singular freedoms can forge laws valid for all” (18). But who ever claimed that people's being separate from one another precludes from the start the possibility of ethics? Not only have most moral philosophers not found the separateness of individuals an a priori impediment; they have felt the need to construct systems of ethics—to try to forge laws valid for all—precisely because of this fact. What stymies Beauvoir here is her allegiance to Sartre's way of conceiving the separateness of persons. In his view this separateness is radical: human beings not only have individual consciousnesses and bodies, but these consciousnesses and bodies inherently have absolutely nothing in common with one another (except, of course, insofar as they mutually provoke and antago-

nize one another through exchanges of the Look). This means that there is nothing in Sartre—Kantian reason, say, or Hegelian Spirit—that can in principle ground a system of morality. The fact of human separateness, to put it another way, is not offset by the existence of some universal metaphysical font of which all human beings across time and place ought to or even can aspire to partake. So since on this view there is nothing like a human essence, “the source of values” has to be “the plurality of concrete, singular men projecting themselves toward their own ends on the basis of situations whose particularity is as radical, as irreducible, as subjectivity itself.”<sup>24</sup> This is of course a central plank of Sartre’s existentialist platform, and it rests on the still more fundamental belief that, as Beauvoir puts it, “the meaning of the situation does not impose itself on the consciousness of a passive subject[;] . . . it surges up only by the disclosure which a free subject effects in his project” (20). So it turns out that Beauvoir in the *Ethics* wants to show that even though each human individual is unique, not least because each one’s “situation” is unique, groups of human beings can “forge laws valid for all.”

Given that what Beauvoir wants to produce is an ethics, and given that at this stage in her philosophical life she has no reason to question whether an ethics must implicitly or explicitly acknowledge the possibility or desirability of universal laws, it is not surprising that her aspirations take the form they do. As one would expect from the author of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, the laws that Beauvoir is going to try to generate in the *Ethics* are those dicta the obeying of which she deems to be necessary to the full exercise of human freedom. So, for example, it’s going to be imperative to respect and promote the freedom of other people (see, e.g., 60). In part 2 of the (four-part) *Ethics* Beauvoir attempts to bring these laws into relief by describing various types of people who fail to live up to them: the Sub-man, the Serious Man, the Nihilist, the Adventurer, and the Passionate Man<sup>25</sup>—in order from least to most “ethical.” The tensions inherent in each of these positions tend to push each type into the next category. Thus the Sub-man, defined as the person who wishes to merge with the realm of things, to cleave purely to the in-itself, is often motivated by fear of an unknown future to become a Serious Man, a person who acknowledges that he is for-itself but who wishes to devote himself as such en-

tirely to absolute ends dictated by convention, so that the for-itself reifies into something thing-like (45–46). In turn, the Serious Man “will always be saying that he is disappointed, for his wish to have the world harden into a thing is belied by the very movement of life” (52); and so the Serious Man may easily become a Nihilist, a person who understands correctly “that the world *possesses* no justification and that he himself *is* nothing” but who fails to see that “it is up to him to justify the world and to make himself exist validly” (57).

Both the Adventurer and the Passionate Man, on Beauvoir’s view, “assume [their] subjectivity positively” (63), but both fail to reach moral perfection because they refuse to see that the promotion of their own freedom necessarily enjoins them to promote the freedom of other people as well. The Adventurer “is the one who remains indifferent to the content, that is, to the human meaning of his action, who thinks he can assert his own existence without taking into account that of others” (61). And for the Passionate Man, to whom “only the object of his passion appears real and full” (66), the freedom of others is beside the point. This is true even—perhaps especially—if the object of the Passionate Man’s passion is another person, for in his desire to eliminate the distance between himself and this object the Passionate Man desires the other person to be an object and not a free being. This means that the Passionate Man is to be compared with Sartre’s description of the person in love in *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>26</sup> But whereas Sartre denies the possibility of genuine love—of the sort of love that actually can promote the freedom of the Other—Beauvoir argues in the *Ethics* that “a conversion can start at the heart of passion itself” (66, TM; French 93), a conversion marked by the Passionate Man’s acceptance of the radical otherness of the Other. She writes,

It is only as something strange, forbidden, as something free, that the Other is revealed as an Other. And to love him genuinely is to love him in his Otherness and in that freedom by which he escapes. Love is then renunciation of all possession, of all conflation. (67, TM; French 94)

There is a sense, then, in which Beauvoir wants to say that genuine love is an expression of the highest of moral laws: when I love an-

other person genuinely, I both exercise my existential freedom and evince the highest respect for the freedom of the Other, on which, I understand, my own freedom rests (since, à la Hegel, my acknowledgment of the Other's subjectivity is a condition of my own self-understanding as a subject).

What has dropped out of the picture in Beauvoir's employment of a series of types as a way to flesh out existentialist laws of morality is the insistence, so prevalent in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, of the need for violence. This need will return in the third and final section of the *Ethics*. But I want to suggest at this juncture that it is absent in Beauvoir's presentation of the types because she is experimenting with what she recognized to be a species of Hegelian dialectics. In her depiction of the way the various types segue into one another, Beauvoir suggests that each contains a contradiction that tends to propel it beyond itself, so that the pressure, to take one example, for a Nihilist to become an Adventurer can be characterized as entirely internal, that is, entirely dialectical in the Hegelian sense of the word. In the dialectical movement from Nihilist to Adventurer, the Nihilist's lack of commitment to particular goals is, to employ Hegel's notoriously complex concept, sublated (where "sublate" is the English stand-in for the German *aufheben*): negated in some important sense (as evidenced in the Adventurer's commitment to various goals) and yet at the same time taken up and preserved (as evidenced in his or her refusal to take these goals seriously, especially insofar as they affect other people).

I highlight this feature of Beauvoir's *Ethics* because I take it as evidence that in this book she ought to be seen as struggling to find a way to account for her persistent sense of the pertinence of Hegel to the project of trying to develop an existentialist ethics. In the half-dozen direct appeals to his work in this section of the book, he is depicted exclusively as a figure of authority. But in the remainder of the book, the part in which the motif of violence returns, Hegel comes in for the kind of severe criticism to which Beauvoir also subjects him in *Pyrrhus*.<sup>27</sup> In attempting as it were to *mimic* Hegel's dialectic, Beauvoir fails on her own terms to appropriate his work in a way that is faithful to both her interest in and dissatisfactions with it. This accounts for the uncharacteristic upbeat note on which Beauvoir ends the second section of the *Ethics*, in her rosy idealization of love as the

highest moral moment: here she indulges in precisely that optimism which she so severely distrusts in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. In expressing suspicion about the sincerity of this moment (a sincerity that, I take it, is something upon which Debra Bergoffen is depending in the way she draws a line from the *Ethics* to what she calls a "philosophy of the erotic" in *The Second Sex*), I do not want to suggest (indeed, I will argue to the contrary) that Beauvoir's sense of the possibilities for human interrelationship are as constrained as Sartre's are. It's just that I find I cannot believe in this particular expression of her belief in the possibility of human community.

That Beauvoir is not ultimately as sanguine as she appears to be at the end of the second section of the *Ethics* becomes obvious in the third section of the book, which begins with a subsection called "The Aesthetic Attitude." Here she disparages the person who in effect "claims to have no other relation with the world than that of detached contemplation," the person who sees all human "situations" as metaphysically equivalent and who ignores their details in his or her recounting of the human condition (74). But of course the person Beauvoir is describing is precisely herself in the second section of the *Ethics*. While she does not explicitly identify a certain type of philosopher or style of philosophizing as exemplifying the aesthetic attitude—instead, she describes its appearance in "the artist"—this type or style, a type or style I have argued governs Beauvoir's approach in the second section of the book, is identified in the third section as a quintessential manifestation of bad faith. Genuinely to will freedom, for oneself and others, Beauvoir insists at the end of "The Aesthetic Attitude," is to pay careful attention to the "situations" in which one finds oneself and others and, further, to *rank* them according to the degree to which they promote human freedom. And yet the notion of "situation" has played no role whatsoever in what I've portrayed as Beauvoir's mimicry of Hegelian dialectic in the second section of the *Ethics*.

Indeed, "The Aesthetic Attitude" seems to pick up where the first section of the book leaves off, with the following cryptic remark:

It can be seen that, on the one hand, freedom can always save itself, for it is realized as a disclosure of existence through its very

failures, and it can again confirm itself by a death freely chosen. But, on the other hand, the situations which it discloses through its project toward itself do not appear as equivalents. It regards as privileged situations those which permit it to realize itself as indefinite movement. (32)

Here again we see Beauvoir insisting that one can *rank* situations, using freedom as a metric. The idea that what's important is freedom in some real-life sense, and not just as abstract metaphysical notion, is an idea that is new to the *Ethics*. We do not find it in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, where, we may recall, Beauvoir exactly expresses Sartre's point of view on this subject in boldly proclaiming that "you can throw a man in prison, leave him there, cut off his arms, lend him wings; but his liberty remains infinite in every case" (86). In the *Ethics* she takes what looks like a diametrically opposite view, severely criticizing the aesthete for pretending that "men are always disclosing being, in Buchenwald as well as in the blue isles of the Pacific, in hovels as well as in palaces" (74). But this view is in fact not all that far from the position she took in *Pyrrhus*, for even in the earlier book Beauvoir was trying to show that certain people lack the conditions all human beings need to have in place in order to exercise their (metaphysical) freedom. These conditions, to repeat, are that each person be able to issue a call, or appeal, to others and that these others be in a position to respond to this call. The difference between *Pyrrhus* and parts 2 and 3 of the *Ethics* is that in the *Ethics* Beauvoir is beginning to explore the idea that certain "situations" are *systematically* bereft of these conditions. In *Pyrrhus* Beauvoir implies that each person's "situation" is exactly as idiosyncratic as that person is—that a person's "situation" is no more than a description of a person's unique circumstances. But in the *Ethics* Beauvoir seems to be struggling to move to the point of view that there are certain *types* of situations—for example, the situation of being a prisoner at Buchenwald, or of living in a hovel, or of being royalty—types that are not unique to a single person. This is to say that she is beginning to want to say that we can talk meaningfully of groups of people and of local commonalties and that we can perhaps even rank these groups according to the degree to which these local commonalties promote or impede the freedom of

their members. While she still wants to deny that there is such a thing as *universal* commonality—and this is something that she will steadfastly deny for the rest of her life—she is beginning, to put it plainly, to provide herself with the means to develop a philosophical conception of *oppression*.

I have never seen any reader of Beauvoir, even serious readers of the caliber of Le Doeuff and Bergoffen, make anything of the fact that Beauvoir's most extended depiction of the conditions and limits of oppression in the *Ethics* makes explicit reference to the "situation" of women.<sup>28</sup> Because I find this very long paragraph crucial in framing not only the difference between the *Ethics* and *Being and Nothingness* but even more tellingly between the *Ethics* and *The Second Sex*, I'm going to quote it in its entirety:

There are beings whose life slips by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads. Like the child, they can exercise their freedom, but only within this universe which has been set up before them, without them. This is the case, for example, of slaves, who have not raised themselves to the consciousness of their slavery. The southern planters were not altogether in the wrong in considering the Negroes who docilely submitted to their paternalism as "grown-up children." To the extent that they respected the world of the whites the situation of the black slaves was exactly an infantile situation. This is also the situation of women in many civilizations; they can only submit to the laws, the gods, the customs, and the truths created by the males. Even today in western countries, among women who have not had in their work an apprenticeship of freedom, there are still many who take shelter in the shadow of men; they adopt without discussion the opinions and values recognized by their husband or their lover, and that allows them to develop childish qualities which are forbidden to adults because they are based on a feeling of irresponsibility. If what is called women's futility often has so much charm and grace, if it sometimes has a genuinely moving character, it is because it manifests a pure and gratuitous taste for existence, like the games of

children; it is the absence of the serious. The unfortunate thing is that in many cases this thoughtlessness, this gaiety, these charming inventions imply a deep complicity with the world of men which they seem so graciously to be contesting, and it is a mistake to be astonished, once the structure which shelters them seems to be in danger, to see sensitive, ingenuous, and light-minded women show themselves more harsh, harder, and even more furious or cruel than their masters. It is then that we discover the difference which distinguishes them from an actual child: the child's situation is imposed upon him, whereas the woman (I mean the western woman of today) chooses it or at least consents to it. Ignorance and error are facts as inescapable as prison walls. The Negro slave of the eighteenth century, the Mohammedan woman enclosed in a harem have no instrument, be it in thought or by astonishment or anger, which permits them to attack the civilization which oppresses them. Their behavior is defined and can be judged only within this given situation, and it is possible that in this situation, limited like every human situation, they realize a perfect assertion of their freedom. But once there appears a possibility of liberation, it is resignation of freedom not to exploit the possibility, a resignation which implies bad faith and which is a positive fault. (37–38, TM; *Pour une Moralité* 54–56)

Here we find the first expression of an idea that is fundamental to *The Second Sex*, namely that being a woman constitutes a “situation.” But we also see Beauvoir hesitating to invest herself fully in this idea. On the one hand, she wants to say that slaves and “women of many civilizations” lack the means of “breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads.” On the other hand, she wants to say that even in situations of oppression people can “realize a perfect assertion of their freedom,” albeit only if we adjust our standards of perfection according to the constraints of the situation. Here we see a disturbing retreat into the familiar Sartrean insistence on the radical limitlessness of human (metaphysical) freedom.<sup>29</sup> And a second kind of hesitation pervades this paragraph: Beauvoir can't seem to figure out where to draw the line in deciding which slaves and women are responsible for their “situations” and which are not. The African-American slaves of

the eighteenth century are said to be unable “to attack the civilization which oppresses them,” as are Muslim harem women. But “slaves who have not raised themselves to the consciousness of their slavery” are said both to lack the means of changing their situation *and* to be responsible for this situation insofar as they “docilely submitted to their paternalism” and “respected the world of the whites.” Similarly, Beauvoir holds “the woman (I mean the western woman of today)” responsible for her situation because she “chooses it or at least consents to it.” In the *Ethics*, despite her burgeoning sense of the importance of human “situations,” Beauvoir has not provided herself with the resources to ask questions about what could count as (to use her examples) submission, respect, choice, and consent under situations of oppression. She is without the means to investigate those situations in which the weight of oppression so crushes a person that talk of responsibility becomes perverse.

Beauvoir lacks the means for this investigation at this point in her philosophical life because she is attempting to write from within Sartre’s engagement with the subject, an engagement marked by a high degree of what Beauvoir identifies (albeit retrospectively) as “abstractness” and by a degree of nihilism that she cannot rationalize without contradicting herself. By the time she comes to write the *Ethics*, which she is to finish just before she conceives of writing *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir is already gripped by many of what will turn out to be the guiding intuitions of the latter book. In this earlier work, the intuitions are always expressed in universal, abstract form and are almost invariably disturbingly vague or self-contradictory. Take, for example, the idea that we have to “assume” our ambiguity, just as in *Pyrrhus* we are exhorted to “assume” our acts, vis-à-vis their effects on other people. Here, I think, “assuming” is supposed to play something like the role that recognition plays in the master-slave dialectic: it’s something we need to do in order to be fully human. But there’s a reason that Beauvoir’s “assuming” seems worryingly vague while Hegel’s “recognition” seems merely to stand in need of interpretation. While it’s not exactly *obvious* to readers of the *Phenomenology* what “recognition” is supposed to consist in, that’s because Hegel’s concept is, and is meant to be, purely abstract. But when Beauvoir appeals to the notion of “assuming” one’s ambiguity or one’s acts, she does

so in the context of attempting to forge an ethics that abjures all reference to abstract notions (except, of course, “freedom”). So she seems obliged to fill out the notion of “assuming” in a concrete way, which, given her allegiance to Sartre’s highly abstract way of proceeding, she cannot do.

What’s ironic about this allegiance is that it seems to fly in the face of precisely that intuition that seems to be motivating Beauvoir to attempt to extend and defend Sartre’s system on an ethical front.<sup>30</sup> This is what Beauvoir expresses as the idea that one must attempt to “justify” one’s choices as a free being without attempting to flee one’s freedom. Consider in this light Beauvoir’s warning in *Pyrrhus* against the temptation to try to achieve self-justification by dedicating oneself body and soul to the rescue of another person. She asks us, recall, to suppose

that the other needs me; suppose that his existence possesses an absolute value: then I am justified in existing since I exist for a being whose existence is justified. I am delivered from risk, from anguish; in posing before me an absolute end I abdicate my liberty. No question is posed any longer. I no longer want to be anything but a response to this call that needs me. (70)

Might this be read as a description of Beauvoir’s own way of responding to Sartre’s sense of being beleaguered by critics who pounced on him for the ethical nihilism his views in *Being and Nothingness* appear very strongly to suggest? If so, then it seems that, to put things in the terms that Beauvoir herself uses in *Pyrrhus* and the *Ethics*, we can describe what happens in these early books as her failing to respond as a subject to Sartre’s “call,” to “assume” her own “ambiguity” and to let Sartre “assume” his acts. It will turn out, in *The Second Sex*, that understanding what this is supposed to mean is no harder, and no easier, than understanding how one becomes a person who is not expected to set her own agenda in the world—how, in other words, one becomes a woman.

*The Second Sex* and the Master-Slave Dialectic

One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman. No biological, psychological, or economic destiny explains the figure that the human female assumes in society; it is the whole of civilization that creates this product, intermediate between male and eunuch, that we call feminine. Only the intervention of others can constitute an individual as an *Other* [*un Autre*]. Insofar as the child exists for itself [*pour soi*], he or she is unable to grasp himself or herself [*se saisir*] as sexually differentiated. . . . If, well before puberty and sometimes even from early infancy [the girl] seems to us to be already sexually specified, this is not because mysterious instincts directly doom her to passivity, coquetry, maternity; it's that the intervention of others in the life of the child is almost primordial and that from her earliest years her vocation is imperiously forced upon her [*insuffler*].

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” These words, which open the second volume of *The Second Sex*, are without doubt the most famous ever penned in the service of liberating human beings from the constraints imposed upon them by, or that they impose on themselves through, sex difference. One finds them cited everywhere in the literature on sex roles; for feminists, Beauvoir’s famous sentence is no less of a landmark, of no less historical import, than Neil Armstrong’s assessment of the significance of his first steps on the moon. Indeed, the ritualistic intoning of this line has been so common in academic feminism that failing to pay tribute to Beauvoir by quoting it in the first few pages of your feminist theory book is tantamount to forgetting to genuflect on your way into the family pew. Beauvoir’s claim, it’s ordinarily taken for granted, is simply that what English speakers now tend to call “gender” is not a biological fact but rather a “social con-

struct.” Of course, commentators disagree profoundly on the validity and sincerity of Beauvoir’s pronouncement. Some, for example, laud her apparent dismissal of the significance of biology; others claim that it covers up what is in fact her insidious “biologism” throughout *The Second Sex*.<sup>1</sup> In fact the debate that her words have generated is so massive that it’s scarcely an exaggeration to claim that it’s coextensive with feminist theory itself.

There can be no doubt that Beauvoir was interested in the question of the extent to which the difference between masculinity and femininity can be attributed to biology; and because she insists at various junctures throughout *The Second Sex* that biology bears on the way that norms of femininity and masculinity develop it is not unreasonable to ask whether her apparent commitment to social constructivism, as emblemized in her famous words, was actually less solid than those words seem to suggest. But what I wish to show in this chapter and the next is that these issues, while important both for Beauvoir and for the feminist debates that her work was to engender, are less philosophically central to *The Second Sex* than is the seemingly throwaway idea, also expressed in the opening to book 2, that “only the intervention of others can constitute an individual as an *Other* [*un Autre*].” This claim, while it appears almost laughably tautological, on closer inspection can be seen to interpret the idea of becoming, as opposed to being born, a woman as the process of becoming an Other, a process the description of which by Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* constitutes what I characterize as a strikingly original act of philosophical appropriation. And I’m going to argue that it’s easy to miss this act of appropriation precisely because *The Second Sex* is written in, as it were, two registers: that of the ordinary, or everyday, in which the “situation” of women comes into relief; and that of the philosophical, in which, for Beauvoir, this situation becomes interpretable (if not justifiable). So when, for example, Beauvoir claims at the end of the passage I’ve used as an epigraph to this chapter that “the intervention of others in the life of the child is almost primordial and that from her earliest years her vocation is imperiously forced upon her,” she means to be saying both that little girls are forced to exemplify, or are forcibly judged by the standards of, femininity and that this forcing is to be explained in terms of the human ability and propen-

sity to turn other people into “the Other.” While it’s my view that Beauvoir arrived at her ground-breaking understanding of women’s situation through her ground-breaking appropriation of the philosophy of Hegel and Sartre, I argue in this chapter that what distinguishes this act of appropriation is Beauvoir’s grounding of it in her ordinary experience as a woman.

This means that my preliminary depiction of the relationship between what I am calling the two registers of *The Second Sex* needs some fine-tuning. It’s not just that the philosophical register allows for an interpretation of the ordinary one (so that Beauvoir’s characterization of the ordinary register would be dependent on the philosophical one); if this were a full enough description of what’s going on in *The Second Sex* then the fact that the philosophical dimension of the book is as easy to ignore as it is would be practically impossible to explain. What makes it possible to overlook the philosophical dimension of the book is that it is itself beholden to the ordinary register, without which, I am claiming, Beauvoir could not have found and did not find the means to successfully express herself philosophically. Because the philosophical aspirations and achievements of *The Second Sex* are grounded in Beauvoir’s capacity for describing the ordinary facts and ramifications of sex difference as she has known and studied them, the book *sounds* ordinary: the sense predominates of its merely *describing* (albeit polemically) the world we inhabit. But a careful study of what Beauvoir is doing reveals that the relationship in *The Second Sex* between the ordinary and the theoretical takes the form of, if you will, a dialogue, or perhaps what you might even be willing to call a *dialectic*, the discovery or founding of which I attempted to describe and account for in chapter 2. Like all dialectics, this one is characterized by a tension between and a propulsion beyond the terms that originally confront one another—in this case, the “ordinary” and the “philosophical”—which means that on my interpretation *The Second Sex* is aspiring to question the hiatus between these two things and to redefine each in terms of the other. You might describe the accomplishment—and the philosophical difficulty, in more than one sense—of this book as its bringing into sharp relief the ambiguity of the line between the everyday and the philosophical.<sup>2</sup>

In Beauvoir’s case the “everyday” or “ordinary” denotes the expe-

rience of being a sexed being, which in her case of course means being a woman. This is of course far from the case in *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, in which, on this particular understanding of what constitutes ordinariness, the dimension of the everyday is entirely absent. As I observed in chapter 5, Beauvoir eventually came to criticize both of these early philosophical works for what she called their “abstractness.” I’m suggesting now that what she’s gesturing at by this word is their not having been *grounded* in the ordinary. For it certainly is not the case that either book is entirely lacking in references to the material problems of real people. In the *Ethics*, for example, Beauvoir briefly discusses the predicament of African-American slaves in the antebellum American South, and in *Pyrrhus* she argues that morality and even freedom itself demand that we actively commit ourselves, in our real lives, to working for “health, knowledge, well-being, law” in order to ensure that the liberty of others “does not consume itself in combating sickness, ignorance, misery” (115). What’s unsatisfying about these works is not exactly that they’re too abstract; rather, the problem is that they manifest a conception of philosophy on which it is fundamentally detachable from the sort of everyday concerns that tend to motivate our interest in the subject. In *Pyrrhus* and the *Ethics*, Beauvoir is already aware of her deep interest in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, and particularly in the master-slave dialectic. But what she hasn’t yet figured out how to do is *account* for the power that Hegel’s prose holds on her, the fact of her inevitable return to it every time she picks up her pen to write philosophically.<sup>3</sup> What happens in *The Second Sex*, I wish to argue, is that her growing concern to understand herself, a concern she initially saw as following a trajectory quite separate from that of her philosophical pursuits, came to dovetail—phenomenologically, as it were—with her abiding fascination with Hegel. With her discovery that, to her surprise, the first thing she has to say about herself is the most ordinary thing in the world—that she is a woman—comes the even more surprising, and surprisingly fruitful, revelation that her previous failure to recognize her own investment in this knowledge can be explained by (that is, in terms of)—and, in turn, allows her to explain—her investment in Hegel’s philosophy.

A major claim in the following analysis of these investments is

that Beauvoir does not simply map the master-slave dialectic onto the situation of men and women. Indeed, it will turn out that Hegel provides Beauvoir, through her thinking about just this situation, with a way of contesting to a certain degree his understanding of reciprocal recognition: what leads to it and what it consists in. On Hegel's view the encounter with the other immediately provokes in the subjectively self-certain being a desire to be recognized by that other as "for-itself," as, in other words, a subject. But on Beauvoir's view this encounter in fact provokes in the subjectively self-certain being (figured for her in the form of the human infant) a desire to be recognized by the other as "*in-itself*," as, in other words, an object, a thing. The most important feature of an object for these purposes is that it is static, that it has a fixed place in the world, that it is not in an important sense *free*. The desire to be an object, Beauvoir finds, takes different forms in men and women. In men it takes the somewhat paradoxical form of wishing to be confirmed as (once and for all time) "for-itself"—as, to employ Sartre's term for this fantasy, "in-itself-for-itself." It could be argued that this particular desire, one Beauvoir associates with men, is not terribly at odds with Hegel's understanding of what the encounter with the other elicits in a subjectively self-certain being. But what is certainly not in Hegel is Beauvoir's idea that in women, the desire for recognition tends to take the form of renouncing the claim to be being-for-itself. On Beauvoir's view, as on Hegel's, the achievement of recognition paradoxically requires the foregoing of one's desire for it, at least in its initial narcissistic form. What is required instead is an acceptance (what in chapter 5 we saw Beauvoir calling an "assuming") of one's own inalienable freedom and that of the other. But unlike Hegel, Beauvoir in a moment of appropriation from Sartre sees this acceptance as requiring an acknowledgment of the power of the other's judgment—an acknowledgment of the respects in which one is, in fact, inevitably fixed as an object in the other's Look. In what follows, I show that for Beauvoir the risk required for the consummation of Hegelian reciprocal recognition is the risk of allowing the other to be genuinely other, which is to say the risk of acknowledging a certain freedom from him—or her.

A QUESTION OF INFLUENCE: HOW TO CONCEPTUALIZE THE  
HEGELIANISM OF *THE SECOND SEX*

While Hegel's name and terminology are all over *The Second Sex*, the vast majority of Beauvoir's commentators find the allusions gratuitous, hokey, or otherwise incidental to the book's aims and achievements. This way of construing, or, as the case may be, ignoring Hegel's role in *The Second Sex* is not, in and of itself, an obvious lapse; Hegel is an equally strong presence in both *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and yet even I would argue that Beauvoir's reading of him in these works is not integral to their construction. Indeed, it's only in the light of what Beauvoir does with Hegel in *The Second Sex* that, I would argue, her interest in him in the earlier works takes on its own interest. But if one takes seriously what I have argued in chapter 5 are Beauvoir's philosophical aspirations in the earlier works; if one sees her struggling there not to parrot but to appropriate Sartrean existentialism; and if one reads *The Second Sex* as though this struggle has not been abandoned or sidetracked or put on hold but, rather, propelled into new territory—if these are one's bearings, then, I claim, the centrality of her appropriation of Hegel in that work becomes unignorable. And if I'm right in suggesting that Beauvoir's re-conceptualization of what it is to appropriate the philosophical tradition is perhaps *the* central philosophical achievement of *The Second Sex*, then in claiming that Beauvoir genuinely appropriates Hegel and that this appropriation is central to understanding the work as a whole, I am claiming that *The Second Sex* is not just incidentally but in the main—even in the first place—a philosophical piece of writing.

To my knowledge, the Swedish philosopher and intellectual historian Eva Lundgren-Gothlin is the only serious reader of *The Second Sex* to provide an extended interpretation of Hegel's role in the book and to argue, or at least to imply, that this role is of central importance in understanding what Beauvoir is trying to say about what it is to be a woman.<sup>4</sup> It's important to note that Lundgren-Gothlin parts ways quite sharply with the usual breezy understanding of how we are to understand Hegel's place in *The Second Sex*. She claims, in effect, that Beauvoir uses the master-slave dialectic not as a philosophical *model*

of the way things stand between the sexes but as a philosophical *foil*: rather than simply recalling Hegel's figures of the master and the slave to dramatize the inequity between men and women, Lundgren-Gothlin argues, Beauvoir is *contrasting* the position of women with that of the Hegelian slave. Specifically, Beauvoir's woman differs fundamentally from Hegel's slave insofar as she never demands recognition from a man and thus fails to "enter into the master-slave dialectic" (73).<sup>5</sup> Therefore, Lundgren-Gothlin argues, there is no dialectical tension or movement in the relationship between the sexes, so that woman is fixed in her relation to man as, in Beauvoir's argot, the "absolute" Other. On Lundgren-Gothlin's view, what's of prime significance about Hegel's influence on Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* is that it is not mediated, at least in the main, by Sartre's appropriation of the master-slave dialectic.<sup>6</sup> Her appeal to the dialectic plays a key role in establishing Beauvoir's philosophical independence from Sartre, because it is the vehicle of her disagreement with him on the question of whether "mutual recognition" is possible (67). Specifically, Lundgren-Gothlin thinks, Beauvoir rejects Sartre's view (influenced of course by Hegel) that human relations, and particularly relations between men and women, are marked by a "fundamental theme of conflict" that is "ahistorical and eternal" (67). Instead, Lundgren-Gothlin maintains, Beauvoir "counterbalances" Sartre's fundamental theme of conflict with the conviction that this conflict can be transcended through Hegelian "reciprocal recognition."<sup>7</sup>

I of course am in agreement with many of Lundgren-Gothlin's claims about Hegel's influence on *The Second Sex*. Certainly, anyone who pays attention to Beauvoir's allusions to the master-slave dialectic will acknowledge the inevitability of Lundgren-Gothlin's claim that Beauvoir's woman, unlike Hegel's slave, never demands recognition from men. More important, Lundgren-Gothlin is justified in detecting and insisting on the fatefulness of Beauvoir's disagreement with Sartre about the possibility of reciprocal recognition. Yet while Lundgren-Gothlin's reading renders Beauvoir's ideas in a way that, as I will try to show, is far better able to account for her words than most, it still undervalues the originality of Beauvoir's philosophical achievement and specifically the originality of what I have been calling her appropriation of Hegel. Lundgren-Gothlin sees that it won't do

to try to shoehorn what Beauvoir says about the situation of men and women into Hegel's master-slave model. Nonetheless Lundgren-Gothlin accounts for the discrepancies between the man-woman and master-slave roles by suggesting that Beauvoir is simply affirming some portions of the dialectic and rejecting others. This fits with the idea that a reasonable enough way of conceptualizing the relationship between Sartre and Beauvoir with respect to their inheritance of Hegel is to see Beauvoir as "counterbalancing" the "fundamental theme of conflict" in Sartre with an endorsement of the possibility of reciprocal recognition. My view is that one cannot adequately appreciate Beauvoir's relation to Hegel if one construes it simply as one of influence and mediation, nor can one fully appreciate the differences between Sartre and Beauvoir if one conceptualizes Beauvoir's inheritance of Hegel as counterbalancing that of Sartre. My goal in this chapter is to show that a more subtle understanding of Beauvoir's way of appropriating Hegel is required in order to fully appreciate its philosophical ramifications, at the level of both method and content.

#### INTRODUCING THE MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC IN *THE SECOND SEX*

Beauvoir's first mention of Hegel in *The Second Sex* occurs in the introduction and follows her famous declaration that while man is "the Subject, he is the Absolute," woman is "the Other" (xxii):

The category of the *Other* is as primordial as consciousness itself. In the most primitive societies, in the most ancient mythologies, one always finds a duality, that of the Self (*du Même*) and the Other. This division was not originally placed under the sign of the division of the sexes; it does not depend upon any empirical givens. . . . Otherness [*l'altérité*] is a fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself as One without at once posing [*poser*] the Other opposite [*en face de*] itself. It suffices for three travelers to be put together [*réunis*] by chance in

the same compartment for all the rest of the travelers to become vaguely hostile “others.” For the villager, all not belonging to the village are suspect “others.”<sup>8</sup> . . . These phenomena would be incomprehensible if human reality were exclusively a *Mitsein*<sup>9</sup> based on solidarity and friendship. Things become clear, on the contrary, if following Hegel we discover in consciousness itself a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness. The subject poses himself [*se pose*]<sup>10</sup> only in setting himself up in opposition: he sets out to affirm himself as the essential and to constitute the other as inessential, as object.

However, the other consciousness opposes to his a reciprocal claim. In traveling the native becomes aware with shame [*scandale*] that there are natives in neighboring countries who regard him in his own right as a stranger. Between villages, clans, nations, classes, there are wars, festivals, markets, treaties, fights that remove the idea of the *Other* in its absolute sense and thus uncover its relativity. For better or for worse, individuals and groups will inevitably [*sont bien obligés*] recognize the reciprocity of their relationship. (xxii–xxiii, TM; *LDS* 1:16–17)

To be human, according to this passage—to have a truly human consciousness—is to harbor “a fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness.” One conceptualizes oneself—claims oneself to be—a subject only by “constituting the other as inessential, as object.” However, the other, in his own self-conceptualization, sets up an exactly reciprocal claim, one in which of course he is a subject and the other is figured as object. And this very counterclaim reveals, inexorably, the essential *relativity* of the sort of otherness Beauvoir is describing.<sup>11</sup>

But then how could women be “the absolute Other” vis-à-vis men?<sup>12</sup> Here is how Beauvoir puts the question, and a start on an answer, in the introduction to *The Second Sex*:

How, then, is it that between the sexes this reciprocity has not been posed, that one of the terms can be affirmed as the sole essential, denying all relativity in relation to its correlative, defining

it as pure otherness? Why don't women contest male sovereignty? No subject poses himself immediately and spontaneously as the inessential; it's not the Other who in defining herself [*se définissant*] as the Other defines the One: the Other is posed as the Other by the One posing himself as the One. But for the turning back [*retournement*] of the Other to the One not to take place, the Other must submit to this alien point of view. Whence in the woman comes this submission? (xxiii–xxiv, TM; *LDS* 1:17)

According to Lundgren-Gothlin, Beauvoir's view is that women have failed to enter a competing claim to recognition in the wake of their being objectified by men.<sup>13</sup> Because women fail to enter this claim, men are unlikely to be struck by the relativity of woman's otherness; hence there is slim chance for the sort of reciprocity that becomes unavoidable, according to Beauvoir, when both parties demand recognition. Thus, men demand recognition; women fail to demand it in return; and women as a result are oppressed as absolute Other. Lundgren-Gothlin is arguing that Beauvoir shows how the master-slave dialectic in effect *misfires* when it comes to relationships between men and women: men get the ball rolling by lodging claims to recognition, but women then simply capitulate, allowing men to be masters instead of countering their claims to recognition and thereby inaugurating a struggle that will end in some state of reciprocal recognition. Lundgren-Gothlin's main claim about how to interpret the influence of Hegel on Beauvoir is epitomized in the following paragraph:

I am therefore claiming, in contrast to other scholars, that while Beauvoir uses the Hegelian master-slave dialectic to explain the origins of oppression, she does not locate man as master and woman as slave in this dialectic. Instead, woman is seen as not participating in the process of recognition, a fact that explains the unique nature of her oppression. Although the man is the master, the essential consciousness in relation to woman, the woman is not a slave in relation to him. This makes their relationship more absolute, and *non-dialectical*, and it explains why woman is the *absolute Other*. (72)<sup>14</sup>

What I'm going to contest in the remainder of this chapter is the implication that the man, "the master," as Lundgren-Gothlin calls him, can be located within the terms of Hegel's dialectic any more easily than the woman can. My view is that Lundgren-Gothlin's understanding of Beauvoir's relationship to Hegel—while far superior to any other I have seen and compelling on any number of fronts—continues the tradition of underestimating Beauvoir's powers of philosophical appropriation and reads the man-woman relationship as it is analyzed in *The Second Sex* as though it were essentially *analogous* with Hegel's master-slave dialectic rather than *transformative* of it. Beauvoir, on my view, is not simply gesturing at the master-slave dialectic as a source of inspiration for and illumination of her own view. Rather, she wants what she has to say about women to *contest*, on philosophically internal ground, the generic picture of human relations we get in the dialectic—a picture so gripping that it had occupied, in one way shape or form, virtually every European philosopher in the hundred years between Hegel and Sartre. As in the case of her appropriation of Descartes, Beauvoir is once again both accounting for the power of a paradigmatic moment in the history of a certain tradition in philosophy *and* suggesting that this power is bought precisely at the expense of ignoring the experience of people—of philosophers—like her: of women.

BEAUVOIR'S APPROPRIATION OF HEGEL  
IN BOOK 1 OF *THE SECOND SEX*

At the very end of the introduction to *The Second Sex*, directly after she has announced that her perspective in the book will be one of "existentialist ethics," Beauvoir poses a series of what she calls "fundamental questions on which we would like to throw some light."<sup>15</sup> "Now, what in a singular manner defines the situation of woman," she says,

is that, being like every other human being an autonomous liberty, she discovers and chooses herself in a world where men make her assume herself as the Other [*lui imposent de s'assumer contre l'Autre*]: they attempt to fix her as an object and doom her to immanence insofar as her transcendence is to be perpetually transcended by another consciousness that is essential and sovereign. The drama of woman is this conflict between the fundamental claim of every subject, who always poses himself or herself [*se pose*] as the essential, and the exigencies of a situation that constitutes her as inessential. How in the feminine condition can a woman become a human being? What roads are open to her? Which culminate in impasses? How can independence be rediscovered at the heart of dependence? What circumstances limit the liberty of woman and which can she surpass? (xxxv, TM; *LDS* 1:31–32)

These questions, Beauvoir goes on to say, would not make sense if we were to suppose that woman's lot were inalterably determined by, for example, physiology, psychology, or economic forces. Thus, her goal in part 1 of book 1, entitled "Destiny," is to show that in fact woman has no unalterable, fixed destiny: nothing predetermines her situation, and no discipline or theory—not biology, not psychoanalysis, not historical materialism—has convincingly explained it. In part 2 of book 1, entitled "History," Beauvoir tries to show that nonetheless there really is something that can plausibly be called *the* situation of women, despite wide variations in women's concrete circumstances across cultures and across time, from the prehistoric era through the present day.<sup>16</sup> "The world has always belonged to men," she says in the first line of the "History" section, even though "none of the reasons that have been proposed to explain this fact has struck us as sufficient" (61, TM; *LDS* 1:109). In reviewing certain salient moments in history, Beauvoir then suggests, we will be able to get a complex picture of how the "hierarchy of the sexes" was established, where this way of understanding women's situation, it is implied, is going to be different from the sort that proposes to trace the hierarchy of male over female to some brute fact about human biology, psychology, or socio-

economic need. The problem, Beauvoir reminds us, stems from—which is not to say is synonymous with—what she in the introduction calls “the fundamental hostility” that consciousness harbors toward the (fundamental category of the) “other”:

We have already proposed [*posé*] that when two human types [*catégories*] are face to face, each wants to impose upon the other its sovereignty. If both are able to hold out against [*soutenir*] this claim, there is created between them whether in hostility or in friendship, always in tension, a relationship of reciprocity. If one of the two is privileged, it will get the better of the other and will work to maintain the other’s oppression. It’s therefore understandable that man would have the will [*volonté*] to dominate woman: but what privilege permits him to carry out this will? (61, TM; *LDS* 1:109)<sup>17</sup>

It is the historical development of what she is calling the “privilege” of men that Beauvoir then attempts to illuminate in the remainder of the “History” section.

Thus we arrive at the “Myths” section—part 3—of *The Second Sex*, which begins with a long, exceptionally elliptical and dense passage that is pivotal to understanding Beauvoir’s appropriation of the master-slave dialectic.<sup>18</sup> The passage begins with a summary of Beauvoir’s conclusions from part 2:

History has shown us that men have always kept in their hands all concrete powers. Since the earliest patriarchal times they have judged it useful to maintain woman in a state of dependence. Their codes are established against her, and thus she has been concretely constituted as the Other.

The passage then continues with a series of claims that are obviously intimately related to Hegel’s master-slave dialectic:

This condition served the economic interests of males, but it also suited their ontological and moral claims [*prétentions*]. Once the subject seeks to assert himself [*s’affirmer*], the Other who limits

him and denies him is nevertheless necessary to him: he doesn't attain himself except through this reality that he is not. This is why the life of the human being [*l'homme*] is never plenitude and rest: it is lack and movement; it is struggle [*lutte*].

The one apparently un-Hegelian feature of this paragraph is its last sentence: "This is why the life of the human being is never plenitude and rest: it is lack and movement; it is struggle." The idea of a ceaseless struggle is not a part of the *Phenomenology*, in which the master-slave dialectic is only a stage in the journey of *Geist*. Indeed, this idea seems out of place in the paragraph in which we find it, a paragraph in which Beauvoir is presumably sketching out an answer to the question of why men's "maintaining woman in a state of dependence" has had not only economic but also "moral and ontological" advantages. The basic idea here is that the subject, man in this case, needs an absolute Other, a role the woman has historically played for him, in order to "attain" himself in the wake of his "asserting" of himself. But it isn't at all clear, at least at this juncture, how this conception of the relationship between subject and Other implies or is otherwise connected to the idea that "the life of the human being is never plenitude and rest." Why isn't men's dominance over women stable?

Getting a start on an answer to this question requires looking at more of the passage.

Opposite himself man [*l'homme*] encounters Nature.<sup>19</sup> He has a hold on her; he attempts to appropriate her.<sup>20</sup> But she cannot satisfy him. Either she materializes [*se réaliser*] only as a purely abstract opposition—she is an obstacle and remains a stranger; or she submits passively to man's desire and allows herself to be assimilated by him—he possesses her only in consuming her, that is to say in destroying her. In both these cases, he remains alone. He is alone when he touches a rock, alone when he digests a piece of fruit. There is no presence of the other unless the other is himself present to himself: that is to say that true alterity is that of a consciousness separate from mine and identical to itself.

It is the existence of other men that tears each man from his immanence and that permits him to fulfill [*accomplir*] the truth of

his being, to fulfill himself as transcendence, as escape toward the object, as project. But this strange liberty that confirms my liberty enters also into conflict with it: this is the tragedy of the unhappy consciousness.<sup>21</sup> Each consciousness aspires to pose itself as sole sovereign subject. Each attempts to fulfill itself by reducing the other to slavery. But the slave in work and in fear experiences himself also as essential and, through a dialectical turning-back [*retournement*], it is the master who appears as the inessential. The drama [of the master-slave relationship] can be surmounted by the free recognition of each individual in the other [*en l'autre*], each posing himself and the other at the same time *as object and as subject* in a reciprocal movement [my emphasis].

I take it as absolutely critical that Beauvoir does *not* characterize “free recognition” here (or elsewhere) as requiring that each individual in the dialectic identify himself and the other merely as *subjects*. What is strikingly original about the way Beauvoir is rendering what is recognizably a version of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic in the long passage I have been examining is that she believes that a person must acknowledge himself and the other as *objects* as well as subjects in order for reciprocal recognition to be achieved.<sup>22</sup> That Hegelian reciprocity demands that beings mutually recognize one another as *subjects* is right on the surface of the concept. Indeed, what philosophers in Hegel’s wake have disputed is precisely whether and how our acknowledgment of each other as subjects is possible. But Beauvoir is to my knowledge wholly original in her figuring reciprocal recognition as requiring the acknowledgment of one’s own and the other’s essential nature as *objects* as well as subjects. Beauvoir goes on to hint at the origin of the difficulties in achieving this sort of reciprocity:

But friendship and generosity, which concretely realize this recognition of liberties, are not easy virtues. They are assuredly the highest accomplishment of the human being; it’s thus that he achieves [*se trouve*] his truth. But this truth is that of a struggle ceaselessly sketched out [*ébauchée*], ceaselessly abolished. It requires that a human being at each instant master himself [*se surmonte*].<sup>23</sup>

What exactly does this ceaseless self-mastery require? Against what or whom must the human being constantly struggle in order for reciprocal or “free” recognition to take place? Beauvoir appears to go on to suggest that is has to do with undertaking a quintessentially Sartrean task—one that she describes in what she calls “another language,” a language that, not surprisingly, sounds awfully Sartrean—namely, the task of renouncing being in favor of assuming one’s existence:

One might say also, in another language, that man attains an authentically moral attitude when he renounces *being* to assume his existence. By this conversion [*conversion*], he also renounces all possession, since possession is a mode of seeking being. But the conversion through which he attains true wisdom is never done. It is necessary to do it ceaselessly; it demands a constant tension. So much so that, incapable of fulfilling himself [*s’accomplir*] in solitude, man in his relationships with his fellows [*semblables*] is ceaselessly in danger: his life is a difficult enterprise the success of which is never assured.

What’s odd about this restatement of what recognition requires is the tension between its superficial party-line Sartreanism, if you will, and its deeper divergence from the basic tenets of *Being and Nothingness*. The idea, for example, that man ought to “renounce being to assume existence” is most certainly borrowed from Sartre, as is the idea that possessing things is merely a mode of seeking being.<sup>24</sup> Then there is the idea that in one’s relationships with other people one is “ceaselessly in danger”; this is a prime instance of what I have been calling the bleakness of the Sartrean view. But what’s entirely lacking in Sartre is the idea that one can attain something called “an authentically moral attitude” and that one can do this only by something Beauvoir calls “conversion.” On my reading, these distinctly Heideggerian-sounding concepts radically alter the *Gestalt*, if you will, of this paragraph, a paragraph otherwise apparently pieced together from textbook Sartrean positions, so that it becomes a question what the nature of the conflict and the danger and tension that Beauvoir envisions are, rather than a cliché.

That there is something unusual going on here—that we are not just getting Sartre warmed-over—becomes obvious when we look at the next (and last) section of this long passage. It starts with a familiar enough set of ideas:<sup>25</sup>

But he [*l'homme*; the human being] does not like difficulty. He is afraid of danger. He aspires, contradictorily, to life and to repose, to existence and to being. He well knows that “restlessness of the spirit” [*l'inquiétude de l'esprit*] is the price [*rançon*] of his development, that his distance from the object is the price of his presence to himself. But he dreams of rest in restlessness [*de quiétude dans l'inquiétude*] and of a plenitude that would be opaque but would nevertheless inhabit consciousness.

But then we get the following startling claim:

This dream incarnated is precisely woman. She is the wished-for intermediary between nature, which is foreign to man, and the fellow [*semblable*] who is too identical to him. She opposes to him neither the enemy silence of nature nor the hard demand [*exigence*] of a reciprocal recognition. By a unique privilege she is a consciousness; and yet it seems possible to possess her in her flesh. Thanks to her, there is a means of escaping from the implacable dialectic of master and slave that has its source in the reciprocity of liberties [*la réciprocité des libertés*].

Now, on Lundgren-Gothlin's view the key clause here is the one in which Beauvoir claims that woman does not “oppose” to man “the hard demand of a reciprocal recognition”:

Female human beings do not seek recognition; it is males who are confirmed as human, as self-consciousness, in relation to other males, males who become either masters or slaves. Beauvoir is saying here that man, in the relationship to woman, nurtures the hope of achieving confirmation without engaging in this kind of dialectics; logically, therefore, woman has not engaged in a struggle for recognition, and thus neither has become essential

nor has had her self-consciousness confirmed. In other words, she remains at a more animal level. Woman has not raised a reciprocal demand for recognition. (71–72)

But this doesn't seem quite right. For Beauvoir nowhere says or implies that women do not seek recognition from other women, which means, according to Lundgren-Gothlin's own logic, that Beauvoir does not deny that women may be "confirmed as human, as self-consciousness" in relation to other women, that they may become "either masters or slaves." There is no reason, then, to assume that woman "remains at a more animal level" than man. Furthermore, by interpreting the idea that the demand for reciprocal recognition is "hard" as implying that what's difficult about it is just the *lodging* of it (however hard that lodging may turn out on Beauvoir's view to be), Lundgren-Gothlin draws attention away from the idea that the master-slave dialectic, in Beauvoir's words, is "implacable"—that is, that it requires constant effort even after the demands for recognition have been lodged. Lundgren-Gothlin thus closes off the possibility that for Beauvoir what's exacting about reciprocal recognition is not *lodging* the demand that inaugurates it but the incessant *struggle*—and we have yet to establish whether and how this is to be figured primarily as a struggle against the other or to master oneself—that's required to maintain it. What I mean to suggest here is that what's "hard" about the demand might not be the lodging of it, per se, but as it were the maintenance of it, the continuance of it in the face of the ceaseless struggle that this continuance itself demands.

If we take seriously her investment in the idea that reciprocal recognition requires a ceaseless struggle of some sort, then we get a somewhat clearer sense of why Beauvoir claims that human beings put such a high premium on achieving a state of rest. It's not, or not exactly, as Lundgren-Gothlin claims above, that men wish to "achieve confirmation without engaging in dialectics," if this means that they are loathe to *undertake* the fight to the death. What on my reading they—and women—desire is a state of stasis, of rest, in which recognition has been achieved once and for all (where, for the time being, what "recognition" consists in must also remain vague). Human beings cannot achieve permanent recognition in their interaction with

things, with instances of being that are not human, because things are not capable of recognizing them at all. And they cannot achieve permanent recognition in their interaction with other human beings because with other human beings recognition is never permanent; it involves a ceaseless struggle. What women do for men, Beauvoir claims, is provide them with a sense—albeit a false one—of having achieved recognition once and for all, of finding what she calls “rest in restlessness.” Women do this by serving as something “intermediary” between a thing and a human being: by virtue of being what Beauvoir calls “a consciousness” a woman is capable of the act of recognition; but this very act of recognition is seen as manifesting the sort of power that a thing has—that is, a power that is in principle continuously vulnerable to exploitation or consumption.

I say that women “serve” as something intermediary because Beauvoir never suggests that women *are* this intermediary entity. Woman *is* a conscious being, she says; but it merely “*seems* possible to possess her in the flesh” (my emphasis). That women’s status as intermediary must be illusory—that men who figure women as thinglike in the relevant respects or women who figure themselves this way are at best deluding themselves and at worst indulging in, if you will, bad faith—follows from the idea that recognition (whatever it turns out to look like exactly, on Beauvoir’s view) is fundamentally not some quality or power people inherently have or mechanically manufacture but the product of deliberate action on the part of a free and conscious being.

So when Beauvoir says that through women men find the means to escape “from the implacable dialectic of master and slave that has its source in the reciprocity of liberties,” what she is saying, on my reading, is that men and women have settled into a relationship in which the man labors under the illusion that the woman is continuously (always, seamlessly) recognizing him and thus continuously providing him with a sort of peace—something that, as a free, conscious being, she in fact by definition cannot do—while the woman poses as a being not in need of being recognized in return—that is, as something that she is not. Now, Lundgren-Gothlin claims that Beauvoir wants to say that “the man is the master, the essential consciousness in relation to woman” but that “the woman is not a slave in

relation to him” (72). This implies that the man has staked a claim to recognition. But has he, according to Beauvoir? Lundgren-Gothlin is careful never to suggest that the man has *demand*ed recognition from woman; indeed she implies that he has not staked such a claim when she characterizes him as “[nurturing] the hope of achieving confirmation without engaging in this kind of dialectics” (71). But when she says that “it is males who are confirmed as human, as self-consciousness, in relation to other males” she strongly implies, first, that men have demanded recognition from one another and, second, that through this man-to-man dialectic men somehow put themselves in the position of becoming the masters of women. But how could this happen? If neither women nor men demand recognition from one another, then how does the man end up being the woman’s master while the woman somehow escapes being his slave? I’m trying to argue here that unless Beauvoir is saying the men actually demand recognition from women—a position that neither I nor apparently Lundgren-Gothlin finds articulated anywhere in *The Second Sex*—then men are no more in a position to become women’s *masters*, per se, than women are to become men’s masters.

On both my reading of *The Second Sex*, and especially of this long passage that launches the “Myths” section in book 1, and on Lundgren-Gothlin’s reading, there’s no evidence that Beauvoir wishes simply to map the situation between men and women onto the master-slave dialectic. The question, then, is what Beauvoir *does* wish to do. Lundgren-Gothlin’s implicit answer is that Beauvoir wishes to map only *some* of the master-slave dialectic onto Beauvoir’s depiction of the relationship between the sexes. So, for example, she claims, you can show that in Beauvoir’s picture men are in effect Hegelian masters. But other features of the dialectic—such as the would-be slave’s staking of a reciprocal demand for recognition from the would-be master before the fight to the death—are absent from Beauvoir’s account, which, Lundgren-Gothlin argues, explains why the relationship between man and woman is “more absolute, and *non-dialectical*, and it explains why women is the *absolute Other*” (72). Somehow, on this reading, men get to be masters, but nondialectically so, since women don’t get to be slaves—that is, since there is no dialectic to begin with.

Lundgren-Gothlin is certainly not without apparent evidence for her way of understanding Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel. Consider the following passage she cites from the "History" section of book I of *The Second Sex*:

Certain passages of the dialectic by which Hegel defines the relation of master to slave apply much better to the relation of man to woman. The privilege of the master, he says, comes from his affirmation of Spirit as against Life through the fact that he risks his own life; but in fact the conquered slave has known the same risk. Whereas woman is basically [*originellement*] an existent who gives *Life* [*la Vie*; Beauvoir's emphasis] and does not risk *her* life; between the male and her there has never been any combat [*combat*]. Hegel's definition applies particularly well [*singulièrement*] to her. "The other [consciousness] is the dependent consciousness for whom the essential reality is the animal life." (TSS 64, TM; LDS 1:114; brackets around "consciousness" in Beauvoir's text)

On Lundgren-Gothlin's reading, when Beauvoir says that certain passages of the master-slave dialectic "apply much better to the relation of man to woman" than to that of master and slave, she is referring only "to the first phase of the dialectic, where the master has proved himself as pure self-consciousness by not having set life up as supreme."<sup>26</sup> This first phase, Lundgren-Gothlin says, is for Beauvoir "an excellent illustration of the relationship between the sexes," a relationship in which men show themselves capable of risking life (and thus deserving recognition) and women merely embrace life. But Beauvoir on Lundgren-Gothlin's interpretation in effect ignores the "second phase" of the dialectic, in which the slave "has taken a step away from the animal, a step he fulfils [sic] through his labour in the service of his master"; the woman, in her failure to work—in her capacity as a giver of life, rather than a worker—evidently fails to progress to this phase.

But there's something odd about this conceptualization of the relationship between what Beauvoir is saying about man and woman, on the one hand, and the master-slave dialectic, on the other. If I understand Lundgren-Gothlin correctly, the first phase of the dialectic

comprises the moments up until the master has shown himself willing to risk his life and the slave has shown himself fearful of doing so—that is, the moments up until one self-consciousness becomes the master and the other the slave. But of course in choosing to undertake the fight to the death, the slave has by definition chosen to risk his life; that he eventually loses heart does not mean that he never had it or aspired to have it. The difference between the slave and Beauvoir's woman—the reason that certain passages of the dialectic apply much better to the relation of man and woman than to that of master and slave—is that the woman *never* risks her life at the hands of the man by laying a claim to recognition that would require a fight to the death with him. Indeed, Beauvoir implies that the woman in her commitment to being a life-giver (i.e., to having babies), is enamored of Life as an abstract concept and refuses to see herself as someone standing in need of recognition who might risk her particular, concrete life. But this is as much as to say that what goes on between Hegel's master and slave is very different—from the start—from what goes on between Beauvoir's man and woman. I'm claiming, then, that to say that the first phase of the master-slave dialect is an excellent illustration of the relationship between the sexes is to mischaracterize the nature of Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel.

I am suggesting, further, that Beauvoir is balking at Hegel's declaration (at the end of para. 189 of the *Phenomenology*) that for the slave “the essential reality is the animal type of life.” What brings her to the point of balking at this, I think, is her discovery, a discovery made in the context of investigating the meaning of her own womanhood, that Hegel's description of the slave is uncannily applicable not in fact to Hegelian slaves but to *women*. Since her work on *The Second Sex* has led her to the view that “woman is basically an existent who gives Life,” she is poised to recognize woman in Hegel's description of that being whose “essential reality is the animal type of life.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, in surveying the history—both ontogenetic and phylogenetic—of women Beauvoir has found that she cannot identify moments at which women have evinced something that could count as a Hegelian willingness to *risk* their lives, which means that, as Lundgren-Gothlin emphasizes, one cannot simply assimilate women to Hegelian slaves. And then in looking back over the parts of the dialectic that precede

the slave's capitulation to the master—that is, the parts that precede Hegel's defining the slave as a being whose “essential reality is the animal type of life”—Beauvoir is in a position to notice something about the importance of the risking of life that recedes in the Hegelian dialectic as soon as the slave backs out of the fight to the death: that to be willing to risk your life, however temporarily, is in and of itself to generate evidence that you are not a mere thing. What Hegel gives Beauvoir the means to do is to identify “risking your life” as that which ensures that your “essential reality” is *not* “the animal type of life.” And then the task for her becomes specifying what it would mean for a woman, as a woman, to risk her life in relation to a man.

In order to lay the ground for this specification, I want to close this chapter by looking carefully at another passage from the “History” section of *The Second Sex*, one in which Beauvoir once again is obviously gesturing somehow at the master-slave dialectic. She is, more specifically, appealing to the dialectic while undertaking to trace the origins of the oppression of women; and at the point the passage begins she has arrived at a discussion of the inauguration of slavery during the bronze and iron ages, an inauguration made possible by the invention of the tool:

Man wished to exhaust the new possibilities opened up by the new techniques: he called in [*fait appel à*] a servile labor force, he reduced his fellow man [*son semblable*] to slavery. The work of the slaves being much more effective than what woman could furnish, she lost the economic role she had played [a role Beauvoir has previously depicted] in the tribe. And in his relationship with the slave the master found a much more radical confirmation of his sovereignty than in the attenuated [*mitigée*] authority he exercised over woman. Being venerated and feared [*redoutée*]<sup>28</sup> for her fecundity, being *other* than man and participating in the disquieting character of the *other*, woman held man in a certain dependence on her, while being at the same time dependent upon him; the reciprocity of the master-slave relation *actually* existed for her, and by it she escaped slavery. But the slave was protected by no taboo. He was nothing but a man in servitude, not different but

inferior: the dialectical play [*le jeu dialectique*] of his relation to his master was to take centuries to come into existence. (78, TM; LDS 1:131)

What strikes Lundgren-Gothlin about this passage is that here again Beauvoir “sees a particular phase of the [master-slave] dialectic as actually reflecting the relationship between the sexes better than the one between master and slave.”<sup>29</sup> The phase to which Lundgren-Gothlin is referring is the postfight moment in which the parties, while in fact mutually dependent on one another, are conscious only of the slave’s dependence upon the master. What they, and especially the master, fail to see is that the master is also dependent on the slave, insofar as the master needs both the slave’s labor and his recognition (however worthless that recognition may in fact be, given the nonhuman status to which the slave has been reduced in both parties’ eyes). Lundgren-Gothlin reads Beauvoir as claiming that between men and women, “mutual dependence has been actual from the very outset.” By “actual,” I take Lundgren-Gothlin to mean that both men and women have always been *aware* of the fact of their mutual dependence: both realize that woman is, presumably, *economically* dependent on man, while man has depended on woman for, as Lundgren-Gothlin puts it “confirmation of his sovereignty.” Thus, once again, we are to read Beauvoir as using the master-slave dialectic to “illustrate” what she wants to say about men and women.

It seems to me, however, that Beauvoir is doing something more, and considerably more important, than simply illustrating her point via an allusion to Hegel. What Lundgren-Gothlin has in effect written out of the passage is its historicity, and in particular Beauvoir’s implicit—and striking—claim that woman has not always been the (absolute) Other for man. Indeed, what’s especially fascinating about the passage is that in it Beauvoir is claiming that the historical development of slavery produced a drastic change in relations between men and women. Before this development, these relations manifested something Beauvoir calls “the reciprocity of the master-slave relation,” a reciprocity she connects with a certain (historically specific) manifestation of women’s “otherness.” It’s of the highest importance that this is “other” with a small “o.”<sup>30</sup> For woman to be “other” to man is for

her to appear different in the sense that the traveler regards the natives (and the natives regard the traveler) as “other.” This is the category of the “other” that, Beauvoir claims, is fundamental to consciousness; for two people to be “other” to one another not only does not preclude a certain reciprocity but is in fact necessary for it, insofar as it is precisely the relativity of otherness that inevitably engenders this reciprocity. To be an “Other” in Beauvoir’s idiom, on the other hand, implies the impossibility of this sort of reciprocity with the “One”; it is to be perceived as absolutely metaphysically inferior—as, for example, fundamentally an object as opposed to a subject. The idea, if I understand Beauvoir correctly, is that before the inauguration of the institution of slavery, women were regarded as being in a critical respect *different* from men and that because of this difference men’s authority over women was limited.

And how were women at that time perceived to be different? Recall that Beauvoir describes these women as “being venerated and feared [by men] for [their] fecundity” and as protected by a taboo. The taboo that protected woman, that made her appear (relatively) “other,” invested her with a certain power over man, a power that caused him to experience his dependence on her in the form of fear and veneration. On my reading of Beauvoir, she wants to say that before the invention of the tool, which means before the “invention” of slavery, men and women were reciprocally dependent on one another in essentially the same way that the master and the slave are in Hegel’s dialectic: the dependence, while “reciprocal,” is not *symmetrical*; and one party clearly benefits more from the relationship than the other, at least in an everyday, material sense. What distinguished the venerated woman from Hegel’s slave was the simple fact that the man who venerated her, unlike Hegel’s master, *recognized* his dependence on her—and, of course, he did so precisely through his veneration and awe of her and his belief in the taboo that protected her. Because the person who was consigned to use his tools was not held in such high regard by the man once he became a master—because the man failed to *recognize* his dependence on his worker—this person, precisely as in Hegel’s dialectic, became the master’s slave. Thus Beauvoir is suggesting that before the invention of the tool woman, while man’s other, was *not* his slave because, exactly unlike Hegel’s master, man concep-

tualized her otherness not as absolute inferiority but as difference. This means, that from the outset the woman experienced *a certain form* of reciprocity, albeit not a perfect one, without having to “risk her life” in the way that the slave—both Hegel’s slave and the Bronze-Age one Beauvoir is discussing—did. The slave (in both cases), on the other hand, was figured by all concerned as someone whose very service to his master served as decisive proof of his inferiority. You might say, looking at matters from Beauvoir’s point of view, that both the historical and Hegelian slaves were initially regarded by themselves and their masters, however delusionally, as (absolute) Others—which is to say, if one runs the logic all the way through, as post-Bronze-Age *women*. In this historical case, the lack of any external pressure to dispel the delusion meant that “the dialectical play of [the historical slave’s] relation to his master was to take centuries to come into existence.”

I’m arguing, then, that it’s not that Hegel’s prose better “fits” the man-woman relationship than the master-slave one; it’s that Hegel provides Beauvoir with the terms in which to conceive the man-woman relationship *and*, in turn, to let this conception shed light back on the dialectic itself. Precisely by noticing that the history of man-woman relations does *not* jibe perfectly with Hegel’s dialectic, Beauvoir finds herself in a philosophically productive position. She sees, for example, that “reciprocity” does not necessarily imply “symmetry”: a relationship can be reciprocal (e.g., two people can be mutually dependent) while grossly asymmetrical (as when a woman is dependent on man for her daily sustenance while man is dependent on woman only insofar as he has a general if marked and persistent fear of her powers of reproduction). I also read Beauvoir as figuring “reciprocity” as something that requires *consciousness* of whatever form of mutuality is extant. This would mean that on Beauvoir’s understanding of reciprocity the slave and the master in Hegel’s dialectic, while mutually dependent, do not have a reciprocal relationship, *per se*. For them to achieve reciprocity, I think she is claiming, requires that each become aware of their mutual dependence, something that Beauvoir claims took centuries in the case of historical slaves, so that the dialecticity of the master-slave relationship was, as it were, for a very long time on hold or stalled. In the case of women and

men before the Bronze and Iron Ages, on the other hand, man's and woman's perceptions of each other as "other" (small "o") allowed them to enjoy a certain reciprocity, however asymmetrical, apart from a need for either party to risk its life vis-à-vis the other. This would imply, in turn, that a new, symmetrical reciprocity, while requiring acknowledgment of mutual otherness, might come to be in the absence of the sort of fight to the death that is at the center of the master-slave dialectic.

As the "History" section of *The Second Sex* unfolds, Beauvoir argues that the inauguration of the institution of slavery is what precipitated the change in woman's status from relative other to absolute Other. She posits that the invention of the tool and tool-driven agricultural practices spurred the development of the institution of private property. The master's authority over the slave was intertwined with his claim to own the land the slave cultivated for him; and both of these things, Beauvoir argues, "exalted his pride" (78). This pride, she says, was "turned against women," for the fecundity of the land could now be explained by the labor of the slave on behalf of the master, and thus its magical association with the fecundity of the woman was severed. No longer a venerated "other," woman became simply another one of man's possessions, along with his land and his slaves and his children.

And yet, Beauvoir argues, man still feared woman (see, e.g., pp. 79–80). To put the point in Sartrean terms that I imagine would be congenial to Beauvoir, he feared her precisely because his treatment of her as an absolute Other was in massive bad faith: her humanity betrayed itself with her every Look.<sup>31</sup> Man's fear of woman, Beauvoir says, thus came to manifest itself not in the form of veneration or awe—of an acknowledgement of otherness and difference—but in the guise of resentment and hatred, or what we nowadays call misogyny:

Of the ambivalent virtues [*vertus*] with which she was formerly invested, the evil aspects are now retained: once sacred, she becomes impure. Eve, given to Adam to be his companion, ruined the human race; when they wish to wreak vengeance upon man, the pagan gods invent woman; and it is the first-born of these female creatures, Pandora, who lets loose all the ills from which hu-

manity suffers. The Other—she is passivity confronting activity, diversity that destroys unity, matter as opposed to form, disorder that resists order. Woman is thus dedicated to Evil. (80, TM; *LDS* 1:134–135)

Here we see Beauvoir adducing familiar myths of Woman as evidence for the depiction of the change in women's status from other to Other, a change that on my reading she wants to assign to a historically specific moment. In the final section of book 1 of *The Second Sex*, "Myths"—the section that begins with the long passage from Hegel that I addressed in the first part of the present chapter—Beauvoir chronicles the persistence of figures of misogyny right up through her own era. Is it a coincidence that what launches this section of the book is her appropriation of Hegel's master-slave dialectic? Are we to understand her to be identifying the dialectic as another piece of mythology? Then does she mean to be positing some sort of relationship between mythology and philosophy? And how do mythology and philosophy, whatever their relationship may be, intersect, on her understanding, with the claims she has made about history? What is the philosophical or, particularly, ontological status, to put the question another way, of her claims about the history of the oppression of women? This question—the question of how Beauvoir finds a way, via her appropriation of Hegel, to philosophize about sex difference—will be the focus of the final chapter of this book.

The Struggle for Self in *The Second Sex*

Women are still, for the most part, in a state of subjection. It follows that woman sees herself and chooses herself not insofar as she exists for herself [*pour soi*] but as man defines her. So we must first describe her as men dream her, since her being-for-men is one of the essential factors of her concrete condition.

—Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*<sup>1</sup>

These three sentences, which close the “History” section of *The Second Sex*, are to be read, I want to argue, as a reminder of the precarious position from which Beauvoir authors her book. Unless we read her as wishing to exempt herself from being a woman—something that, in the light of my reading of her ambitions in chapter 2 I hope seems highly implausible—then the constraints on women Beauvoir is referring to here, summed up by the idea that their “being-for-men” is an essential part of their lives, are to be seen as constraints on Beauvoir herself. For her the particular character of women’s subjection is such that women’s existential choices, both how they regard themselves and how they choose to act, are constrained by the way that men regard them—that is, as I read her, by Man’s Look. And it is this set of constraints, constraints that Beauvoir is declaring herself to be laboring under even as she writes *The Second Sex*, that constitute what she calls “women’s situation.” Accordingly, the depiction of this situation takes two forms. The first is the form that constitutes the “Myths” section of book 1, the section (discussed at length in chapter 6) that begins with Beauvoir’s longest sustained invocation of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic and that explores the breadth and depth of men’s dreams, as Beauvoir puts it, of

women. The second form structures book 2, which chronicles what Beauvoir calls women's "lived experience" from birth to death: as little girls; teenagers; and young, middle-aged, and old women; and across the spectrum of choices currently open to them: as wives, lesbians, mothers, homemakers, "legitimate" wage-earners, and even prostitutes.

In identifying this chronicle as the "second form" of Beauvoir's depiction of women's situation, and by defining "situation" as consisting in significant part in the set of constraints placed upon women by Man's Look, I am suggesting that Beauvoir is herself constrained in book 2 to rely upon resources she has inherited from men.<sup>2</sup> She will, for example, help herself to Freud's analysis of femininity—the very analysis she has argued in the first part of book 1 can neither explain nor justify women's subjection—to explain how young girls become (or to their peril do not become) feminized as they develop. In the last section of book 2, entitled "Justifications," Beauvoir sketches what she claims are three common strategies adopted by women in attempts to rationalize and even exalt their own subjection, namely, narcissism, amorousness, and mysticism; and her analysis suggests that in employing these strategies women attempt to live men's fantasies of them and thus to rid themselves once and for all of the burdens of subjectivity. But where does one draw the line between what I've evasively characterized as "helping oneself" to men's dreams and fantasies and capitulating to them? What could it mean to transcend or otherwise overcome these fantasies, if it is indeed true that women are constrained and to a certain important extent concretely constituted by them? What *is* a woman?

We will of course misinterpret the point of Beauvoir's question if we define her simply as a grown female instance of the species. And yet it is essential that we not overlook the fact that on Beauvoir's analysis female physiology is another important part of women's "situation." Beauvoir is absolutely clear about this, as the following passage from the early "Biology" chapter of book 1 shows:

Biological considerations are extremely important. In the history of woman they play a part of the first rank and constitute an essential element of her situation. Throughout our further discus-

sion we shall always bear them in mind. For, the body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another. This accounts for our lengthy study of the biological facts; they are one of the keys to the understanding of woman. (32)

And yet, Beauvoir immediately warns,

I deny that they establish for her [woman] a fixed and inevitable destiny. They are insufficient for setting up a hierarchy of the sexes; they fail to explain why woman is the Other; they do not condemn her to remain in this subordinate role forever. (32–33)

Many readers, Eva Lundgren-Gothlin included, are inclined to doubt that this conclusion accurately represents Beauvoir's considered view of the relationship between a woman's biology and her destiny. On Lundgren-Gothlin's reading, it is Beauvoir's commitment to understanding relations between the sexes in Hegelian terms that ultimately gives her work an "androcentric" cast, so that it "sometimes verges on being misogynist" (81): in validating Hegel's investment in risking life as opposed to affirming it as it is, Lundgren-Gothlin argues, Beauvoir validates men over women. But of course this is true only if we rigidly associate the risking of life with men and the affirming of it with women—which is precisely what Lundgren-Gothlin believes Beauvoir, in her analysis of the anatomical differences between men and women, does.

In reading Beauvoir this way, Lundgren-Gothlin has in mind passages like this: Woman's "misfortune," Beauvoir writes in the "Biology" chapter, "is to have been biologically destined for the repetition of Life, even when in her own eyes Life does not carry within itself its reasons for being and when these reasons seem more important than life itself" (64, TM; *LDS* 1:114). In the next paragraph Beauvoir claims that "certain passages" of Hegel's master-slave dialectic are better applied to man-woman relationships, since women do not risk their lives but instead give life. But to say that woman is "biologically destined for the repetition of Life" does not imply that women are be-

holden to this destiny, that they *cannot* “risk their lives,” whatever this risking turns out to look like on Beauvoir’s account of it. Indeed, this possibility is explicitly affirmed by Beauvoir in the passage I quoted above on the importance she accords to biology. Furthermore, to insist on the importance of risking one’s life cannot be seen as in and of itself “masculinist,” even if it is true that men are biologically more inclined to do so than women. On Lundgren-Gothlin’s analysis the masculinism of this view appears to stem from its association with Hegel. As I read Lundgren-Gothlin, it is the fact that Hegel was a man, and a man who, at that, took an appallingly dim view of women (as the quotation from his *Philosophy of Right* that I cite in chapter 1 suggests), that leads him to value risking life over preserving, extending, or creating it. But this is also to suggest that Beauvoir simply adopts certain Hegelian tenets wholesale, that, to look at the matter from a broader perspective, there is nothing fundamentally interesting about Beauvoir’s appropriation of the master-slave dialectic—which is, of course, just the reading of Beauvoir I’m attempting to contest.

When Beauvoir says that women are “biologically destined for the repetition of Life,” what she is referring to, of course, is woman’s child-bearing capacity. But this is all she is referring to. She is not arguing that women are *psychologically* destined to bear children, that they are naturally inclined to crave producing children more than they desire anything else. What she is emphasizing is the degree to which women are constrained, from puberty on, by the fact of their female biology: even if they do not desire to produce children, they are at the mercy of physiological processes connected with their capacity to give birth, such as menstruation and menopause. It’s not that these processes are inevitably crippling for women (to the contrary, I will argue, Beauvoir’s way of appropriating Hegel depends on her taking the view that they are not); it’s that they at best interfere with the goals she sets for herself. To make this point clear, Beauvoir distinguishes in the “Biology” chapter between what she calls the individual’s point of view and that of the species; she also speaks of the “interests” of the individual versus those of the species (see, e.g., 25 and 27). The interests of the individual are expressed in the goals he or she sets for himself or herself, and the interests of the species are expressed in his or her physiology. It is from the point of view of the

species that woman's role is to become impregnated and bear children and that man's role is to impregnate women.

Now, man's biological role in reproduction, Beauvoir wants to argue, is such that it does not interfere with his interests as an individual. Indeed, the two interests can coincide exactly. As Beauvoir writes,

From [puberty] on, the male has a sex life that is normally integrated with his individual existence: in desire, in coition, his surpassing [*dépassement*] toward the species blends with the subjective moment of his transcendence: he *is* his body. (26, TM; *LDS* 1:63)

By "surpassing toward the species" Beauvoir is referring to the fact of the man's fulfilling the interests of the species in the act of heterosexual intercourse.<sup>3</sup> Because the man (more or less, I suppose) *chooses* to engage in this act, his surpassing toward the species, his playing the role of impregnator, is coincident with his goals as an individual (whatever these may be: to impregnate, to feel or provide pleasure, to feel powerful or to inflict powerlessness). On the other hand, Beauvoir claims, "the individuality of the female is opposed by the interest of the species; it is as if she were possessed by foreign powers: alienated" (25, TM; *LDS* 1:62). Beauvoir even uses the notion of slavery in characterizing the woman's relation to her female physiology (27). She argues that none of the physiological burdens of having a female body (menstruation; cyclical hormonal changes and the emotional and physical lability they often produce; pregnancy; menopause) are inherently desirable—are things women would choose to bring upon themselves—outside their purpose in making and sustaining babies. Furthermore, even in the most uncomplicated of circumstances the range of possible negative consequences of enjoying or otherwise exercising their sexuality is considerably broader for women than it is for men: until extremely recently a woman's choice to have sexual intercourse with a man was inevitably a choice to risk becoming pregnant.<sup>4</sup> While a man might engage in intercourse in circumstances that entail long-term complications for him (he might, for example, become infected with a venereal disease or provoke a woman to fall in

love with him or despise him), the act itself is something from which he can simply walk away. For women, on the other hand, unless the circumstances under which she has intercourse are exactly right (she or the man is sterile, a form of birth control that works is used), she risks becoming pregnant, with all the ramifications (physical and almost always social and psychological) that pregnancy entails.

It will be argued here that the interests of woman as an individual and the interests of the species are not always at odds, that many women *choose*, for example, to become pregnant. Indeed, it is a frequent criticism of Beauvoir that she fails to appreciate the fact that many women are thrilled to become mothers and even sometimes enjoy the other physiological aspects of womanhood, such as its cyclical nature.<sup>5</sup> As I read her, Beauvoir has two responses to this objection. First, no woman chooses to be incapacitated in the way that pregnancy and the postpartum period or menstruation can be incapacitating. Whatever may be thrilling or satisfying about being a woman, it is not (for example) the exhaustion and nausea of the first trimester of pregnancy or the pain of menstrual cramps. Second, Beauvoir is suspicious of celebrations of what she would call, following Sartre, women's "immanence," that is, her bodily being, what she is by virtue of being female. On Beauvoir's view investing in one's womanly immanence amounts either to a capitulation to the culture's—that is, to men's—expectations of women or to a revolt against the culture (as when, e.g., women celebrate their menstrual cycles), in which case it still constitutes capitulation to the culture's way of figuring woman. But more important for Beauvoir, for a woman to choose immanence is, given her physiology, in effect for her to choose, as she puts it, to *alienate* herself, to allow herself to be colonized by what she calls "foreign powers."

Beauvoir paints a vivid picture of this concept of alienation in, for example, the following passage:

It is during her periods that [woman] feels her body most painfully as an opaque, alien thing; it is the prey of a stubborn and foreign life that each month constructs and demolishes [*fait et défait*] a cradle within it; each month all things are made ready for a child and then aborted in the crimson flow. Woman, like man, *is*

her body; but her body is something other than herself. (29, TM; LDS 1:67)

To my ear, Beauvoir here paints a scene of woman's body as the site of a life-and-death drama (something she at one point calls "the theater of a play that unfolds within her" [27]) in which she might well find herself invested (as when she hopes to become pregnant) but over which she has no control. Of course, all creatures could be described as prey to certain bodily processes over which they have no control (such as indigestion). But Beauvoir's point is that what distinguishes women from men, what makes their bodily situation describable in general or by type in terms of a particular conception of alienation, is that they are *routinely* prey to "foreign powers," routinely become sites of drama, strictly by virtue of being female. And it's not that a woman could not in principle *choose* pregnancy, for example, as a project; it's that this choice inevitably leads to a certain split in the self, between what Beauvoir calls her "individuality" and what she calls "the interests of the species."<sup>6</sup> Understanding women's inherent tendency toward alienation is a key to understanding the role that biology plays in Beauvoir's conception of women's situation, of how women have come to be constrained by the fantasies that govern men's Looks.<sup>7</sup>

It's important to note, however, that the alienation Beauvoir describes is not necessarily psychological or even existential/phenomenological. Beauvoir is not, in other words, making some empirical claim about how women *feel* about themselves or specifically their bodies when they menstruate. If she were making such a claim, then the charge that she is a biological determinist might be warranted; for the implication would be that woman is bound to regard herself as alienated (in the sense Beauvoir is trying to articulate here) under any circumstances as long as her body is female. I read her instead as trying to make the point that women's bodily alienation lends itself to exploitation under certain social circumstances, whereas men's physiology (in and of itself) does not. Women's physiology, in other words, makes her prone to suffer oppression. But of course this reading requires an explanation, which will emerge as we explore a second, markedly different use Beauvoir makes of the concept of alienation.

This second use, introduced in the chapter on psychoanalysis, which follows the chapter on biology, appears in the form of what Beauvoir calls an “existential fact,” namely, “the tendency of the subject toward *alienation*” (47). She writes,

The anguish of his liberty leads the subject to search for himself [*se rechercher*] in things, which is a way of fleeing from himself. This is a tendency so fundamental that immediately after weaning, when he or she is separated from the All, the child strives to seize in mirrors, in the look [*le regard*] of his parents, his alienated existence. (47, TM; *LDS* 1:90)

Beauvoir herself glosses this idea at the very beginning of book 2 of *The Second Sex*, right after the first paragraph, the one that opens with “One is not born a woman”:

The world is at first present to the newborn only in the form of immanent sensations. He is still immersed in the bosom of All [*sein de Tout*] as in the time he lived in the shadows of a womb. When he is raised to the breast or bottle, he is invested with the heat of maternal flesh. Little by little he learns to perceive objects as distinct from himself: he distinguishes himself from them. At the same time, in a more or less brutal fashion, he is detached from the nourishing body. Sometimes, he reacts to this separation by a violent crisis. In any case, it is toward the moment when it is consummated—toward the age of about six months—that he begins to manifest through acts of mimicry, which subsequently become genuine displays, the desire to seduce others. Certainly, this attitude is not defined by a reflective choice; but there is no need to *intend* [*penser*] a situation for it to *exist*. In an immediate manner the nursling lives the original drama of every existent, which is the drama of his relationship to the Other. It is in anguish that the human being feels his abandonment. Fleeing his liberty, his subjectivity, he would like to lose himself in the bosom of All: here is the origin of his cosmic and pantheistic dreams, of his desire to forget, to dream, to be ecstatic, to die. He never succeeds in abolishing his separate self [*moi*; also translatable as “ego”]. At

the least he wishes to attain the solidity of the in-itself, to be petrified into a thing. It is particularly when he is fixed by the look of others that he appears to himself as a being. It is in this perspective that we must interpret the conduct of the child. In a carnal form, he discovers finitude, solitude, abandonment in a foreign world. He tries to compensate for this catastrophe by alienating his existence in an image whose reality and value others will ground. It appears that he begins to affirm his identity at the moment at which he recognizes his reflection in mirrors—a moment that coincides with that of weaning. [Here Beauvoir inserts a footnote citing a paper by Jacques Lacan.] His ego [*moi*] blends [*se confonder*] so well with this reflection that it is formed only in being alienated. Whether the mirror properly speaking plays a role more or less considerable, it is certain that the child begins around six months to mimic his parents and to grasp himself in their look as an object. He is already an autonomous subject who transcends himself toward the world: but it is only in alienated form that he will encounter himself. (268–269, TM; *LDS* 2:14–15)

Here Beauvoir is claiming that an infant's coming to perceive himself as individuated inevitably entails a certain resistance, which, she says, takes the form of a desire to become an in-itself, or object. For the baby, individuation is nothing less than a "catastrophe": through it he "discovers finitude, solitude, abandonment in a foreign world." This catastrophe is for the baby the meaning of his existential "liberty," which Beauvoir indicates here is, or is the defining feature of, his subjectivity. In chapter 3 I said that like Hegel and Sartre, Beauvoir links the idea of subjectivity with the idea of freedom by defining a subject as a being who acts, where by definition for all three figures acting is something that goes beyond mere attempts at fulfilling one's desires as one finds them; I noted that such desires might include those for food, shelter, sexual pleasure, and so forth. But in the long passage above what Beauvoir is emphasizing is something like the cost or condition of this freedom, which is a radical state of independence or separation from the world. Indeed, in this passage the baby's first experience of freedom, epitomized by the image of being forcibly weaned from the mother's breast, is marked by a sense not of exhilara-

tion but of what Beauvoir calls “abandonment”—a realization that the world exists independently of you, of your perceptions, your needs, your desires. This interpretation implies that experiencing one’s existential freedom also consists in the recognition of oneself as desirous—as craving guaranteed connections with this independent world. It also provides the means to suggest that when in her earlier philosophical works Beauvoir talks about “assuming” freedom, what she means is keeping this recognition of one’s craving for secure connections with the the world in view, living with and against it, bearing up (whatever this turns out to look like) in the wake of a separation you acknowledge to be catastrophic.

Notice also that Beauvoir suggests in the above passages that it’s perfectly natural, indeed “fundamental,” to attempt to avoid assuming one’s freedom by wishing to transform oneself into a thing, that is, something whose relationship to the world is reliably constant. This natural desire to divest oneself of one’s existential liberty is what she means by this second use of the term “alienation.” And notice that the naturalness of what Beauvoir (like Sartre) calls the “flight” from liberty need not be explained—is not explained by her here—in terms of cowardice, moral or psychological. Instead, she identifies it as a product of the fact that coming to see oneself as separate from the world is coincident with the discovery of oneself as an object in the eyes of others (and, as the case may be, in mirrors). In the last sentence of the long passage cited above, Beauvoir seems to be suggesting that coming to see oneself as individuated is the result or by-product of or perhaps even the form taken by coming to see oneself as (to use Sartre’s term) being-for-others, that is, as an object of other people’s regard. If this is right, then there is something of a paradox or perhaps an ironic coincidence here: one discovers oneself in the other’s Look as the object one desires, only because of this discovery, to be. But Beauvoir appears to be suggesting that this particular desire, the desire to be reified by the other’s Look, is bound to be disappointed whenever the other’s gaze is turned or averted. Thus, the infant, “living the original drama of every existent,” seeks to seduce the other, to recapture herself or himself in the other’s Look. The infant learns to do this, at first, by mimicking his or her parents, who themselves are acting out their own dramas. And later, Beauvoir suggests, the infant may learn to

look for himself elsewhere, in “his cosmic and pantheistic dreams, his desire to forget, to dream, to be ecstatic, to die.” Thus Beauvoir is in effect declaring some of the highest of human aspirations to originate in a universal drama of alienation. This is going to turn out to be important in her understanding of both men’s and women’s “situations.” One could say that the difference between the two is a difference in how this drama plays out: while men tend eventually to attempt to alienate themselves in Projects, to dream big dreams and risk dying for them (literally or spiritually), women are inclined never to stop attempting to reify themselves in the gaze of others.

Before I explore Beauvoir’s explanations for this difference, I want to pause at least to acknowledge the resonances between the long passage from the opening of book 2 of *The Second Sex* cited above and key moments in the writing of the authors whose work Beauvoir is appropriating in this passage, in particular Hegel and Sartre. (Given the preoccupations of this project, I cannot pursue at any length the question of Beauvoir’s indebtedness at this juncture to Lacan. But should anyone doubt that his work figures heavily in Beauvoir’s understanding of alienation, he or she need only consult the (sole) footnote to Beauvoir’s long passage, in which she hails Lacan’s discovery of the so-called “mirror stage” of infancy, declaring it to be “of prime importance.”<sup>8</sup>) Beauvoir’s picture of the newborn learning to distinguish herself from objects recalls Hegel’s picture of the subjectively self-certain being, who also regards such objects solely in terms of their usefulness with regard to his own desire and their accessibility. For both Beauvoir’s infant and Hegel’s subjectively self-certain being, the discovery of the “other” bodes catastrophe, not the least striking feature of which is a massive change in self-conception (a moment Freud might identify as that at which the conditions sustaining primary narcissism are destroyed). But at this point Beauvoir and Hegel seem to part company. While Hegel portrays the subjectively self-certain being’s response to this catastrophe as an attempt to achieve objective self-certainty through the other’s “recognition” of himself as essentially “for-himself,” Beauvoir suggests that the infant, who, again, she says, is living the drama of every existent, responds to it by attempting to petrify herself in the other’s reflection, “to attain the solidity of the in-itself.”<sup>9</sup>

Beauvoir's depiction of the infant here recalls Sartre's characters in *No Exit*, in which, I argued in chapter 4, it is the narcissistic wish for the Other to reflect back to you a fixed image you have of yourself that brings on the conditions of hell. But the difference here, as I read it, is that for Beauvoir this wish is the centerpiece of a necessary *stage* in the history of the human individual. What she seems to be suggesting is that individuation itself is driven by a human being's demand to find a fixed reflection of himself or herself in another person's regard, a regard human beings attempt to elicit by what Beauvoir calls seduction. The infant's ego, she claims, "blends so well with this reflection that it is formed only in being alienated." By denying that the infant chooses to be alienated ("this attitude is not defined by a reflective choice"), Beauvoir suggests that the infant's attempt to seduce the other does not count as a genuine act, a genuine expression, in other words, of the infant's freedom. You might say that it is the crisis of recognizing oneself to be for-itself, in the Hegelian sense, that provokes the desire to be confirmed by the other to be fundamentally in-itself. This means that I'm arguing that Beauvoir in the passage I'm examining is doing something like turning Hegel—and Sartre—inside out. For both Hegel and Sartre, the presence of the "other"<sup>10</sup> induces in a person the catastrophe of experiencing himself as in-itself, as a mere thing in someone else's world. And a natural response to this crisis, on both their accounts, is the attempt to get the "other" to recognize you as essentially *not* a mere thing, as fundamentally "for-yourself." But for Beauvoir, I'm claiming, the presence of the "other" reveals to me the fact of my own individuality, which I experience in the form of a sense of loss, of isolation. This catastrophe is the other face of what Sartre calls freedom. But the natural response to the crisis is not to exploit this freedom but to attempt to divest oneself of it by demanding of the other not that he or she confirm you as "for-itself" but as something with a stable connection to the world—as "in-itself." This means that for Beauvoir, unlike for Hegel, the encounter with the "other" does not automatically lead to a demand for "recognition," at least in Hegel's sense. Rather, it leads to an attempt to seduce others into allowing you to alienate yourself in their gaze.

This does not imply that Beauvoir rejects the idea that there is a stage in the drama she's describing at which the demand for recogni-

tion in Hegel's sense may and often does occur. But Beauvoir does not see the demand for recognition as *natural*, at least not in the context she's exploring. Rather, she sees the attempt to alienate one's freedom as the natural response to the encounter with (what the catastrophe of experiencing one's separation from the world reveals to the infant, enacting the drama of every existent, to be) the "other." At one point (shortly after the passage I've been looking at) she even claims that "carnal union creates a deeper alienation than any resignation under the gaze of others" (270), which suggests that alienation is not only a temptation that occurs in the wake of the crisis of individuation but is indeed the primary "situation" of each individual. Once again, the distinctiveness of Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel is to be explained, I wish to argue, by the specific project that motivates it: the attempt to explain the singular nature of women's "situation." It is this project that provokes Beauvoir to examine the mechanics, if you will, of the "becoming" of women (and of men). The long passage I've been focusing on represents the beginning of this project, in which Beauvoir is claiming (a) that the impulse to self-alienation is universal in the early stages of human development; (b) that given the magnitude of the catastrophe of discovering oneself to be an individual, human beings never fully recover to the point of totally divesting themselves of this temptation; and (c) that there is no difference in the way male and female infants experience this crisis.

Beauvoir is quite explicit about this final point. She writes,

There is no difference in the attitudes of girls and boys during the first three or four years. Both try to perpetuate the happy condition that preceded weaning. In both sexes one observes seduction and display [*parade*]: boys are as desirous as their sisters of pleasing adults, provoking smiles, making themselves admired. (269–270, TM; *LDS* 2:16)

While both boys and girls succeed in their seduction of adults only intermittently ("In this world, uncertain and unpredictable as the universe of Kafka, one stumbles at every step," says Beauvoir [270]), girls actually seem to be more privileged than boys are at this early-childhood stage. This, according to Beauvoir, is because of what

culture—all cultures—demand of the little boy, namely, that he demonstrate his maleness by becoming independent of adults: “He will please them,” as Beauvoir wryly puts it, “by not appearing to seek to please them.”<sup>11</sup> Meanwhile, the little girl is allowed and even encouraged to continue her seductive ploys: “She is dressed up in dresses soft as kisses; her tears and caprices are indulged; her hair is carefully styled; people are amused by her expressions and coquetry. Carnal contacts and obliging looks protect her against the anguish of solitude” (270, TM; *LDS* 2:17).

However, Beauvoir argues, “if the boy seems at first to be less favored than his sisters, it is because there are grander designs on him” (271, TM; *LDS* 2:18). Specifically, boys are given to understand at a very early age that their difference from girls, if apparently putting them at a disadvantage as young children, will eventually work to their benefit: the path, it is implied, may be more difficult, but the payoffs will be greater. And the boy is also taught that the symbol or, as Beauvoir goes so far as to put it, the “incarnation” of this advantage is his penis. Beauvoir is again quite explicit here: the boy does not automatically regard his penis as a symbol of either virility or privilege; rather, “he experiences [pride in his penis] through the attitude of the group around him” (271, TM; *LDS* 2:18). This is true, Beauvoir argues, regardless of the valence, if you will, of this attitude: whether the adults raising the boy are aroused by his maleness or awed by it or “get a sense of revenge in coming upon it in the nursling in a very humble form” (271), they convey to the boy that the penis—something that belongs to no girl—is important. Evidently, according to Beauvoir, the adults who convey this message to the young boy are passing on to him what was taught to them in early childhood and reinforced as they grew into maturity. Here, a partial explanation for this phenomenon, for the singular valuation of the penis, emerges. Beauvoir claims that the penis is *anatomically* well suited for this purpose: “projecting free of the body, it seems like a little natural plaything, a kind of puppet” (271). And adults teach the boy that he can do things with his penis that little girls cannot do, e.g., urinate standing up. They teach him these things not (necessarily) because they believe that the penis is valuable in and of itself but (primarily) because they wish to salve his disappointment in the wake of what Beauvoir

calls the “second weaning,” that is, the culture’s demand that the boy become independent of others.

There is no reason, on the other hand, Beauvoir claims, for adults to direct little girls to invest their genitalia with any particular meaning or significance. (That some adults in this day and age go out of their way to do so would, I imagine, be interpreted by Beauvoir as a response to their sense of the penis’s being overvalued and thus would not constitute a fundamental change in the way we raise our children.) Still, according to Beauvoir, girls do not experience the absence of a “significant” genital as a lack. In taking this position, Beauvoir sets herself against Freud (mentioned at this juncture of *The Second Sex* in a footnote), whose explanation of sexual difference in his notorious undelivered lecture “Femininity” turns on the claim that women universally experience what he famously calls “penis envy” as a natural response to the sight of the male organ. For Beauvoir, to the contrary, if envy of the little boy or even of his penis develops it is because the little girl “finds herself situated in the world differently from the boy”; and it is “a constellation of factors” that “can transform this difference, in her eyes, into an inferiority” (272). While the girl may envy the fact that the little boy can, for example, urinate standing up and direct the stream of urine more precisely than can she, this difference in and of itself “is something too secondary to engender directly a feeling of inferiority” (276, TM; *LDS* 2:25). What makes it the case that the absence of a penis “will certainly play a great role in her destiny” is not some direct disadvantage for her but, rather, the *existential* advantage the boy can gain from the fact that he has an organ “that can be seen and grasped” (278).

This advantage, to be explicit, is that the boy can “at least partially alienate himself” in his penis (278, TM; *LDS* 2:27<sup>12</sup>). The idea here, as I understand it, is that as the boy comes to recognize the unreliability of the approbation of adults, in which he hopes to find a stable reflection of himself (as “in-itself”), he finds a substitute for this mode of alienation in his relationship with his penis. The most important thing about this relationship, Beauvoir seems to think, is that the penis is itself part of the little boy, albeit a part whose existence may well appear to the boy to be in danger of being taken away (as Beauvoir, now following Freud, recognizes). And because the penis seems to the boy to

be a particularly powerful and, in a manner of speaking, independent part of his body, because of, for example, its length, urinary force, and erections, for him to alienate himself in his penis is for him to adopt a picture of himself as active and strong. To the extent that the boy *is* his penis, in other words, he is able to perform the neat trick of figuring himself simultaneously as “in-itself” *and* as powerful and independent (see *TSS* 278).

The little girl, on the other hand, lacks not only a penis but also, Beauvoir implies, the incentive to try to alienate herself in something other than the gaze of others. The girl, to repeat, is ceaselessly encouraged to seduce others. If she is given a doll to play with, Beauvoir suggests, the little girl may use it as a penis-substitute—that is, may seek to alienate herself in it. But

on the one hand, the doll represents the whole body, and, on the other, it is a passive object. Therefore the little girl will be encouraged to alienate herself in her entire person and to consider this as an inert given. While the boy seeks himself in the penis in the capacity of [*en tant que*] autonomous subject, the little girl cuddles her doll and dresses her up as she dreams to be cuddled and dressed up; inversely, she thinks of herself as a marvelous doll. (278–279, TM; *LDS* 2:27–28)

So while the boy’s alienation in his penis represents a step away from the stage at which he is attempting to seduce adults, a step toward what Beauvoir calls “autonomy” (278), the girl’s alienation in the doll takes place only because the doll represents to her the epitome of the seductive object she has sought to be since infancy. To alienate herself in it is to identify herself completely with something that, unlike the penis, is “passive” and “inert.” Thus a little girl’s alienation of herself in a doll, according to Beauvoir, perpetuates what she calls the “narcissism” of infancy, that is, I take it, the attempt to figure oneself exclusively as a seductive object.

Beauvoir recognizes that, of course, a boy might well “cherish a teddy bear, or a puppet into which he projects himself” (280). Her point is that no one factor—biological or social—determines that boys’ and girls’ “situations” will be different from one another. Cul-

tural expectations (that the boy become independent and that the girl become passive) as well as biological chance (the boy's having an organ that lends itself to his attempt to alienate himself) combine to produce this difference. What's important is that the boy has the means to put himself in a position in which "his manner of existing for-others encourages him to pose himself as for-himself" (280, TM; *LDS* 2:29). I read Beauvoir here to be suggesting that little boys have the opportunity to project themselves and to see themselves reflected in the other's gaze as magnificently paradoxical beings—beings, to be specific, who in-themselves are yet fundamentally *for*-themselves. Now, this state of being simultaneously in-itself and for-itself is, of course, exactly what Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* claims that human beings yearn for: "Each human reality," he argues right before the conclusion of the book, "is at the same time a direct project [or, as he calls it a sentence later, a "passion"] to metamorphose its own For-itself into an In-itself-For-itself" (784). But this project, he claims, is attempted in vain; in the concluding line of this same final section of the book proper, he notoriously declares that "man is a useless passion." What Beauvoir seems to be suggesting in *The Second Sex* is that the little boy seems to have succeeded in fulfilling this passion: "what is very important," she declares,

is that there is no fundamental opposition between his concern for that objective figure which is his, and his will to affirm himself in concrete projects. It is in doing that he makes himself being, in a single movement. (280, TM; *LDS* 2:29–30)

Most commentators on *The Second Sex* take moments such as these as evidence of Beauvoir's "masculinism," of what they read as her tendency to exalt men as having obtained the highest human standards and to exhort women to follow suit. But the problem is that one can read these moments in this way only if one ignores the fact that Beauvoir is trying to understand why men oppress women. So far, in her analysis of human development from infancy through early childhood, no light has been shed on this subject. Beauvoir has said nothing at this point to link what she has identified as certain systematic *differences* between little girls and little boys—differences that,

again, she traces to a complex situation constituted by social expectations (which she has yet to explain) and biological chance—with systematic *oppression* of human females by human males. The simple fact (if it is a fact) that his situation is more conducive to his self-realization as for-itself, if you will, in no way implies that the little boy needs the little girl's situation to be worse than his. And that is why in identifying this simple fact as what I've called a neat trick or magnificent paradox for the boy, Beauvoir is not to be read as glorifying maleness, *per se*.

Indeed, it turns out that on her analysis the problem with this neat trick is that it is ultimately unstable. This is because the sense of himself as in-itself-for-itself that the boy gets through alienating himself in his penis is entirely dependent on the social value of the way he poses himself. In other words, his achievement must be recognized as such *in the eyes of the other* in order for it to count as an achievement. And on Beauvoir's understanding, this recognition cannot be and is not something that the boy (or man, or woman or girl for that matter) can obtain once and for all. The struggle for recognition, as I suggested in chapter 6, is ceaseless. And this is why man needs woman, or, more generally, needs someone to play the role of the absolute Other for him: in order to figure himself as in-himself *being* (statically) for-itself, he needs to be able to count on the existence of beings who can be relied upon endlessly to supply affirmation of his own subjectivity. He needs, as Beauvoir puts it in the conclusion of *The Second Sex*, to “alienate himself in the other, whom he oppresses to that end” (719, TM; LDS 2:647). And she explains that this means that what a man needs in order to understand himself as *being* (steadfastly) independent, active, strong, and so forth is “to find himself in his wife, [or] in his mistress, in the form of a stone image” (719). I read Beauvoir to suggest through this move that the sense of stability that little boys are privileged to acquire can be perpetuated only through acts of bad faith, that their apparent achievement of stability as in-itself-for-itself comes at the cost of denying—and denying to themselves that they are denying—the humanity of the Other.

But this still does not explain why women, *per se*, are oppressed—or, to put it another way, why men need alienate themselves in *women* in order to secure fixed images of themselves. The an-

swer, as I read *The Second Sex*, is that they need not do so and, indeed, do not always do so. One need only consider the wide variety of systematic forms of oppression that human beings have inflicted on each other to see that this is the case. Men and women frequently oppress other men and women through slavery, racism, caste systems, and other forms of both institutionalized and insidious inequalities. And yet, Beauvoir argues, there is a fundamental difference between these forms of oppression and the oppression of men by women, and this difference turns on the fact that women have good reason to *desire* their situation. For if human beings indeed respond to the “catastrophe” of finding themselves individuated in infancy with a longing to reestablish a fixed connection with the world, and if little (and big) girls are encouraged through the approbation of others to believe they have done so by alienating themselves (literally or figuratively) in (or into) dolls, then it is no wonder they often happily do so. Compare, for example, the case of African-Americans, whose second-class status in this country—no less and perhaps more appalling now that we are all supposedly “equal” in the eyes of the law—has never in and of itself been advantageous for them, even if fear of the unknown—literally, of freedom—occasionally induced certain antebellum slaves (and their heirs) to rationalize their lot to themselves. Women, on the other hand, have traditionally had good reason to enjoy the benefits of not having to be actors in the world: they have rarely been *expected* to work for wages, even if economic circumstances sometimes forced them to do so (in which case they are entitled to feel gypped); their narcissism is often rewarded; they are able to endow those of their bodily processes associated with reproduction with a sense of purpose and meaning. With reference to “this great difference” between American Blacks and women, Beauvoir writes,

Blacks submit to their lot in revolt. No privilege compensates for their difficulty, whereas woman is invited to complicity. I have already recalled that side by side with the authentic claim [*revendication*] of the subject who would desire [*se veut*] sovereign liberty, there is in the existent an inauthentic desire for resignation [*démision*] and flight. These are the delights of passivity with which par-

ents and educators, books and myths, women and men lure [*font miroiter*] the young girl. In her youngest childhood she is already taught to relish [*goüiter*] them. The temptation becomes more and more insidious, and she gives in to it all the more fatally as the impulse to her transcendence crashes against more severe forms of resistance. (298, TM; *LDS* 2:53)<sup>13</sup>

For Beauvoir, to review my interpretation thus far, systematic differences between men and women are to be accounted for with reference to a fundamental human tendency to achieve a stable connection with the world by “alienating” oneself in the Look of the other. A boy is taught to do so by aspiring to establish himself as an independent being. He is to achieve and sustain his independence by forcing a woman, or several women, to devote herself or themselves to being his mirror and reflecting back to him a “stone image” of himself as powerful, creative, and free. A girl, on the other hand, is taught to achieve a stable connection with the world by turning herself into a seductive object (a mirror, let’s say) whose passivity is rewarded by the approbation and assurances of others. Both roles—masculine and feminine—are dependent on an insidious “inauthenticity” or “bad faith”: all people, boys and girls, men and women, must at least implicitly deny the status of women as “for-themselves,” which for the likes of Beauvoir means that they must deny that women are human beings. This requirement provides the incentive for both male and female adults to mold children to conform to sex stereotypes. And neither sex, therefore, is singularly responsible for the fact of women’s oppression; individuals are guilty only insofar as they see the situation for what it is and choose deliberately to perpetuate it.

What allows Beauvoir herself to see the situation for what it is (if indeed this is an accurate description of her achievement) is not, on her reckoning, that she is somehow more perceptive or less feminine than other women—a claim that puts me at odds with a number of her critics, who, as I described them in chapter 2, insist that she is exempting herself from the status of being a woman.<sup>14</sup> What she says allows her to see the situation for what it is, again, is that she is particularly well placed to do so. Let us look more closely at how she de-

scribes her positionings in the following key passage from the introduction to *The Second Sex*. Having argued that the “woman question” needs to be reposed, she writes,

But then how shall we pose the question? And to begin with, who are we to pose it? Men are judge and party to the case: women too. Where to find an angel? In truth, an angel would be poorly qualified to speak. An angel would ignore all the particulars [*données*] of the problem. As for the hermaphrodite, that case is quite singular: the hermaphrodite isn't at one and the same time man and woman but rather neither man nor woman. I believe that to shed light on the situation of woman, there are still certain women who are best placed. It would be a sophism to claim to enclose Epimenides in the concept of Cretan and the Cretans in that of liar [*C'est un sophisme que de prétendre enfermer Epiménide dans le concept de Crétois et les Crétois dans celui de menteur*]: it's not a mysterious essence that dictates good or bad faith to men and women; it's their situation that disposes them more or less to seek the truth. Many women of today, having had the chance to see all the privileges of the human being restored to themselves can offer themselves the luxury of impartiality: we even feel the necessity to do so. (xxxiii, TM; *LDS* 1:29)

I want to propose that in these sentences Beauvoir is lodging a claim to be especially well placed to attempt to pose the woman question through a simultaneous declaration that she is both a woman and a philosopher. The key sentence here is the rather obscure one that makes reference to Epimenides' so-called liar's paradox. “I am a Cretan,” Epimenides notoriously said; “and all Cretans are liars.” Ever since Aristotle, what philosophers have found interesting about Epimenides' claim is that it is impossible to determine whether or not it is true: as any first-semester logic student can tell you, if Epimenides is telling the truth, then he must be lying; and if he is lying, then he must be telling the truth. But if I read Beauvoir correctly, she is suggesting that what Epimenides says becomes paradoxical only if we subscribe to an overly narrow and rigid conception of what it is to “be” a Cretan or a liar. Epimenides' paradox goes through only if to

be a liar is to lie all the time. But is this what we ordinarily mean by the concept “liar”? Does calling someone a liar imply that he or she never tells the truth or is incapable of telling it? The fact that in ordinary language it does not is important to Beauvoir: we do not ordinarily assume that just because a certain kind of behavior is characteristic of an individual or group that individual or group is doomed to exhibit at all times only that kind of behavior. So to say that Cretans are liars does not imply that every utterance of every Cretan is a lie. Epimenides may well be telling the truth.

Similarly, Beauvoir explicitly asks us to think about what it is to “enclose” (*enfermer*) Epimenides in the concept of “Cretan.” Unless “Cretan” is just another word for “liar,” then there is a question about exactly what it means for Epimenides to declare himself to “be” a Cretan. A Cretan is of course a citizen of, or a person from, Crete. But a person’s nationality is his only salient feature only under extraordinary (and ordinarily deeply immoral) circumstances. Indeed, no set of facts about a human being confines that human being to indulging in one or the other sort of behavior, and for the same reason that no statement about what’s characteristic of a *type* of human being applies in all times and all places to people who “are” that type. So when Epimenides claims that he is a Cretan and that Cretans are liars, he is most naturally read as warning us—in provocation, on a dare, in order to be coy, or in order to achieve some particular speech act—simply that he is a member of a group whose members, insofar as they are members of that group, are prone to lie.

But I do not mean to be implying that Beauvoir is declaring herself in the above passage to be a philosopher solely by asking us to take a second look at Epimenides’ paradox (or, for that matter, by warning that to take it as philosophers have traditionally taken it is to take it as a “sophism”). What’s at least equally important is that she is asking us here, already, to think about what it could mean for her to declare that she “is” a woman or to define what a woman “is.” In what follows her warning about how to read Epimenides’ paradox, Beauvoir claims that to “be” a man or a woman is not to partake of some “mysterious essence” that forces you to behave one way or the other. Rather, it’s to be in a certain “situation.” This situation, while it may encourage or even predispose a person to behave in one manner or

another does not *confine* him or her to any particular way of being in the world. And to “be” in a certain situation implies neither that you are utterly constrained by its parameters nor that it’s the only situation you are in. Beauvoir needs to make this point in part because at the beginning of the passage she has said that both men and women are both “judge and party to the case.” Here Beauvoir is alluding to a remark she’s quoted approvingly earlier in the introduction, one made by a man she identifies as “a little-known feminist of the seventeenth century,” namely, François Poulain de la Barre: “All that has been written about women by men should be suspect, for the men are at once judge and party to the lawsuit.”<sup>15</sup> (Beauvoir in fact uses this line as one of two epigraphs to the first book of *The Second Sex*, both of which are deleted in the English edition of the book.) In claiming that it is not only men but women, too, who are “judge and party to the case,” then, Beauvoir is casting suspicion on the idea that women are, as women, inherently more qualified than men to take on “the woman question.” But via her reference to Epimenides she observes that to “be” party to the case does not necessarily mean that one is *incapable* of being a good judge, too.

Now, what is required of a good judge is what Beauvoir calls “impartiality,” something that she identifies as a luxury. This is her way of identifying philosophy itself—which, at least since Descartes, has prided itself on its impartiality—as something that is, for women, at any rate, a luxury. Some fortunate women, she is saying, are in an overall position, an overall situation, to be impartial—to do philosophy; and when she adds that “we even feel the necessity to do so” she is suggesting that women in such a situation actually feel something like *called* to philosophy—that is, they feel that their philosophizing, given their situations, is called for. In Beauvoir’s case, it is her philosophical training—or, more specifically, the material conditions afforded her in part because of and through this training—that distinguishes her particular situation from that of women who are less favorably placed to write a book like *The Second Sex*. As an *agrégée* in Philosophy (that is, someone with the highest possible certification, equivalent to that required for a doctorate, in the subject), Beauvoir was guaranteed a position in the French secondary-school system for the rest of her life, which meant that unlike the vast majority of women

in her day she could count on lifelong financial independence.<sup>16</sup> But more than this: Beauvoir's achievement allowed her to belong, as something like a peer, and to be recognized as belonging to a circle of similarly achieving men—I mean not only the author of the hugely influential *Being and Nothingness* and his cohort but also the historical circle of men preoccupied with philosophical problems.<sup>17</sup> But of course this admission did not erase the fact of Beauvoir's being a woman. Despite her being in a position to indulge the luxury of her "detachment," she writes, she and others like her "know the feminine world more intimately than men because we have our roots there. We grasp more immediately what the fact of being female means for a human being, and we are more concerned to know it" (xxxiii–xxxiv, TM; *LDS* 1:29–30).

I am suggesting, in effect, that Beauvoir is declaring herself to be well placed to pose the questions she is posing in *The Second Sex* because her situation comprises that of "being" a woman *and* that of "being" a philosopher, where this is to be understood as a declaration of a certain sense of being split—or, if you like, ambiguous. And on her analysis of what it is to "be" a woman, in which one's being an individual is at odds with one's biological destiny, the implication is that her existence as a woman philosopher is, as it were, doubly ambiguous. That this situation has its advantages, its own economy of fertility, is attested to by the very existence of *The Second Sex*. (That it has its disadvantages is, I would argue, what accounts for that existence.) If Beauvoir accuses both men and women of attempting to avoid recognizing that women, like men, are fundamentally "for-themselves," she is able to articulate this claim only from within her own sense of being split, of being, specifically, a woman philosopher. She needs, to put it another way, the resources of both her philosophical powers and her experience as a woman to understand why human beings oppress one another and allow themselves to be oppressed on the basis of their sex. This is not to say that a man (or a differently placed woman, for that matter) could not have arrived at something like Beauvoir's picture of the situation between men and women. It is to suggest how Beauvoir herself came to require a reconceptualization of the line between the ordinary and the philosophical that most people are inclined not to question.

In *The Second Sex* Beauvoir comes to be able to articulate Hegel's

achievement in the master-slave dialectic—an achievement the full implications of which, she at least implicitly suggests, it was not open to Hegel himself to recognize—as one of showing the human being’s sense of herself in the world to be a function of her “being-for-others.” That human beings, on Beauvoir’s appropriation of Hegel, harbor a “fundamental hostility toward every other consciousness” is not some brute fact about how people are hard-wired; rather, the experience of freedom, when it takes the form of a sense of the loss of the world, inclines people to attempt to objectify themselves in the eyes of others, to try to attain steadfast connections with the world by asking others to affirm that one “is,” for all times and places, whatever it is one fancies oneself to be. (This would mean that the “fundamental hostility” that Beauvoir says we *all* bear against each other need not take an overt, frankly hostile form.) In certain situations—notably, that of men vis-à-vis women—the attempt to get the other to objectify you is driven by a desire to affirm that you are essentially a free being, that is, the desire that drives the beings in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. In other situations—notably, that of women vis-à-vis men—the attempt to get the other to objectify you is driven by a desire to affirm that you are essentially *not* a free being.

And when these attempts are made by man and woman vis-à-vis one another, they do *not* take the form of demands or claims. (I am therefore arguing, contra Lundgren-Gothlin, that neither men nor women “demand” recognition from one another.) This is because women are already poised, for the reasons I’ve discussed above, reasons having to do with their experience as little girls, to reflect back to men what they wish to see of themselves; and men are already poised for the same sorts of reasons to treat women as the mirrors they have good reason to wish them to be. In their relationships with one another, then, neither men nor women risk their lives. “In [woman’s] eyes,” Beauvoir writes, “man incarnates the Other, as she does for the man; but this *Other* seems to her to be on the plane of the essential, and with reference to him she sees herself as the inessential” (329). For both men and women then, man *is* a subject, is in-himself for-himself, and woman *is* an object, pure in-itself. And there is nothing internal to their relationship that has the power to make the bad faith of

their conceptions of themselves (insofar as they are men and women) intolerable—no contradiction capable of making the relationship productively dialectical.

But this is not to imply that, even given the way things now stand between Man and Woman, an individual man and an individual woman cannot have a relationship characterized by what Beauvoir has identified as the hallmarks of “reciprocal recognition,” namely, friendship and generosity. In particular, as Debra Bergoffen has stressed, Beauvoir suggests that such a relationship may be achieved in an erotic context.<sup>18</sup> At the end of a chapter called “Sexual Initiation,” part of the first section of the second book of *The Second Sex*, after trying to show that her first heterosexual experience is often a disastrous experience for a young woman, Beauvoir writes that the “normal and happy flowering of feminine eroticism” requires that

woman succeed in surmounting her passivity and in establishing with her partner a relationship of reciprocity. The asymmetry of male and female eroticism creates insoluble problems as long as there is a battle of the sexes. They can easily be solved [*se trancher*] when the woman feels in the man at the same time desire and respect. If he desires her in her flesh all the while recognizing her liberty, she finds herself [*se retrouvere*] the essential at the moment at which she makes herself an object; she remains free in the submission to which she consents. Thus, the lovers can know, each in his or her manner, a common *jouissance*. Pleasure is felt by each partner as being his or her own, all the while having its source in the other. The words *receive* and *give* exchange their senses: joy is gratitude, pleasure, tenderness. Under a concrete and carnal form reciprocal recognition of the self and the other is accomplished in the sharpest consciousness of the other and of the self. (401, TM; *LDS* 2:189)

Bergoffen places the highest importance on this passage because she reads it as evidence that a central achievement of *The Second Sex* is Beauvoir’s development of a “philosophy of the erotic.” But on my reading what’s most important about this passage is that, for starters,

it confirms that Beauvoir in contradistinction to Sartre believes that reciprocal recognition is possible and that it can take the form of (at least) carnal love. More important, this passage reveals that what is required for reciprocal recognition on Beauvoir's view is the willingness and the wherewithal to make oneself both subject and object in the other's eyes. This is an absolutely crucial point. If I am right in reading Beauvoir this way, it means that she is *not* making the point she's widely believed to make, namely, that men are subjects and women are objects and that women's "liberation" requires that women become subjects (often read to mean that men are the standard to which women have to rise). Rather, I am arguing, Beauvoir is claiming that both women and men must learn how to be simultaneously both subjects and objects.

But how are we to do this? We have seen already that the way boys and men attempt to become in-itself-for-itself requires a certain persistent self-deception. We have also seen that, on Beauvoir's analysis, women are tempted by incentives not to desire their own subjectivity. In the passage I've just quoted, Beauvoir seems to be suggesting that under the right conditions erotic love can induce both men and women to act toward each other in good faith. These conditions, Beauvoir specifies in what follows this passage, are constituted by the specifics of an individual woman's situation as well as by "her social and economic situation as a whole" (402). But why erotic love, exactly? Beauvoir's answer is that "the erotic experience is one of those that discloses to human beings in the most poignant way the ambiguity of their condition. In it they experience themselves as flesh and as spirit, as the other and as subject" (402, TM; *LDS* 2:190). Bergoffen as I understand her reads Beauvoir here to be declaring that erotic love provides us with *the* paradigm for the achievement of recognition between men and women. On my reading, Beauvoir's point is that even under the current circumstances, when men and women are systematically encouraged to shirk their existential freedom, erotic love with a person of the opposite sex can, under the right conditions, encourage them to assume it. This point depends on a claim the status of which, I take it, is itself ambiguous: that in the best instances of erotic love human beings find themselves capable of bearing up un-

der, or even reveling in, the experience of their own ambiguity.<sup>19</sup> I claim that the status of this claim is itself ambiguous because it seems to me to be based on an authority that is not properly philosophical (not something that could be, or could obviously be, backed up by an argument) and not properly empirical (not something based on some psychological or sociological study). Rather, it is the product of the authority Beauvoir finds herself able to arrogate to herself as a woman philosophizing.

That certain experiences of heterosexual erotic love provide glimpses of what reciprocal recognition between men and women could look like is further affirmed by Beauvoir's suggesting in the same context that what is required is that each lover, and particularly the woman, claim his or her "dignity as a transcendent and free subject, all the while assuming his or her carnal condition." And this, she warns, "is a difficult enterprise, full of risk" (402, TM; *LDS* 2:190). I read this to be specifying a way for men and women to risk their lives with one another—that is, to undertake what I have argued Beauvoir deems necessary for a dialectic between men and women to inaugurate itself. On this interpretation, to risk one's life according to Beauvoir is equivalent to assuming one's freedom. More specifically, it is to do so in the context of accepting one's own ambiguity, that is, accepting the fact that even as one lacks a stable connection with the world one is bound to find oneself fixed in the eyes of the other. This is something that in Beauvoir's view both men and women have failed to do, at least vis-à-vis one another. And it is here that women actually can be seen to have an advantage over men, as Hegel's slave at a certain juncture can be seen to have an advantage over the master. As Beauvoir's writes,

It is for the woman that this conflict [between flesh and spirit, self and other] takes on the most dramatic character because she grasps herself at first as an object, because she doesn't immediately find in pleasure a sure autonomy. . . . But the difficulty of the situation itself protects her against the mystifications to which the male falls prey [*se laisser prendre*]. He is the ready dupe of the fallacious privileges that are involved in his aggressive role and the sat-

isfied solitude of his orgasm. He hesitates to recognize himself fully as flesh. The woman has a more authentic experience. (402, TM; *LDS* 2:190–191)

I read Beauvoir here to be suggesting that the man in a heterosexual erotic relationship, like Hegel's master, has reasons to protect himself from the truth of his situation—from, in this case, his reliance on the woman's subjectivity for his own sense of himself. The woman, like the slave, on the other hand, has less to risk and more to gain under these circumstances. Like the slave, she is in a better position to see the truth.

Unlike Bergoffen, however, I do not think that Beauvoir believes that women in erotic relationships with men, even under the best circumstances, are *likely* to see the truth. Indeed, in the closing lines of the chapter on amorousness toward the end of book 2 of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir limns a vision of what she calls “authentic love” as though human beings have yet to experience it:

Authentic love would be founded on the reciprocal recognition of two liberties. Each of the lovers would experience himself, then, as himself and as the other. Neither would abdicate his transcendence; neither would mutilate himself. Both would disclose [*dévoileraient*] together values and ends in the world. For the one and the other, love would be revelation of himself through the gift of self and the enrichment of the world. (667, TM; *LDS* 2:579)

One way to read this passage is in juxtaposition with one in which we have seen Beauvoir articulating what is required for a person to achieve insight about himself or herself:

The drama [of the master-slave relationship] can be surmounted by the free recognition of each individual in the other [*en l'autre*], each posing himself and the other at the same time as object and as subject in a reciprocal movement. But friendship and generosity, which concretely realize this recognition of liberties, are not easy virtues. They are assuredly the highest accomplishment of the human being; it's thus that he or she achieves [*se trouve*] his or her

truth. But this truth is that of a struggle ceaselessly sketched out [*ebauchée*], ceaselessly abolished. It requires that a human being at each instant master herself [*se surmonte*]. (140, TM; LDS 1:238)

In this second passage, which, again, is part of the long rendering of Hegel that inaugurates the “Myths” section of book 1 of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir claims, first, that mutual recognition requires that each individual pose both himself or herself and the other individual as object and as subject. This “posing” (or, to use the English translation of Fichte’s word, “positing”) of oneself and the other, something that Beauvoir claims provides each person with her or his “truth,” in turn is said to require the virtues of friendship and generosity. And finally the attainment of these virtues according to Beauvoir requires a ceaseless struggle to master oneself. One way of putting what strikes me as problematic about Bergoffen’s reading of Beauvoir is that this idea of a ceaseless struggle seems to have dropped out.

I asked in chapter 6 what this struggle might look like. Beauvoir’s analysis of men and women suggests that it takes the form of battling your desire to shirk your freedom, a desire Beauvoir suggests takes the form of a wish to enslave yourself to a fixed picture of who you are and how you are connected with the world. This is a desire, Beauvoir claims, that culture itself, as it is incarnated in particular men and women, works ceaselessly to cultivate. So perhaps the “ceaseless struggle” to which Beauvoir refers is, after all, to take place at least in part on the sociopolitical battlefield. One can imagine Beauvoir suggesting—as numerous feminists in her wake have done—that what’s necessary for men and women to systematically treat each other in the spirit of friendship and generosity is that we transform our social practices—the way we parent our children, for example, or the way we decide what’s true and false.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, in the conclusion to *The Second Sex* Beauvoir does claim that for women’s situation to change, there must be changes in “laws, institutions, customs, public opinion, and the whole social context” (725). It is especially crucial, she argues, that women’s economic condition, and in particular their opportunities as workers, be improved; until such improvement brings about “the moral, social, cultural, and other consequences that it promises and requires,” Beauvoir says flatly, “the new woman can-

not appear” (725). This is at least in part because Beauvoir, again, on my reading, appropriating Hegel, believes that coming to see oneself in all good faith as a subject requires that one do something productive in the world, that one act and create.

One could argue—and many critics of Beauvoir have—that taking care of a home and bearing and raising children constitutes productive work, so that in her implication that genuine work takes place only in the public sphere Beauvoir is once again betraying her “masculinism.” But I submit that Beauvoir’s problem with homemaking is not that it is intrinsically any less or more productive or satisfying than any other kind of work but that given women’s situation as it stands it is not *recognized* as such. Women do not, for example, receive monetary compensation for housework. While it is true that homemakers are characteristically supported economically by their “providers,” the money the man brings into the household, even if he does give the woman a certain amount of leeway with it, is never directly or explicitly tied to the woman’s labor, *per se*. When a married couple divorces, it is not a foregone legal or moral conclusion that the male wage-earner ought to continue to compensate the female homemaker for her household labors, now that he is no longer living under the same roof with her. (Alimony, when it is granted, is never identified as compensation for housework, *per se*.) Economically, as many feminists have observed in the last thirty years, the work women do in the home is invisible. In his articulation of the master-slave dialectic, Hegel claims that because the slave is doing productive work—work, interestingly enough, that, given Hegel’s description of it looks for all the world like what we call housework—and because the slave has experienced the fear of death, he (unlike the master) is in a position to see the truth of himself as for-himself. Beauvoir’s view seems to be that one only comes to be in this position if the sort of work that one does is recognized as genuine work by the culture in which one labors—as that of Hegel’s slave, like that of Beauvoir’s woman, is not. But for “slave’s work” or “women’s work” to be recognized as genuinely creative labor, the slave/woman will have to be recognized as a genuinely creative being—as, that is, a subject. This means, effectively, that for the slave/woman’s productive work to have the power (along with the fear of death) to move the dialectic along, recognition of her-

self as for-itself must already have taken place. But if this is the case, then it's hard to see how improvement of women's economic condition could inaugurate the right kind of change in her situation, since it looks as though this change is itself necessary for the improvement of women's economic condition.

So then: What *is* necessary for a change in women's situation? Beauvoir claims, again in the conclusion to *The Second Sex*, that oppression itself puts pressure on existing social structures to evolve. In the case of the oppression of women by men, Beauvoir says, this pressure can take either of two forms. The first form is to be found in circumstances in which the oppression of women is crushing. In such circumstances, Beauvoir suggests, individual women at various times will find that they cannot bear their imprisonment in their immanence. A woman in such circumstances will rebel by attempting to bring her jailer, the man, into her immanent space so that the prison "will be confounded with the world and she will suffer no longer from being enclosed in it" (717, TM; *LDS* 2:644). The man, of course, will resist, thereby creating what Beauvoir calls "a state of war" (717). And because the man is more powerful than the woman, he is likely to win the battle. But there is a second way that oppression puts pressure on social structures to change, a way Beauvoir claims is dominant "today," when there are chinks in the prison walls and women are able to see the advantages of being actors in the world. Now, "instead of wishing to put man in a prison, woman endeavors to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence" (717). Men feel this desire for emancipation as a threat to their sovereignty, Beauvoir says, which forces women to take "an aggressive attitude" (717). Consequently, "two transcendences confront each other [*s'affronter*]; instead of mutually recognizing one another, each liberty wants to dominate the other" (718, TM; *LDS* 2:645).

Here, I submit, we find an allusion to the Hegelian "fight to the death" as well as to Sartre's appropriation of this moment in Hegel—that is, specifically, to Sartre's identification of the desire to dominate the other as fundamental to all human relationships. But Beauvoir in effect rejects Sartre's appropriation of Hegel when she claims that the

confrontation that oppression under certain circumstances puts into play actually takes place *within* each person. She writes, toward the end of the conclusion of *The Second Sex*,

In these combats in which they believe themselves to be confronting each other, it's against himself that each one battles, projecting into his partner this part of himself that he repudiates. Instead of living the ambiguity of his condition, each tries to force the other to bear the abjection of it and to reserve for himself its honor. If, however, both would assume the ambiguity with a lucid modesty, correlative to an authentic pride, they would meet each other as fellows [*semblables*] and would live the erotic drama in friendship. (728, TM; *LDS* 2:658)

So instead of accepting Sartre's idea that the struggle against the other is both inevitable and interminable, Beauvoir is claiming that men and women can get beyond it if they can come to see, and to accept, that they are "projecting" a part of themselves onto the other. Specifically, in accordance with the reading of Beauvoir I have been laying out in this chapter, I think she is claiming that what a person projects onto the other is his or her own sense of not having a fixed relationship with the world—of, to put the point positively, being free. In the encounter with the other I am tempted to see not myself but the other as free: free, in particular, to turn me into an object. I am further tempted to try to get the other to use this freedom to make of me an object whose fixed relationship with the world is the one I covet for myself, whether that be, paradoxically enough, a relationship of freedom (as in the case of men) or of bondage (as in the case of women). Regarding the other solely in terms of how he or she fixes me in his or her gaze is, of course, a way of understanding what Freud means by narcissism. This means that on Beauvoir's view what is necessary in order to go beyond Sartre's picture is the recognition and foregoing of a certain temptation to narcissism.

Beauvoir's rejection of Sartre's bleak picture of human relations turns on seeing the encounter with the other not as inevitably condemning one to an interminable struggle with the other but as an opportunity to grasp two important truths: about oneself, namely, that

one is fundamentally “ambiguous”; and about the other, specifically, that he or she is not just a mirror. The idea that there is an opportunity here is absent in Sartre, but it plays an important role in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic. Hegel, you may recall, claims that in the encounter between two subjectively self-certain self-consciousnesses, a being initially does not “see the other as an essential being, but in the other sees its own self” (para. 179). And what a being sees in the other’s eyes, Hegel says, is itself as other, so that the encounter with the other is what in fact *reveals* to the self (what, as I claimed in chapter 3, both he and Beauvoir call) its ambiguity (as between being for-itself and in-itself). In the master-slave dialectic, this sense of ambiguity is unbearable, and it is what drives the self to struggle against the other for mastery. What is desired on Hegel’s view, again, is that the other recognize you as being essentially “for-yourself.” But on Beauvoir’s view, I am arguing, this is simply one form that the temptation to narcissism can take—and, in the case of men’s relationships with women, characteristically takes. For her, merely getting the other to confirm that you are “for-yourself” does not count as genuine recognition; and she further believes, as I have argued above, that this confirmation is often granted (that is, women grant it to men) in the absence of any “demand” for it, *per se*. What is required, on Beauvoir’s view, for genuine recognition to occur is that a person “assume” his or her ambiguity, which is at the same time to allow the other his or her otherness. The first step in this process has to be a willingness to see and accept that the struggle with the other is in fact a cover for the struggle within oneself—the struggle, that is, against one’s own sense of being ambiguous, which I have characterized as being fueled by a fear of one’s freedom, understood as entailing a loss of a sense of a secure relationship to the world.

This insight and acceptance requires, first and foremost, that a person stop warding off the truth of the other’s genuine otherness. For the locus of the struggle to shift from your encounter with the other to your encounter with yourself—for you to see that your most fundamental nemesis, as it were, is not in fact the other but, rather, yourself—you have to come to recognize the other as something more than his or her gaze.<sup>21</sup> I am suggesting here, this means, that on Beauvoir’s view my recognition of the other (where this, I am now specify-

ing, is to be understood as my recognizing the genuine otherness of the other) is not only necessary to but is even the first step in my getting the other to recognize me. But what is what I am calling “recognizing the genuine otherness of the other” supposed to look like? Beauvoir does not say much about this, at least not directly. It follows from my analysis of her appropriation of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, however, that at least a part of recognizing the otherness of the other would have to consist in foregoing the attempt to manipulate the other person’s judgment of me—foregoing, in other words, the *demand* that the other recognize me solely as I wish to be recognized. But to forego this demand is to make room for the other’s *free* judgment of me, so that foregoing the demand can be characterized as inviting this free judgment.

How to do this? I want to suggest that even though Beauvoir doesn’t address this question explicitly, she provides a powerful response to it in the form of *The Second Sex* itself. This is a book that Beauvoir finds herself having to compose, let us recall, in order to be able to, as she puts it, write about herself. She finds, to her astonishment, that the first thing that she has to say about herself is that she is a woman, and that she does not know what this means—that is, what it means to declare yourself to be a woman as well as what it means to discover that this is the first thing that you have to say about yourself. *The Second Sex* can therefore be read as a record of this woman’s preparation for recollecting or recounting herself. What’s remarkable is that this preparation does not take place in private. Beauvoir finds that in order to say anything specific about who she is, she must first recount woman *to* (other) women, and to men. In doing this she is not taking, or even pretending to take, the vantage point of an expert. She’s writing *as* a woman (even as she is exploring what this could mean). Her authority stands or falls entirely on her authorship, so that to publicize the words that make up *The Second Sex* is inevitably to stake claims solely on the basis of this authorship, these words.

In effect, I am suggesting, in having everything rest on the reception of her authorship, Beauvoir is staking *herself*. And it is this staking of herself, through her words, that is to count as an answer to the question of how genuine mutual recognition is to be achieved. Beauvoir offers herself as the object of other people’s judgments in inviting

them to take up and evaluate her words. This is to say that not just any old words will do; Beauvoir's words are "fighting words" in the sense that they are intended to provoke the judgments of her readers. But these words are equally offered as an expression of her subjectivity, which means that in and through them she is making an attempt to constitute herself as "for-herself." The enterprise of writing, when carried out in good faith, can thus be seen as a certain kind of risk-taking: when you write from the heart, as it were, then you express yourself as a subject (a creator, an actor) precisely by taking the risk of turning yourself into an object of the other's judgment.

I am suggesting that in her authorship of *The Second Sex* Beauvoir, far from setting out to petrify the "other" in order to shore up some private sense of herself, as Sartre suggests in *Being and Nothingness* we inevitably do in our relationships with others, is offering up her writing as an invitation to the other to express himself or herself as a subject, as a judge of her words.<sup>22</sup> In turn, this judgment, if again it is put forth publicly and in good faith, will constitute both an expression of the other's subjectivity (which, à la Sartre, Beauvoir will experience as such to the extent that the critic's words move her, one way or another) *and* an object of Beauvoir's further judgment, of her own (further) criticism. This, then, is a picture of the Hegelian struggle for recognition as taking place at the highest reaches of human conversation.<sup>23</sup> Mutual recognition is to be found, it follows, not in some definitive words that the other can pronounce on your behalf but in the very willingness to continue talking. This means that in a sense recognition is never final, never complete. At the very least, it is withdrawn the moment the conversation breaks down.

For Beauvoir the idea of inviting the best kind of human conversation, by subjecting oneself to criticism, is linked with the idea of *pleasure*, in much the same way that erotic fantasies of give-and-take are so associated. On my reading of Beauvoir, the pleasure imagined or experienced in conversation is not a *goal*, exactly, of that conversation but, rather, a mark of its success.<sup>24</sup> Often, as Beauvoir certainly knew, the pleasures of conversation are to be had at the cost of enormous pain: the pain of misunderstandings, of failure to find the words one needs, of discursive impasses, of vulnerability, of inadequacy, of self-loathing, of anger. Needless to say, it is a feature of hu-

man conversation that it can derail at any moment—and in actuality of course does, and all the time. All of a sudden, or slowly, over time, I might find that I don't know or understand you the way I thought I did, or you me—or each of us ourselves. We can't pin each other, or sometimes even ourselves, down. This is because the struggle to keep the conversation going is the struggle to come to terms with the fact that what it means to be a human being is that neither my nor the other's relationship to the world is ever fixed, both because human beings inherently are not simply objects and because we are constantly exposed to the (varying) judgmental eyes of different others. To continue the conversation requires foregoing precisely the sort of narcissism that Sartre depicts so cannily in *No Exit*, a narcissism that demands that I find mirrored in your judgments of me a static image of myself in which I can take pride. On Sartre's view, of course, this narcissism is what drives my very encounter with the Other, so that the fight-to-the-death, the struggle, is essentially between my narcissism and yours. But on Beauvoir's view the essential struggle is with myself: I struggle to let go of a fixed picture of myself, to risk letting the other teach me who I am. To the extent we can allow the other to play such a role, our various failures of conversation are to be seen as moments revealing a certain *truth*, moments in which we come to grips with the fantasies we customarily construct as a way of avoiding confrontation with the fact of our ambiguity. The idea of exposing our fantasies to ourselves in our struggles with ourselves is a major motif throughout *The Second Sex*.

This is also a picture, then, of a world in which something other than Sartre's solipsistic sort of objectivity is possible. Recall that for Sartre, "objectivity" can consist only in the state of feeling oneself trapped, thinglike, in the Other's Look—a state, I argued in chapter 4, characterized by narcissism and paranoia. On Sartre's view, in order to be a human being, I must will what the skeptic fears: that you and I be radically separate and that it be impossible for us genuinely to share a world. But on Beauvoir's view, what marks us as human, as capable of subjectivity, is our risking ourselves (as in-itself, as it were) in order to create a world for ourselves with others. For her, then, to be objective is to undertake this risk. We do so by investing ourselves in language, in employing the signs we share publicly, in taking respon-

sibility for co-*authoring* the world. As I put it toward the end of chapter 3, this investment demands foregoing another, namely, the investment in one's privacy (figured as a wish to automatically be transparent to oneself and others), a foregoing Beauvoir regards as demanding an acceptance of oneself as ambiguous and one that she takes to be a prerequisite of any morally productive form of human self-consciousness. In her case it is the very act of writing a book such as *The Second Sex* that constitutes Beauvoir's willingness for publicity and specifically for attempting to forge a world in which an ethical form of cohabitation between men and women is possible.

The difference between this world and the world in which we now live, Beauvoir suggests, will be that men and women, males and females, find themselves in situations in which the temptation to privacy, to narcissism and distrust and skepticism, is outweighed by the temptation to what she calls friendship and generosity. Crucially, forging a genuinely new world will probably demand a drastic change in the material circumstances of many people. It's hard to take an interest in authoring the world if it is simply crushing you.<sup>25</sup> But even under conditions of widespread plenty, people will always wish for what Beauvoir calls rest, for an escape from the unceasing demands of self-scrutiny and self-exposure. These demands, she shows in *The Second Sex*, are the demands of morality. They are demands that we recognize the divisiveness we produce through our obsession with dividing ourselves into categories, such as sex, and that we recognize this divisiveness itself as stemming from our wish to avoid the fact of our fundamental ambiguity, an ambiguity that is both the condition of and the stumbling block to our being able to inhabit a world together. Beauvoir had this concept, or at least this word, *ambiguity* from early on in her writing career. But it took her being overcome by a sense of her own ambiguity, the contradiction she felt between the sense of herself as a potential author of an autobiography and as what is called a woman, to find her voice with the concept philosophically. Why she found conducting a philosophical investigation of this sense of ambiguity unavoidable is perhaps, in the end, simply a matter of her tastes and passions. Personally, I like to think it was women's intuition.

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## NOTES

### INTRODUCTION: RECOUNTING WOMEN

1. The quotation, my translation, is from p. 14 of volume 1 of *Le Deuxième Sexe*, hereafter abbreviated as *LDS* 1 or 2. This passage is found on p. xxi of the English translation, hereafter abbreviated as *TSS*. Where I have modified a translation, I will indicate so by using the abbreviation “TM.”

Perhaps the sole point of criticism on which all serious readers of the English version of *The Second Sex* agree is that this translation, the only one published to date, is shockingly inadequate. The rights to the translation were bought by the publishing magnate Alfred A. Knopf after his wife, Blanche, who was visiting Paris at the time *Le Deuxième Sexe* was published in France, told him (without reading the book) that from the stir it was creating she thought it would become the next big scandalous best-seller, on the order of the Kinsey report. Knopf enlisted the translation services of Howard Parshley, a retired professor of human biology, who upon reading the book tried, and failed, to convince Knopf that although it contained some racy passages it had unignorable philosophical pretensions. It was most likely his desire to help the general-interest reader understand “the philosophy” of *The Second Sex* that moved Parshley to fill the book with annotations—always indistinguishable from Beauvoir’s original prose—that sometimes seriously distort her words. For a version of the story of the translation of *The Second Sex*, see Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir*, chapter 31. Margaret Simons chronicles the problems with the English translation—including the fact that Parshley cuts, without indication, more than 10 percent of the original text and that he also regularly mistranslates key philosophical terms (e.g., *pour-soi* is routinely rendered as “in-itself” rather than “for-itself”)—in her groundbreaking article “The Silencing of Simone de Beauvoir.” See also Moi, “(Mis)reading *The Second Sex*,” and Okely, *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 54, for further specifications of problems with Parshley’s translation.

2. I am claiming here that reading *The Second Sex* against Rousseau’s Sec-

ond Discourse would be philosophically productive, but I don't pursue this comparison in the present book.

3. *The Claim of Reason*, p. 94. Cavell develops this concept throughout his work, notably in "Recounting Gains, Showing Losses" and "Being Odd, Getting Even."

4. These include the essays collected in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Margaret Simons, as well as Debra Bergoffen's *Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*, Sonia Kruks's *Situation and Human Existence*, Michèle Le Doeuff's *Hipparchia's Choice*, Eva Lundgren-Gothlin's *Sex and Existence*, Simons's *Beauvoir and The Second Sex*, Karen Vintges's *Philosophy as Passion*, and the essays of Sara Heinämaa. See also Toril Moi's *What Is a Woman?*, which, although not written by a professor of philosophy, finds its philosophical bearings in many of the same sources in which I find mine.

5. This is perhaps why most revisionist considerations of Beauvoir as a philosopher tend to see *The Second Sex* as unproblematically continuous with her earlier philosophical writing. A notable exception here is Le Doeuff; see, e.g., "Simone de Beauvoir: Falling into Ambiguous Line." I discuss Le Doeuff's thought-provoking work on Beauvoir briefly in the last part of this introduction. In chapter 5, I sketch her argument for the idea that there is a disjunction between Beauvoir's earlier philosophical essays and *The Second Sex*.

6. Her starting with a declaration of our lack of knowledge of ourselves invites comparison with the opening passages of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*. But if Beauvoir is inheriting something from these thinkers, then it is of course a question how the sex-based inflection of her remarks is to be taken. I take up this question specifically with respect to Beauvoir's inheritance of Descartes's *Meditations*, in chapter 2, and of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in chapters 3 through 7.

7. Although the English translation of *The Second Sex* obscures this fact, Beauvoir's phrase *querelle du féminisme* obviously puns on the phrase *querelle des femmes*, the condescending rubric for the famous European debates of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, often in the form of heated salon conversations involving both women and men, on "the woman question." These debates are generally considered to have been constrained in scope and seriousness, although they produced a number of extremely interesting writings by women, such as Christine de Pizan's *The Book of the City of Ladies*. I take

Beauvoir's allusion here to be a suggestion that contemporary debates about feminism are no less constrained and no more serious than those earlier conversations that contemporary interlocutors tend to dismiss and ridicule.

8. I am indebted here to Cora Diamond, whose Whitehead lectures at Harvard in the late spring of 1993 helped me to put this point in this way.

9. See, e.g., chapter 1 of Bergoffen's *Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*.

10. My use of the concepts of "sex difference" and "gender identity" in this sentence indirectly raises a question about what the difference between these two terms is supposed to come to. This is a question that I do not address head-on in this book, although I do explore at length, especially in chapter 7, Beauvoir's understanding of the relationship between cultural and biological forces on the making of little boys and girls into men and women. For the most part, throughout the book I tend to avoid the term "gender," except when so doing would be confusing or awkward (as in the unidiomatic phrase "sex identity"). I do this first and foremost because Beauvoir, as a francophone, had no such word in her vocabulary. Second, I am reluctant to employ a word that tends to conjure up certain fixed and, from the point of view of a reading of Beauvoir, anachronistic pictures about the nature of sex difference (e.g., the familiar picture on which "sex" is biological and "gender" is social or the postmodernist picture, most memorably articulated by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, on which biological sex is no less fully "constructed" than social "gender"). In the first essay of her book *What Is a Woman?* Toril Moi asks searching questions about the usefulness of the so-called sex/gender distinction as a rhetorical and theoretical device in contemporary anglophone feminism. The split so often identified between sex and gender is ordinarily regarded by feminists as a direct legacy of *The Second Sex*, emblemized by the aphorism that opens part 2: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." Moi argues compellingly that this misreading of Beauvoir goes a long way toward obscuring what is of most value in her work.

11. I am grateful to Toril Moi for pointing out to me, in an extremely helpful set of comments on a very early version of this material, the necessity of specifying what I mean by "condescension." An overly broad conception of this term could have the undesirable effect of branding as unreasonable certain valuable modes of approach to Beauvoir's writing, and specifically, as Moi observed, approaches grounding themselves in the terms of psychoanalysis.

12. See fn. 1 of this introduction for more on the problems with the English translation of the book.
13. “The Subjection of Women,” 49.
14. According to Beauvoir in her memoirs, “It was begun in October 1946 and finished in June 1949; but I spent four months of 1947 in America, and *America Day by Day* kept me busy for six months” (*Force of Circumstance* 186, n. 1). As Bair observes (380), this means that Beauvoir spent only about fourteen months writing *The Second Sex*.
15. Moi’s focus is broader than mine; her stated purpose is to document and explore what she sees as “the unusual number of condescending, sarcastic, sardonic or dismissive accounts” of Beauvoir (22), while I am interested in the gestures of condescension in particular. Moi notes that other writers (on p. 22 she mentions Elaine Marks and Anne Whitmarsh) have also written about the “hostile trend in the reception of Beauvoir’s work,” but her own discussion of this trend—as well as her command of both the critical literature and Beauvoir’s oeuvre as a whole—is by far the most thorough I know.
16. Consider the following passage, quoted in chapter 3 of Moi’s *Simone de Beauvoir*, from René Girard’s review of the volume of Beauvoir’s biography entitled *La Force de l’Age*:

Being a particularly brilliant subject, Mme de Beauvoir could not stand the thought of forsaking the *mention très bien*, and she simply refused to be reconverted to home life, thus manifesting for the first time that spirit of rebellion which made her famous and which is still alive in her. However much we admire this valorous feat, we must not exaggerate the scope of the revolution. [ . . . ] Mme de Beauvoir is the voice of all the other feminine first prize winners” (*in Marks, ed., Critical Essays*, p. 85; *quoted in Moi’s Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 90 [ellipsis Moi’s]).

17. *Je, Tu, Nous*, p. 9.
18. *Feminist Theory and the Philosophies of Man*, p. 2. What Beauvoir actually says in the introduction to *The Second Sex* is that her perspective is one of “existentialist ethics” (TSS xxxiv; my emphasis). In chapter 5, I interpret this announcement very differently from the way Nye does. Nye provides an explicit example of what she takes to be Beauvoir’s mindless devotion to Sartre in her discussion of some (“clearly deficient”) remarks Beauvoir makes in *The Second*

*Sex* about Goddess worship: “It is her existentialist presuppositions that forced Beauvoir to this unreflecting rejection of the different values inherent in early agricultural societies. Because these values do not correspond to existentialist self-assertion, Beauvoir had no other recourse but to relegate them to the passive, the imminent, the animal, the not-human” (*Feminist Theory* III, n. 23). See also Nye’s essay “Preparing the Way for a Feminist Praxis,” in which she argues that Beauvoir’s allegiance to Sartre’s philosophy prevented her from developing a robust notion of oppression. In chapters 5 through 7, I provide what I take to be overwhelming evidence against this view.

19. Indeed, the easiest way to put some initial conceptual if not overtly philosophical distance between Sartre and Beauvoir is to recall his association in *Being and Nothingness* of immanence in all its horror with the holes and slime he explicitly associates with the feminine. One might also wish to pay attention to the fact that perhaps his most memorable example of what he famously calls “bad faith” is that of a woman who goes out with a man and then pretends she doesn’t know that his wining and dining her is to compensate her in advance for the sexual favors she then, according to the conventional understanding of what a “date” is, owes him. Sartre’s most extended discussion of immanence and its relation to holes and slime and women occurs in part 4 of *Being and Nothingness*, in section 3 of chapter 2, “Quality as a Revelation of Being.” At one point, he writes, “Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet, feminine revenge.” (777). Shortly thereafter, we find: “The obscenity of the feminine sex is that of everything which ‘gapes open.’ It is *an appeal to being* as all holes are. In herself woman appeals to a strange flesh which is to transform her into a fullness of being by penetration and dissolution” (782). For the “date” example of bad faith, see pp. 96–97.

20. See, particularly, *Hipparchia’s Choice*, which grows out of earlier essays, such as “Operative Philosophy: Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism,” bits and pieces of which are woven into strikingly new cloth in the book’s “Second Notebook.” It is very important for me to acknowledge here that this book, a brilliant and, to my mind, highly underappreciated meditation on women and philosophy, more than half of which takes Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* as its subject, constitutes the best discussion (or perhaps I should call it a demonstration) I know of the difficulty of committing oneself simultaneously to the demands of feminism and those of philosophy. Le Doeuff’s achievements are all the more impressive given the almost total dismissal of

Beauvoir by the most influential French feminist philosophers over the last thirty years; I find her heroism and originality under the circumstances almost unbelievable.

Unlike virtually every other French reader of Beauvoir, Le Doeuff aligns the significance of *The Second Sex* with Beauvoir's philosophical aspirations and achievements. I am of course in absolute agreement with her on this point. But in her envisioning these achievements as measurable mainly over and against those of Jean-Paul Sartre—a vision astonishing enough, given the cold reception of Beauvoir by her French daughters and granddaughters and her dismissal as Sartre's handmaiden by virtually anyone who cares to comment on the two—Le Doeuff turns out to have in important respects a different emphasis from mine. The relative lack of explicit reference to Le Doeuff's work in the present pages belies the enormity of her influence on my own thinking about feminism and philosophy. From the beginning, I have conceived of the present book as something of a response to *Hipparchia's Choice* and other of Le Doeuff's writings, notably her wonderful essay "Women and Philosophy" (cited in n. 22, this chapter).

21. "Operative Philosophy," p. 149.

22. The oblique relationship of women to philosophy, a relationship both enabled and encumbered by desire, is perhaps *the* great theme of Le Doeuff's work. The most concise expressions of her views on this subject are in the brilliant "Women and Philosophy."

23. The paper from which these two quotations are taken was later incorporated into chapter 6 of Moi's book *Simone de Beauvoir*. The first quotation is dramatically transformed in the book and reads as follows: "There is in Beauvoir's theory a productive tension between her initial, highly reified concept of alienation, and the more mobile and fluid outcome of the process in the case of little girls. The result is that her theory of female subjectivity is far more interesting and original than her rather too neat and tidy account of male psychological structures" (160). The second is replaced by the following: "There are strong biographical reasons for Beauvoir's misguided admiration of the male (unconscious idealization of the father, admiration for Sartre, and so on), yet the main rhetorical source of Beauvoir's touching confidence in the penis would seem to be metaphorical." (162).

24. I do not mean to deny either that "biographical reasons" are sometimes, even often, at the foundation of Beauvoir's views or that the unconscious plays a role—even a very large role—in her work. In *The Philosophical Imagi-*

nary Michèle Le Doeuff convincingly shows how various wishes, desires, and fears often surface in the most rigorous of philosophical texts, in the forms of images, examples, tone, etc.; I see no reason to suspect (a) that Beauvoir inhumanly fails to have such wishes and desires or (b) that her unconscious fails to manifest itself in her work. What I am attempting to draw attention to, rather, is the rapidity with which Beauvoir's critics tend to jump to the conclusion that she is out of control of what she is saying. I am also suggesting that this feature of the reception of *The Second Sex* has to do with the idiosyncratic way, to be explored in this book, in which Beauvoir pioneers the writing of philosophy as a woman.

1. IS FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY A CONTRADICTION IN TERMS?  
FIRST PHILOSOPHY, *THE SECOND SEX*, AND THE THIRD WAVE

1. My use of the word “us” here—and “you” later in this chapter—is meant to signal not that I’m taking a certain audience for granted but that one of my aspirations in this book is precisely to find my audience.
2. The word “honorable” is meant to exclude those who tolerate the feminist intervention in philosophy merely because they lack the power to do anything about it and would scarce risk appearing “politically incorrect” by challenging it publicly.
3. I do not mean to imply that no prefeminist philosophical writings have explored this possibility. Any number of philosophers have implied or argued that women’s bodily constitution prevents them from thinking rigorously; and others—perhaps most famously John Stuart Mill, in his remarkable *Subjection of Women*—have denounced this view. Further, phenomenologists from Hegel to, notably, Merleau-Ponty (in what I would argue in another context is his spectacularly underappropriated work in, especially, *The Phenomenology of Perception*) have at least tacitly and sometimes explicitly worried about the body as, at least, the interface between mind and world. And of course scores of philosophers, even analytic ones, have had their say about the nature of sex and love. What hasn’t been taken seriously—until feminism—is the idea that certain facts about one’s body might have a decisive bearing not only on the state of one’s mind but indeed on what should count as philosophical truth.

4. Robert Pippin, in *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*, examines this growing sense and argues (convincingly, I think) that “postmodernism” represents less a revolt against modernism than a furtherance of it.
5. Various inflections of the idea that Beauvoir contradicts herself are to be found in the work of, for example, Kristana Arp, Toril Moi, and Michèle Le Doeuff (all of whom argue that the contradictions they see in *The Second Sex* are often surprisingly rich and productive), as well as Penelope Deutscher and Mary Evans (who disagree).
6. I am all in favor of political manifestos. My point is that they are surely more effective when they are written for and directed at the public and not at a smallish audience of professional philosophers.
7. As will become clear later in this chapter, I believe that the sort of subliming I’m gesturing at occurs even in the most intractably *antimetaphysical* conceptions of philosophy; to argue philosophically against “metaphysics” ordinarily constitutes the doing of metaphysics. Cressida Heyes, in *Line Drawings*, also gets her bearings in her discussion of many of the issues raised in this chapter (particularly in the concluding discussion of the feminist debate between essentialism and antiessentialism) from Wittgenstein, although her approach and conclusions are importantly different from mine.
8. This is not meant to be an exhaustive list. Influential books in feminist ethics in recent years—not all of which exemplify at every turn the approach I’m worrying about in this section of the chapter—include Rosemary Tong’s *Feminine and Feminist Ethics*, Laurie Shrage’s *Moral Dilemmas of Feminism*, Bat-Ami Bar On’s and Ann Ferguson’s edited collection *Daring to Be Good*, Patrice DiQuinzio’s and Iris Marion Young’s edited collection *Feminist Ethics and Social Policy*, and Virginia Held’s edited collection *Justice and Care*.
9. I will just step over the not irrelevant fact that Rorty is trying to convince us of the need to prophesy in a new idiom by deploying arguments in the old.
10. MacKinnon’s most systematic treatment of sexual harassment is to be found in her book *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*.
11. I want to pass along Hilary Putnam’s observation that an especially interesting instance of such reconception is to be found in Pierre Hadot’s *Philosophy as a Way of Life*.
12. Rorty, p. 236, quoting MacKinnon in *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 126.
13. “Feminists and Philosophy,” p. 59.
14. In addition to Nussbaum, feminist philosophers who take the view that,

to put the point in its mildest form, it's far too early to abandon traditional philosophical methods in favor of specifically feminist strategies include Louise Antony, Helen Longino, and Charlotte Witt, all of whom have articles in the volume of essays that occasions Nussbaum's *New York Review* piece (*A Mind of One's Own*, edited by Antony and Witt). This is not to imply, of course, that such thinkers would second Nussbaum's view in her *New York Review of Books* article; indeed, Antony and Witt are the editors of the volume under review, although Nussbaum excludes their papers (and Longino's) from her attack.

15. I thank both Bill Bracken and Ken Westphal for, independently, helping me put this point this way.

16. *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, pp. 263–264. My attention was drawn to this passage by Michèle Le Doeuff, who quotes it on pp. 189–190 of her “Women and Philosophy.”

17. See, e.g., Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman*; Maria C. Lugones and Spelman, “Have We Got a Theory for You!”; bell hooks, *Talking Back*; Jean Walton, “Re-placing Race in (White) Psychoanalytic Discourse”; Judith Okely, *Simone de Beauvoir*; and Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures*.

18. There is a huge literature on “essentialism” in feminist philosophy and, of course, in philosophy in general. The term “essentialism” (as well as its alter ego “antiessentialism” and its close cousin “social construction”) is not used in any clearly consistent way in feminist debates. I will use the term “essentialism” as I have specified above: to refer to the idea that there is some philosophically pertinent feature that binds all women and makes them different from men.

19. Gilligan's most influential book is *In a Different Voice*.

20. See, e.g., Lorraine Code's *What Can She Know?* and Susan Bordo's “Feminist Skepticism and the ‘Maleness’ of Philosophy.”

21. In chapter 2 of this project, I will look at Simone de Beauvoir's diagnosis, or what I read as her diagnosis, of why it is hard to do, why it is hard to talk about “the woman question,” as it was termed in her day, without making metaphysical claims right and left.

22. My goal here is not, of course, to provide a careful explication or evaluation of Butler's views. This means, regrettably, that there will be no room in my brief consideration of Butler to discuss the enormously important galvanizing effect she has had in, particularly, queer studies. What I have to say about Butler will be limited here to how her work helps us assess the viability

as feminist philosophy of something we might call philosophy of sex and gender.

23. For a thought-provoking discussion of Butler's baffling decision to, as it were, deconstruct rather than ignore the "sex/gender distinction," as it has been called since the publication of Gayle Rubin's watershed essay "The Traffic in Women," see Moi, *What Is a Woman?*, pp. 30–59.

24. See especially chapter 8, "Critically Queer." See also Butler's response to the criticism that her thinking has the paradoxical effect of undercutting the idea that "women" are oppressed in "Response to Bordo's 'Feminist Skepticism and the 'Maleness' of Philosophy'"; and see also the following note.

25. See, e.g., Bordo, "Feminist Skepticism and the 'Maleness' of Philosophy." The Butler article cited in the previous note is a rejoinder to this essay.

26. The translation of the last clause is Toril Moi's. The French reads: "*cette vérité constitue le fond sur lequel s'enlèvera toute autre affirmation.*"

27. From "Une interview de Simone de Beauvoir par Madeleine Chapsal" in Francis and Gontier, p. 385. My translation. For more on Beauvoir's use of the word "situation" (*situation* in French), see chapters 5 through 7.

28. *La Force des Choses*, 1:257. My translation.

## 2. I AM A WOMAN, THEREFROM I THINK: THE SECOND SEX AND THE MEDITATIONS

1. Francis and Gontier, p. 471. My translation. This is part of a speech Beauvoir delivered in Japan in 1966. An English translation of this speech appears under the title "Women and Creativity" in *French Feminist Thought*, edited by Toril Moi, pp. 17–32.

2. The French reads: "*Un grand cri rageur, la révolte d'une âme blessée, ils l'auraient accueilli avec une condescendance émue; ne me pardonnant pas mon objectivité, [mes lecteurs masculins] feignaient de ne pas y croire. Par exemple, je m'en pris à une phrase de Claude Mauriac parce qu'elle illustre l'arrogance du premier sexe: 'm'en veut-elle?' s'est-il demandé. De rien: je n'en voulais qu'aux mots que je citais*" (*La Force des Choses* 1:263–264).

3. See, e.g., *A Pitch of Philosophy*, especially chapter 1, "Philosophy and the Arrogation of Voice."

4. This accusation drives, for example, Elizabeth Spelman's "Simone de Beauvoir and Women: Just Who Does She Think 'We' Is?"
5. Toril Moi, whose command of the secondary literature on Beauvoir is unparalleled, reports that "the great majority of American feminists criticize Beauvoir for being male-identified in some way or other, and for failing to appreciate the virtues of women" (*Simone de Beauvoir* 182). In fact, despite a consensus that *The Second Sex* is the founding document of modern feminism, any number of commentators have criticized its depiction of women. The British writer Stevie Smith, for example, said of Beauvoir in an early review of the English translation of the book: "She has written an enormous book about women and it is soon clear that she does not like them, nor does she like being a woman" (602–603; this remark is quoted in Deirdre Bair's introduction to the 1989 Vintage edition of *The Second Sex*, p. xiv). Mary Evans, a British sociologist and author of a well-known study on Beauvoir, now more than a dozen years old, has written that "whilst de Beauvoir claims that much of her work is concerned with the overall condition of women, she turns away from many of the issues which are central to women's lives" (*Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Mandarin* 395). The idea that Beauvoir exalts men above women is also to be found in an influential book on feminist philosophy by Jean Grimshaw; see her *Philosophy and Feminist Thinking*, pp. 45–46.
6. In highlighting this important role that the female body plays in *The Second Sex*, I mean to take issue directly with those of Beauvoir's contemporary readers who claim that Beauvoir undervalues women's bodies, although I do not elaborate on this challenge here. For a different way of defending Beauvoir along these lines, see Debra Bergoffen's argument in *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir* that the central philosophical achievement of *The Second Sex* is a reexamination and revalorization of sexual reciprocity. See also Moi's powerful argument in *What Is a Woman?* (59–83) for the claim that Beauvoir's understanding of the body as a "situation" is central to her achievements in *The Second Sex*. (In chapter 4 I briefly touch on Sartre's use of this term and in chapters 5 through 7 I discuss its metamorphosis in Beauvoir's writing from her early philosophical works through *The Second Sex*.)
7. Examples of feminist philosophers who are critical of Descartes, in addition to Susan Bordo, whose work I'm about to address, include Catharine MacKinnon (see especially chapter 5 of *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*),

Hilary Rose in *Love, Power, and Knowledge*, Jane Flax in “Political Philosophy and the Patriarchal Unconscious,” and Genevieve Lloyd (see especially *The Man of Reason*, pp. 39–50).

8. Bordo’s essay, published in 1986, was distilled from a late draft of a larger project, published in book form the following year under the title *The Flight to Objectivity*.

9. In painting this picture Bordo relies particularly heavily on the work of historian Owen Barfield.

10. The classic texts here are Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* and Dinnerstein’s *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*. In using the words “in our culture” I mean simply to gesture at the fact that Chodorow and Dinnerstein take themselves not to be talking about immutable processes but about what happens to boys under certain social configurations.

11. “The Cartesian Masculinization of Thought,” 444. Bordo borrows the phrase “drama of parturition” from José Ortega y Gasset’s *Man and Crisis*.

12. And why not the “female” anymore? The cosmos from which Renaissance man was separated is identified by Bordo as female. In what sense if any was it feminine? Why do men recreate the world as “masculine” and not as male? Bordo does not address these sorts of distinctions.

13. Here I do not mean to be implying that Descartes saw philosophy in these terms; this is, rather, a claim about Descartes’s *legacy*.

14. Bob Scharff, in commenting on an early version of this material, nicely summed up Bordo’s approach to Descartes in identifying it as uncritically “diagnostic” and pointing out its essential aversion to taking Descartes’s experience seriously (i.e., to a phenomenological approach to the *Meditations*).

15. For the biographical material in these paragraphs I am relying on chapter 1 of Bernard Williams’s *Descartes*. For Descartes’s correspondence with Elizabeth of Bohemia, see Andrea Nye, ed., *The Princess and the Philosopher: Letters of Elisabeth of the Palatine to René Descartes*.

16. For instance in the third meditation, on p. 27.

17. The question of what “able” is supposed to mean here is addressed later in this chapter.

18. Hatfield puts Descartes’s aspirations this way: “He was hoping to help the reader discover, through the process of meditation, a source of impersonal, objective judgments that lies hidden in the intellect. The meditator is to sift through his own experience until he arrives at that which compels

assent, and thereby to discover what lies behind the possibility of universal agreement in such subject matters as mathematics and logic” (69–70).

19. As I shall argue at the end of chapter 7, Beauvoir’s conception of objectivity is remarkably close to the one I have attributed to Descartes. In the present chapter I am doing the groundwork to show that this resemblance is not just a mere coincidence. I should observe, however, *pace* correspondence with Bob Scharff, that this formal claim—the claim that objectivity can be seen as a form of subjectivity—leaves open the question not only of what subjectivity is (and here Beauvoir and Descartes will scarcely agree) but also of what sorts of things thinkers can or are likely to come to agree or disagree about.

20. The lines I’m about to cite are from the first and second meditations, pp. 12–23.

21. I am of course compressing the chain of reasoning in meditation 1 here, since the relationship between the dreaming and evil-demon arguments (and how they get overturned as the *Meditations* proceeds) is not directly relevant to my aims here.

22. The view that historians of philosophy have sorely underestimated the importance of the wax example in establishing Descartes’s interest in arguing for the epistemological primacy of the intellect over the imagination and the senses is made vivid and compelling in the work of John Carriero. See “The Second Meditation and the Essence of Mind.”

23. See chapter 3, especially n. 12, for more on Sartre’s interest as a young philosopher in Husserl’s work.

24. In the new wave of critical literature on Beauvoir that has appeared in the last ten years or so, one finds essay after essay aiming to position her philosophy pretty much exclusively in relation to that of Husserl, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. A common view is that Beauvoir is far less philosophically dependent on Sartre and much more indebted to Husserl or Merleau-Ponty than has been assumed. The proliferation of this view is understandable, given the astonishingly small amount of philosophical attention that Beauvoir’s writings were paid until the 1990s. My position, which it is a central goal of this project to express and support, is that identifying Beauvoir’s philosophical forebears and comrades is of less import than articulating her *way* of appropriating other philosophers’ work—a method, I claim, that develops from Beauvoir’s making her womanhood the subject of a philosophical investigation in *The Second Sex*.

25. For Sartre, of course. For more on Beauvoir's attempts to play Sartre's disciple, see chapter 5.
26. *La Force de l'Age*, pp. 253–254. My translation. This passage is to be found in the English translation of this book, *The Prime of Life*, on p. 178.
27. “*La Femme et la Création*,” in Francis and Gontier, p. 471. My translation. An English translation of this speech appears in Moi, *French Feminist Thought*, under the title “Women and Creativity”; the passage I quote here is to be found on pp. 28–29.
28. See chapter 1 for a more sustained discussion of this declaration.
29. Beauvoir makes the same point in a somewhat different way in the third volume of her autobiography: “Far from suffering from my femininity, I have, on the contrary, from the age of twenty on, accumulated the advantages of both sexes; after *She Came to Stay*, those around me treated me both as a writer, their peer in the masculine world, and as a woman; this was particularly noticeable in America; at the parties I went to, the wives all got together and talked to each other while I talked to the men, who nevertheless behaved toward me with greater courtesy than they did toward the members of their own sex. I was encouraged to write *The Second Sex* precisely because of this privileged position” (*The Force of Circumstance* 189).
30. I am hugely indebted to Stanley Cavell for helping me to word my intuitions in this section of this chapter. A central suggestion of his was that I anchor what follows in this discussion with the idea of Beauvoir's question replacing or displacing that of Descartes. In suggesting a relationship between Beauvoir's question and Descartes's, I am fully mindful of the very different roles these questions play for each thinker. My goal is to use the displacement of Descartes's question with Beauvoir's as an *emblem* of her inheritance of and challenge to certain features of his—and thus the male mainstream's—way of doing philosophy.
31. *Treatise*, p. 269.
32. See especially part 4, “Skepticism and the Problem of Others,” e.g., p. 437: “I said there is no general, everyday alternative to skepticism concerning other minds. Now I will say: I live my skepticism.”
33. I thank Bob Scharff for a detailed and very helpful set of comments on an early version of this chapter.

### 3. THE TRUTH OF SELF-CERTAINTY: A RENDERING OF HEGEL'S MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC

1. Beauvoir was the ninth woman—and the youngest person—ever to pass the French *agrégation* (the equivalent of achieving a Ph.D. in philosophy). For a discussion of the significance of these facts see chapter 2 of Toril Moi's *Simone de Beauvoir*. See also Beauvoir's own account of her becoming an accredited philosopher in the fourth book of her *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*.
2. I discuss Beauvoir's denials that she had the wherewithal to do philosophy at greater length in chapter 2. In her lifetime Beauvoir published four more or less straightforwardly philosophical books, two of which (*L'Existentialisme et la Sagesse des Nations* [1948] and *Privilèges* (also published under the title *Faut-il brûler Sade?*[1955]) are collections of essays. Of Beauvoir's two extended straightforwardly philosophical works, the more famous in this country, perhaps because it's the only one of the four books fully translated into English, is *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947); the other is *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* (1944). The *Ethics* and *Pyrrhus* are the focus of chapter 5.
3. The charge that Beauvoir lacked philosophical originality is almost always linked to her loyalty to Jean-Paul Sartre. The question of Beauvoir's philosophical originality is one of the themes under discussion in *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, edited by Margaret Simons, a collection of critical essays mostly by philosophers. See my review of this volume in the feminist philosophical journal *Hypatia*.
4. Mary Evans, for example, criticizes Beauvoir for her “uncritical belief in what she describes as rationality, her negation and denial of various forms of female experience, and her tacit assumption that paid work and contraception are two keys to the absolute freedom of womankind,” all of which suggest that Beauvoir stands for “a set of values that place a major importance on living like a childless, rather singular, employed man” (in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Mandarin*, pp. 56–57). I discuss the issue of Beauvoir's supposed “masculinism” in chapter 2.
5. One of the readers engaged by Columbia University Press to evaluate the manuscript of this book took me to task for my “continuous references to the arguments that Beauvoir is a mere echo of Sartre and to the claims that Beauvoir is not doing philosophy,” which, it was claimed, “dates the manuscript” since “these debates are no longer current.” This reader suggested that instead of situating myself “as someone who is saving Beauvoir from these attacks,” I

should “acknowledge that Beauvoir has already been saved; that she has successfully been reclaimed by philosophers.” This is something that I cannot acknowledge, however, because of my sense both that the vast majority of philosophers, male and female, feminist and otherwise, continue not to take Beauvoir seriously and that this failure has to do at least in part with something internal to Beauvoir’s writing, so that the question of her status as a philosopher—like the question of the philosophical status of the writings of Nietzsche, or of the later Wittgenstein—will perpetually be an issue: a genuine appreciation of her philosophical significance will require continued fresh acts of appropriation of her work. It follows that I do not see myself as someone who is saving Beauvoir from attacks, although of course I find these attacks both regrettable and ungrounded—if not surprising.

6. Sartre refers to “Hegel’s failure” on, for example, p. 338 of *Being and Nothingness*. I discuss his use of this term at greater length in chapter 4.

7. Note that I am not claiming, as Richard Rorty does, that what’s valuable about such an idiom is (just) that it provides for *political* change. As I said in my discussion of Rorty in chapter 1, I’m all for political change. But the point I’m making here is that, as I read Beauvoir, she is attracted to those texts in the history of philosophy whose terms and concepts allow her to do her own *philosophical* work. (For the record, let me note again that perhaps no piece of philosophical writing, if I can identify Beauvoir’s magnum opus as such, has had a more massive and positive political impact than *The Second Sex*.)

8. There is a list of these works in n. 2 of the present chapter.

9. I thereby disappoint Ken Westphal, who is convinced that if I were to do so, I would see how uncannily *The Second Sex* maps on to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*.

10. The notes are published under the title *Introduction à la Lecture de Hegel*. The English translation of the notes was published in 1969 under the title *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*.

11. The first volume of Hyppolite’s translation of the *Phenomenology* was published in 1939; the second in 1941. For more on the history of the reception of Hegel before and during this period, see Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, especially p. 56; Vincent Descombes, especially chapter 1; and Judith Butler’s *Subjects of Desire*, especially chapter 2.

12. *Being and Nothingness* had begun to take shape in 1933–34, a year Sartre spent in Berlin studying the philosophy of Edmund Husserl at the French Institute. In Beauvoir’s notorious version of the story of Sartre’s first encounter

with Husserlian phenomenology (in *The Prime of Life*, the second volume of her autobiography), we find Sartre turning “pale with emotion” as Raymond Aron, himself at the time studying Husserl at the French Institute, sang the master’s praises during a round of drinks: “You see, my dear fellow, if you are a phenomenologist, you can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!” (112). Beauvoir reports that Sartre instantly went out to the Boulevard Saint-Michel and purchased a copy of Emmanuel Lévinas’s book on Husserl and soon after “took the necessary steps to succeed Aron at the French Institute.”

13. *Prime of Life*, p. 363.

14. The quotation is from Eva Lundgren-Gothlin, *Sex and Existence*, p. 273, n. 16. For informed speculation on Beauvoir’s interest in Hegel, see Michèle Le Doeuff’s “Simone de Beauvoir: Falling into (Ambiguous) Line.”

15. Unless there is an indication to the contrary, quotations from the *Phenomenology* are from the Miller translation.

16. The fact that it’s not obvious what Hegel means by “moment” is treated as a philosophical opportunity, as we shall see later, by both Sartre and Beauvoir.

17. It’s tempting for anyone familiar with Hegel’s method in the *Phenomenology* to read these three moments as “dialectically” related. That is, one might be inclined to read the third moment as a product of the inherent tension between the first two: in primary self-consciousness the “I” is seen as independent and absolute; in secondary self-consciousness it’s seen to be dependent on independent objects; in tertiary self-consciousness this tension is negotiated and resolved. But even if something like this is right, there’s still the question of how to understand, as it were, just who this self-conscious being is and how the dialectic actually plays itself out. These are the interpretive issues that intrigue both Sartre and Beauvoir, albeit in (as I will argue) quite different ways.

18. I am grateful to Frederick Neuhouser for pointing out to me in conversation that my way of rendering this part of the dialectic is somewhat at odds with the—or at least a—standard reading of Hegel, in which the desire for objective self-certainty predates the encounter with the other self-consciousness. On the standard reading, what spurs this desire—or better, perhaps, what determines the form this desire takes—is the history of failure on the part of primary self-consciousness to satisfy its desires permanently. The satisfaction achieved after each individual act of consumption evanesces,

which goads primary self-consciousness to desire the ultimate object—one, that is, whose satisfactions would never wane. On the reading I am offering, however (which, again, is the rendering of the dialectic I believe to be most suited to illuminating Sartre's and Beauvoir's appropriations of it), primary self-consciousness does not yearn for anything other than its transient satisfactions until it encounters another self-conscious being. And I might as well confess that I am not sure where in Hegel's text proponents of the standard reading find evidence for their interpretation. (But see n. 27 below.) I am very grateful for an extremely detailed set of comments on an early version of this chapter from Ken Westphal and hope he will forgive me for persisting in bucking this standard reading of Hegel's conception of pre-self-conscious desire. (For Westphal's own detailed views, see his *Hegel's Epistemological Realism*.) I am encouraged in my iconoclasm by the highly suggestive work of Bill Bracken on desire and recognition; see his *Becoming Subjects*.

19. In chapter 4, I will argue that this wish actually governs Sartre's appropriation of Hegel's picture of self-consciousness

20. A main goal of chapter 7 is to support this claim.

21. Hegel's word for what I'm calling "overcoming" is the famous *aufheben*, often translated as the neologistic word "sublate." Most famously, the dialectical movement in the *Phenomenology* transpires according to Hegel via sublation, a process whereby a certain tension (between, say, a general theory and specific facts) is overcome, though the elements in tension are somehow preserved, in transformed form, precisely through this overcoming.

22. In chapters 5 through 7, I demonstrate how Beauvoir, in the wake of this gap, is struggling unsuccessfully in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to show how what she identifies as genuinely moral human relationships are possible, a project that gets off the ground, in my view, only in *The Second Sex*. In any event, the idea that the outcome of the encounter with the other is, at best, ambiguous and that this ambiguity has important moral implications plays a central role in Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel.

23. The paradoxical nature of the mediating role of the other, who provides the only means for the objective confirmation of another being's being-for-itself precisely through regarding that being as an object, will also predominate in Beauvoir's (but not Sartre's) appropriation of the dialectic.

24. Kojève, *Introduction*, p. 12. This English translation by James Nichols matches Kojève's French practically word for word.

25. I was tempted in writing what follows to use male pronouns to denote

the master and female pronouns to denote the slave for three reasons: (1) for clarity's sake; (2) because the terms "master" and "slave" are metaphors borrowed by Hegel from actual human relationships, so that calling either figure an "it" at this stage would be jarring—which may be why Hegel begins using the personal pronoun ("he," exclusively, of course) at this juncture; and (3) to anticipate Beauvoir's appropriation of the dialectic. At heart, of course, I was faced with the usual problem of how to use third-person pronouns in what was supposed (by me, if not by Hegel) to be a sex-neutral context. But to address this problem by sexing the slave female would be in effect to deny exactly what I claimed in chapter 2 is Beauvoir's ground-breaking intervention in the philosophical tradition, an intervention, I meant and mean to suggest, that implies that (as I have put it) we cannot understand the word "man"—or masculine pronouns—in philosophy apart from bringing ourselves to address the question of what a woman is. (That I was tempted to overlook my own discovery—to suppose that I knew what I was talking about in judging Hegel's context "sex-neutral" and that merely making some pronoun switches is enough to render a context sex-neutral is—I hope—a sign of just how hard it is to appropriate the work of Beauvoir.) Therefore, in what follows of my rendering of Hegel (which, again, is supposed to be *just* a rendering) I use masculine pronouns to denote both the master and the slave.

26. This idea of the morally advantageous position of the slave is, as I've already mentioned, important for Beauvoir's appropriation of Hegel. For Sartre, on the other hand, I will claim, what's of interest in the master-slave dialectic culminates in the idea of a fight to the death between two subjectively self-certain beings, so that he sees no need to concern himself with the dialectic from this point on. This means that for him the question of which position, master or slave, is morally advantageous doesn't even arise. In stopping before this morally momentous section of the master-slave dialectic—before the most dramatic exercise of freedom—Sartre misses what's most compelling, even by his own standards, in Hegel's depiction of a being's struggle to find a measure of stability in its conception of itself as being-for-itself. I have much more to say about these matters in chapter 4.

27. Perhaps Hegel's use of the concept of permanence here is what encourages supporters of the standard reading I referred to in n. 18 above.

28. This is of course the moment of the master-slave dialectic that will most excite and exercise the young Marx, who will use it to develop his view that labor is at the heart of our "species-being" and to denounce the abstractness

of Hegel's formulation of this insight. See, e.g., his "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," especially the section entitled "Estranged Labor." (See Tucker, pp. 66–125.)

29. The French is *esclavage*.

#### 4. THE CONDITIONS OF HELL: SARTRE ON HEGEL

1. This way of phrasing things—and it's not unique in this respect—is no doubt traceable to Heidegger, whose influence on Sartre's way of appropriating the master-slave dialectic, while central, is also beyond the scope of my project.

2. Why this is so—why "vice" and "curiosity" have dropped out of the picture as motives—is a question I'll address later in this chapter.

3. I will follow the conventions of Sartre's translator, Hazel Barnes, in capitalizing his term "Other" and both italicizing and capitalizing his term "*Ego*." These conventions will be useful in distinguishing Sartre's notion of "other" from Hegel's and his notion of "ego" from Freud's.

4. Here, of course, Sartre is piggybacking on Heidegger's conception of authenticity in *Being and Time*. For more on the relationship between Sartre's conception of *shame* and Heidegger's conception of *guilt*, see the following note.

5. Anyone familiar with *Being and Time* will notice Sartre's pointed indebtedness to Heidegger in this passage, especially in the direct borrowing, so to speak, of the idea that human beings are primordially "fallen." (Heidegger will go out of his way to *deny* the association of being fallen with the biblical myth of Adam and Eve—but it is a complicated denial.) What distinguishes Sartre's view from Heidegger's is not only his substitution of the concept of *shame* for Heidegger's *guilt* (*Schuld*) but, more relevantly for my purposes, his insistence that to be "fallen" is not only to be "thrown" à la *Being and Time* into a particular life situation but also to "need the mediation of the Other in order to be what I am." For Sartre, in effect, every encounter with the Other is an encounter with what Heidegger calls *das Man*, the "they": it is not just that I am *seduced*, as Heidegger puts it, by *das Man* but that I recognize myself to *be* the object that I am in the Other's—*any* Other's—eyes. Like Sartre, Beauvoir will resist Heidegger's efforts to banish the subject-

object duality from our ontology. But, as I will argue in chapters 5 through 7, she will in effect make a philosophical career of denying that the Other's mediating role in my being what I am must take the form of degradation, fixedness, or dependence.

6. While my goal in discussing Sartre's views in this detail is to contrast the pessimism and even paranoiac qualities of his views with the optimism and hope of Beauvoir's, it would be perverse of me to fail to acknowledge the interest of much of what Sartre says about love. It strikes me that the paradox Sartre identifies here is a close cousin of the one Groucho Marx hit upon in his old line about not wanting to be a member of any club that would want him as a member; in both instances, a certain familiar horror of suffocation, automatism, and lack of recognition is evoked.

7. Sartre refers on p. 491 to what he calls "the triple destructibility of love." I have just rehearsed the first and, to my mind, most compelling argument Sartre adduces in support of his view that (what he calls) love "holds . . . the seeds of its own destruction" (491). This first argument, to be more specific, is the only one that concerns itself with what is internal to Sartre's depiction of the love relationship. The other two arguments have to do with contingent circumstances, and I'll therefore just mention them here. The second reason love is bound to fail, Sartre says, is that I am always conscious of the fact that at any moment the Other may stop loving me and may regard me, again, as just another object in his universe. And the third reason that love is unstable as a relation with others (a reason Sartre discusses at some length on pp. 490–491) is that if my lover and I are the object of a third person's Look then my lover (and myself) are once again instantly fixed as objects, in the eyes of all three of us.

8. See the example of the homosexual (an example any contemporary person of decent sensibilities will now find problematic, to say the least) on pp. 107–108.

9. In 1983, three years after Sartre's death, his adopted daughter, Arlette Elkaim-Sartre, published two of the twelve *Notebooks for an Ethics* that Sartre worked on from roughly 1947–48 (not coincidentally, as we shall see, the period during which Beauvoir was beginning to write *The Second Sex*). For an interesting discussion of the *Notebooks* in relation to *Being and Nothingness*, see Thomas Anderson's *Sartre's Two Ethics*, especially chapters 2 through 5.

10. Because the locus of objectivity isn't always in me, it follows, as Sartre is eager throughout *Being and Nothingness* to insist, that his picture is not

strictly speaking solipsistic, in the way that his teacher Husserl's system (as articulated in, e.g., *Cartesian Meditations*) is often thought to be.

11. The other important text of this period is the novel *Nausea*, in which Sartre explores the epistemological ramifications of his metaphysics. While, as will be seen, these ramifications are far from irrelevant to my purposes, the play *No Exit* is more pertinent to my central task of trying to understand Sartre's take on Hegel. The explicit philosophical underpinnings of both of these literary works are amply developed in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre's earlier philosophical works, most of which were either polemics against his teacher Husserl's way of doing phenomenology (especially in *Cartesian Meditations*) or incipient attempts to lay out a philosophical psychology grounded in a radical rejection of Freud's idea of the unconscious are, as it were, dialectically incorporated or otherwise sublated in *Being and Nothingness*. These early works include *The Transcendence of the Ego*, *The Emotions*, and *The Psychology of Imagination*.

12. The English translation of *Huis clos* (which is an expression meaning "closed door" and is used almost exclusively to refer to "in camera" juridical proceedings) strays rather far from Sartre's prose in its attempt to make his characters believable to an English-speaking audience. While the drama of the play is magnificently rendered in the English version, the translation's lack of literalness poses a problem for anyone interested in Sartre's specific word choices. I therefore modify the translation as needed and indicate when I am so doing. In this passage I make a simple change in punctuation: the translator's final ellipsis is replaced by Sartre's period.

13. That the eye is an enormously important symbol for Sartre is evidenced not only in *Being and Nothingness*, in which, of course, it is the instrument of "the Look," but also in numerous scenes in *No Exit*, as when Estelle reminds Garcin, "You will be under my eyes constantly" (77), or Inès accuses Estelle of needing "the desire of a man in the eyes of a man" (84), or Inès taunts Garcin by declaring, "I am nothing but the look that sees you" (91), or Garcin refers to "all these looks that eat me up" (93; all citations from the French and all my translation).

14. There is no doubt that the task of proving that something—specifically, one's very sense of oneself—is not a dream is a reference to Descartes in the *Meditations*. I discuss a further connection between Cartesian skepticism and Sartre's appropriation of Hegel later in this chapter.

15. My translation of Sartre's response to a question posed to him in an in-

terview as quoted in Contat and Rybalka, pp. 238–239, and in Noudelmann, pp. 194–196.

16. I would not be displeased were this account also to suggest certain connections between Freud's work and that of Hegel; but on this front I will pretty much let Freud's text speak for itself. Moi also finds Freud's "On Narcissism" useful in understanding what she calls "the primary structuring fantasy" of *Being and Nothingness*; see *Simone de Beauvoir*, p. 105.

17. Much has been made, especially in the wake of Jacques Lacan's readings of Freud's work (see, e.g., Lacan's *Seminar*, book 1, pp. 129–142), of the somewhat confusing use Freud makes in "On Narcissism" of the terms "ego ideal" and "ideal ego," an example of which is to be found in the passage from "On Narcissism" I'm about to cite. For my purposes, exploring this distinction is beside the point; and for simplicity's sake I will consistently use the term "ideal ego."

18. This set of ideas evolves in Freud's work in the decade or so following "On Narcissism" into the concept of the superego. See, e.g., the second chapter of *The Ego and the Id* (1923).

19. Freud adds, provocatively enough for my purposes: "The complaints made by paranoiacs also show that at bottom the self-criticism of conscience coincides with the self-observation on which it is based. Thus the activity of the mind which has taken over the function of conscience has also placed itself at the service of internal research, which furnishes philosophy with the material for its intellectual operations. This may have some bearing on the characteristic tendency of paranoiacs to construct speculative systems" (96).

20. For Sartre's polemic against Freud and his attempt to develop an alternative psychoanalysis, see, e.g., *Existential Psychoanalysis* and also pp. 727ff. of *Being and Nothingness* (section 2 ["'Doing' and 'Having': Possession"]) of chapter 2 ["Doing and Having"] of part 4 ["Having, Doing, and Being"].

21. Sartre explicitly makes such a connection between the Look and the cogito. See, e.g., p. 376: "What the *cogito* reveals to us here is just factual necessity: it is found—and this is indisputable—that our being along with its being-for-itself is also for-others; the being which is revealed to the reflective consciousness is for-itself-for-others. The Cartesian *cogito* only makes an affirmation of the absolute truth of a *fact*—that of my existence. In the same way the *cogito*, a little expanded as we are using it here, reveals to us as a fact the existence of the Other and my existence for the Other."

22. The idea that we ought to take seriously Descartes's fear of madness and

to link it with his expression of skepticism is articulated and studied throughout Stanley Cavell's philosophical work. See e.g., "Being Odd, Getting Even" and part 2 of *The Claim of Reason*.

23. In another context, in fact, I would be inclined to flesh out this claim by contrasting the abstract inexorability of *Being and Nothingness* with the political grounding of certain of Sartre's later pieces of writing. I would like to imagine, of course, that the shift I'm positing in Sartre's understanding of how to do philosophy had much to do with his appreciation of Beauvoir's philosophical achievements in *The Second Sex*.

##### 5. READING BEAUVOIR READING HEGEL: PYRRHUS ET CINÉAS AND THE ETHICS OF AMBIGUITY

1. Robert D. Cottrell in his book on Beauvoir provides another example of this reading. What he calls "the two slender postulates" on which the "mammoth edifice" that is *The Second Sex* rests "are enunciated in the introduction and are derived from concepts elaborated by Sartre in *L'Être et le Néant*, a book to which Beauvoir frequently refers as if to a sacred text whose validity and authority no right thinking person could question. 'The perspective I am adopting,' she announces at the end of the introduction, 'is that of existentialist ethics'" (95).

2. It is of course true that Sartre often alludes in *Being and Nothingness* to the fundamental absurdity of our lives. This implies that the idea that we are not "justified" is at the heart of his philosophy. But my point is that Sartre is not *interested* in the problem, as it were, of justification; and he certainly does not make justification a central issue in his early work. Beauvoir, on the other hand, is centrally concerned with this problem in both *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. (My thanks to Ken Westphal for encouraging me to address this matter here.)

3. Toril Moi also interprets Beauvoir's use of the term "existentialist *ethics*" as signaling Beauvoir's investment in her own earlier works, particularly *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. See *Simone de Beauvoir*, pp. 148–150ff.

4. Céline T. Léon, in "Beauvoir's Woman," for example, argues that "not only does Beauvoir take her cues directly from Sartre's nauseous distaste of a

world whose grasp eludes him, but she indirectly accepts as given the binarities [sic] of Oedipal culture—man/woman, activity/passivity, culture/nature. Notwithstanding all protestations to the contrary, her desire remains based on a lack, a stasis, and she never moves away from the cultural stereotypes she attacks” (145–146).

5. For essays tracing Beauvoir’s thought to that of Husserl, see Karen Vintges, “*The Second Sex* and Philosophy,” and Eleanore Holveck, “Can a Woman Be a Philosopher?” For those tracing her thought to Merleau-Ponty’s, see Sonia Kruks, “Simone de Beauvoir” and Kristana Arp, “Beauvoir’s Concept of Bodily Alienation.” I discuss the tendency to link Beauvoir’s name with those of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty in a somewhat different light in chapter 2.

6. Le Doeuff, “Simone de Beauvoir: Falling into (Ambiguous) Line,” p. 64. All Le Doeuff quotations in this section are from this source. In a recent book whose relative popularity reveals just how much work remains to be done in the difficult task of judging the relationship of *The Second Sex* to the work of Sartre, Kate and Edward Fullbrook write from the bafflingly illogical stance that a condition of Beauvoir’s being an original thinker must be her having invented Sartrean existentialism; and they try to show how all the important points from Sartre’s one-thousand-page book are captured in the first sixteen pages of *L’Invitée*, from which they claim Sartre shamelessly stole on his leaves from the war.

7. See *La Force des Choses*, 1:98; see *Force of Circumstance*, 1:67. Quoted in Le Doeuff, “Simone de Beauvoir: Falling into (Ambiguous) Line,” p. 64.

8. Bergoffen, “Out from Under: Beauvoir’s Philosophy of the Erotic,” p. 185. All quotations of Bergoffen in this section are from this source. This material is developed in Bergoffen’s book *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*.

9. I discuss Bergoffen’s understanding of Beauvoir’s work in *The Second Sex* as a “philosophy of the erotic” in somewhat more depth in chapter 7.

10. I thank Frederick Neuhouser, as well as Steven Affeldt, Bill Bracken, Bill Bristow, Paul Franks, Arata Hamawaki, and Katalin Makkai for the excellent suggestions they gave me for the improvement of this chapter.

11. All translations are my own. This opening exchange between Pyrrhus and Cineas is from p. 10.

12. It is tempting to see the Beauvoir of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas* as in effect attempting to act out this very fantasy vis-à-vis Sartre. That Beauvoir would have been horrified at this possibility is one measure of the philosophical

shortcomings of *Pyrrhus et Cinéas*, which I will characterize below in rather different terms.

13. See, e.g., the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, especially the second section.

14. I agree with Eva Lundgren-Gothlin (over and against Sara Heinämaa, for one), that *The Second Sex* is deeply indebted to *Being and Time*, although of course I have not made Beauvoir's relationship to Heidegger a central subject of this book. See Lundgren-Gothlin's "Simone de Beauvoir's Existential Phenomenology and Philosophy of History in *Le Deuxième Sexe*" and my "Being-with as Being-against: Heidegger Meets Hegel in *The Second Sex*."

15. The concept of the *appel* is a central one for Heidegger, particularly in *Being and Time*. In unpublished work, Lundgren-Gothlin has written suggestively about the notion of the call or the appeal as Beauvoir uses it in *The Second Sex*. As Moi has pointed out to me in private correspondence, Sartre recurs to the concept of the *appel* in his book *Qu'est-ce que la Littérature (What Is Literature?)* published in 1948, i.e., at the time Beauvoir was working on *The Second Sex*. Here, in marked distinction to his conceptualization of the ontology of human relations, Sartre claims that "to write is to make an appeal to the reader that he lead into objective existence the revelation which I have undertaken by means of language. . . . The writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of the work." I have more to say about the congruity between Sartre's understanding of *writing* as something of a conversation and Beauvoir's understanding of reciprocity (including the reciprocity between a writer and reader) at the end of chapter 7.

16. After reading a draft of this chapter, Paul Franks and Bill Bristow reported to me their sense of a remarkable affinity between Beauvoir's conception of our actions as "appeals" to the Other and Fichte's understanding of human action as "summons" or "invitation." Franks in particular suggested that it's as though Fichte is being rediscovered through Beauvoir via Sartre via Hegel.

17. Obviously, some situations that I have a hand in bringing about will not be, or be seen as, mine. But one needn't take on the hoary topic of intentionality in action, or even of responsibility, in order to appreciate the basic point I'm attributing to Beauvoir here: that human beings are sensitive to the way in which the things they do are subject to the objectifying judgment of other people.

18. This is also Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegel. See, e.g., his *Concluding*

*Unscientific Postscript*, the first volume of *Either-Or*, the first part of *Stages on Life's Way*, and *Fear and Trembling*.

19. Of course, a work's unraveling of itself needn't take the form of a certain self-accusation; I, for one, read both J. L. Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* as hugely philosophically productive exercises in *reductio ad absurdum*. But in both of these instances, I would argue, the undoing of a certain kind of philosophy is meant to have a therapeutic effect, as if to drop scales from our eyes. No reader of *Pyrrhus*, however, would make such a claim on its behalf.

20. See the later parts of this chapter as well as chapter 6 for a discussion of this self-criticism.

21. The only one of these essays ever published in English is "Œil pour Œil," which appeared under the title "Eye for Eye" in the journal *Politics* in 1947. See Francis and Gontier for an excellent annotated bibliography of Beauvoir's writings through 1979.

22. The question was posed by Deirdre Bair. See *Simone de Beauvoir*, pp. 269–270.

23. See, e.g., pp. 104–105 of *Ethics*.

24. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, pp. 17–18. I will occasionally take the liberty of modifying certain passages in the English translation. In such cases, I will as usual use the abbreviation "TM" to indicate that I have done so, and I will reference the appropriate pages in the original French (in this case, p. 26).

25. I'm using capitalization here, even though neither Beauvoir nor the translator of the *Ethics* do, to highlight the fact that these categories are supposed to constitute types of people.

26. See chapter 4 for a brief discussion of Sartre's remarks on love.

27. An example: In trying to show that there are "two ways of surpassing the given," one amounting to a rebellion against limitations on human freedom and the other constituting a mere change of scenery, Beauvoir says: "Hegel has confused these two movements with the ambiguous term 'aufheben'; and the whole structure of an optimism which denies failure and death rests on this ambiguity; that is what allows one to regard the future of the world as a continuous and harmonious development; this confusion is the source and also the consequence; it is a perfect epitome of that idealistic and verbose flabbiness with which Marx charged Hegel and to which he opposed a realistic toughness" (84).

28. I recall Vintges's alluding to Beauvoir's discussion of women in the *Ethics*

in her *Philosophy as Passion*, although I cannot now find the exact passage, which failure perhaps confirms my recollection that Vintges, too, finds this discussion not to be particularly noteworthy.

29. It is in a section of *Being and Nothingness* called “Freedom and Facticity: The Situation” that Sartre implies that “being-a-Jew” is not a situation, that it is, indeed, “nothing outside the free manner of adopting it” (677). (I discuss this remark briefly in chapter 4.) It’s also in this section that he defines the “situation” as something that’s unique from person to person: “There is no absolute point of view which one can adopt so as to compare different situations; each person realizes only one situation—*his own*” (703). Here are two quotations from the part of Beauvoir’s autobiography in which she discusses certain tensions between Sartre’s views and her own: “I remembered how once I had said to Olga [a close friend of hers and of Sartre’s] that there was no such thing as ‘a Jew,’ there were only human beings: how head-in-the-clouds I had been!” (*Prime of Life* 366); and “[Sartre and I] discussed certain specific problems, in particular the relationship between ‘situation’ and freedom. I maintained that from the angle of freedom as Sartre defined it . . . not every situation was equally valid: what sort of transcendence could a woman shut up in a harem achieve? Sartre replied that even such a cloistered existence could be lived in several quite different ways. I stuck to my point for a long time, and in the end made only a token submission. Basically I was right. But to defend my attitude I should have had to abandon the plane of individual, and therefore idealistic, morality on which we had set ourselves” (*Prime of Life* 346).

30. I am grateful, once again, to Steven Affeldt, Bill Bracken, Bill Bristow, Paul Franks, Arata Hamawaki, and Katalin Makkai for getting me to see the irony in Beauvoir’s allegiance to Sartre in her early philosophical work.

## 6. THE SECOND SEX AND THE MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC

1. Judith Butler, in “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*,” credits Beauvoir for inventing the idea of a radical distinction between (biological) sex and (constructed) gender. This credit is not exactly a form of praise. See Moi, *What Is a Woman?*, pp. 30–57 for a helpful assessment of Butler’s fateful reading of Beauvoir. For essays accusing Beauvoir of an insidi-

ous reliance on biology in her definition of womanhood, see, e.g., both Charlene Haddock Seigfried, “Second Sex, Second Thoughts,” and Elaine Hoffman Baruch, “The Female Vagabond and the Male Mind.”

2. Karen Vintges attributes the mass of facts and details in *The Second Sex* to Beauvoir’s interest in existential phenomenology—that is, to the philosophical methods of (in particular) Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and, of course, Sartre, methods Vintges claims are inspired by what she calls “Hegel’s empirical phenomenology of history” (*Philosophy as Passion* 142; and see all of chapter 9). Put in simple terms, phenomenologists work from the inside out: they start from their experience and work from it to philosophical insights. Vintges understands Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* to be starting with women’s experience, particularly her own; “us[ing] elements from the thinking of various philosophers”; and then “systematiz[ing] them into a specific theoretical perspective, a reconciliation of existentialism and ethics” (146). My project might be seen as an attempt to specify what exactly “systematization” and “reconciliation” come to in *The Second Sex* and why one might find Beauvoir’s method of philosophical appropriation to have its own interest, both feminist and philosophical. (I note here, too, that Vintges and I agree that the standard reading of Beauvoir’s relationship to Hegel, on which she just maps relations between men and women onto the master-slave dialectic is untenable. In Vintges’s words, “Beauvoir’s theory deviates on essential points from the Hegelian system.” Vintges further observes, quite astutely, that the feminist standpoint theory that developed in the wake of *The Second Sex* has been driven in many of its incarnations by exactly the sort of clichéd Hegelian picture that both she and I fail to find in Beauvoir’s work.)

3. I would argue that Beauvoir’s first published novel, *L’Invitée* (1943, i.e., six years before the appearance of *The Second Sex*), also suffers from what I have identified here as a lack of grounding in the ordinary. Beauvoir in effect simply places her central characters, Françoise and Xavière, in a theory-driven, book-long Sartrean-style fight to the death: incredibly, Françoise actually kills Xavière at the end. (The fight that leads to Xavière’s demise is in fact so Sartrean that Kate and Edward Fullbrook were inspired to convince themselves that Beauvoir beat Sartre, who was simultaneously working on *Being and Nothingness* to the existentialist punch; see their *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre*.) In a chapter on *L’Invitée* in her book *Simone de Beauvoir*, Toril Moi proposes that “if *L’Invitée* is a melodramatic novel [as she thinks it is], it is above all because existentialism is a melodramatic philosophy” (99). My

slightly different view is that the melodrama of *L'Invitée* is a product of Beauvoir's not yet having found a way to square her desire to chronicle the everyday with her investment in the philosophical ideas she is just beginning to explore in her novel—and especially those she inherits from Hegel, who supplies its epigraph: “Each consciousness seeks the death of the other.” See Moi's *Simone de Beauvoir*, chapter 4. For Beauvoir's own later criticism of the “contrived” nature (in Beauvoir's words) of *L'Invitée*, see *The Prime of Life*, pp. 268–274).

4. This is one of the many places in which the extent of my debt to Toril Moi is difficult to acknowledge adequately. Having come back to *The Second Sex* for the first time since I had started my philosophical training, I was overwhelmed with a sense of the importance of Hegel for Beauvoir but also was disconcerted by the relative paucity of work on the Hegelian aspects of *The Second Sex*. When Moi learned of my interest in the subject, she asked Eva Lundgren-Gothlin to send me the page proofs for the English translation of *Sex and Existence*, still at the time available only in Swedish. I found the two chapters Lundgren-Gothlin generously sent me, one called “Hegel and Kojève” and the other “The Master-Slave Dialectic in *The Second Sex*,” enormously galvanizing, and I am deeply grateful to her for allowing me an advance look at this work. In the time since I began work on the present chapter, not only *Sex and Existence* but also two other serious philosophical studies of Beauvoir, by Vintges and Bergoffen, have appeared. The latter two books both acknowledge Beauvoir's interest in Hegel, although his place in her thinking does not play an especially prominent role in either work.

5. In fact, what Lundgren-Gothlin says in spelling out what it means to enter into the dialectic is that women have neither demanded recognition nor participated in work. But on the rendering of Hegel that I provided in chapter 3, participating in work is not a *prerequisite*, per se, for “entering into” the dialectic, although it is necessary for its progression (and self-surpassing). Still, I agree with Lundgren-Gothlin that part of Beauvoir's appropriation of the dialectic involves the way in which she construes both the need for women to work and indeed what “work” will mean in this context.

6. Lundgren-Gothlin helpfully cites several examples of critical essays insisting that Beauvoir's Hegel is Sartre's and that this is a problem with *The Second Sex*. See pp. 275–276, n. 2.

7. This idea of reciprocal recognition, while obviously signaling the influence of Hegel is, Lundgren-Gothlin claims, “mediated via the French tradi-

tion of Hegelianism, and particularly by the interpretation of Kojève” (67). My rendering of the master-slave dialectic in chapter 3 is of course predicated on the same claim. Lundgren-Gothlin herself provides a rendering of the dialectic in “Hegel and Kojève,” chapter 3 of her book *Sex and Existence*.

8. In order to get to the part of this paragraph I am most interested in highlighting, I am here deleting two or three more of Beauvoir’s examples of how people have regarded the “foreign,” “different,” “native,” etc., as “others,” as well as an appeal to Lévi-Strauss’s *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*.

9. This is Heidegger’s signature term for the idea, to put it crudely, that a basic fact about what it is to be a human being is that one is “with” other human beings. Beauvoir’s investment in the concept of *Mitsein*, which appears repeatedly throughout *The Second Sex* demands further study from those who care about their work. Lundgren-Gothlin, in “Simone de Beauvoir’s Existential Phenomenology,” makes a valuable start on this project; she argues that Beauvoir’s concept of ambiguity turns on her appropriation of Heidegger’s notion of *Mitsein* and of disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*). See also my “Being-with as Being-against: Heidegger Meets Hegel in *The Second Sex*.”

10. The verb *se poser*, which I’m rendering “to pose,” is the French cognate of the German *sich setzen*, ordinarily translated in English as “self-positing.” *Sich setzen* is the term coined by Fichte—and appropriated by Hegel—to describe the distinctive activity of subjectivity. This implies that one of the questions about what it is to “pose” as a subject is a question about how Beauvoir’s *se poser* is to be read against Hegel’s *sich setzen*. I am grateful to Frederick Neuhouser for alerting me to this implication, which is obviously centrally relevant to my project of exploring Beauvoir’s appropriation of Hegel’s writing.

11. I am for the moment postponing certain obvious questions here, among them those about what it is to “pose” as a subject, how claims to recognition are lodged, and what recognition and reciprocity look like.

12. Beauvoir uses the lowercase (“other”) to denote the nonabsolute or relative other and the uppercase (“Other”) to denote the absolute other—i.e., to denote woman.

13. See, e.g., Lundgren-Gothlin’s argument on pp. 71–74 of *Sex and Existence*.

14. In a note to this passage (276, n. 7), Lundgren-Gothlin provides a list of scholars who argue that in *The Second Sex* Beauvoir suggests that woman plays slave to man’s master. There is plenty of evidence in *The Second Sex* for Lundgren-Gothlin’s claim that Beauvoir characterizes women as acknowledg-

ing men's claims for recognition without a struggle. One need look no further than the beginning of part 3 of the first book of *The Second Sex*, entitled "Myths," in which, as Lundgren-Gothlin puts it, "the basic elements of the Hegelian master-slave dialectic in Kojève's interpretation are recapitulated" (69). It is in these pages, for example, that Beauvoir warns that "to assimilate the woman to the slave is an error. There were women among the slaves, but there have always been women who are free, that is to say, invested with a religious and social dignity. They accepted the sovereignty of the man and he did not feel threatened (*menacé*) by a revolt that could transform him in his turn into an object. The woman thus appeared as the inessential who never turns back (*retourne*) into the essential, as the absolute Other, without reciprocity" (141, TM; *LDS* 1:239).

15. The reference to "existentialist ethics" occurs on p. xxxiv; the other quotation, the translation of which I have modified, on p. xxxv (*LDS* 1:31). I discuss Beauvoir's use of the phrase "existentialist ethics" in chapter 5.

16. A number of Beauvoir's critics in recent years have vigorously denied that her depiction of these variations is adequate, and they have faulted her, specifically, for what they regard as her white, middle-class, Eurocentric bias, a bias they say casts serious doubts on her claim that we can talk about a single and singular "woman's" situation. This criticism rests largely on an underinterpreted—that is, insufficiently philosophical—conception of what Beauvoir means by "situation." If you take the view that in surveying women's lives from prehistory to the present Beauvoir aspires (and must aspire) to prove via *empirical evidence* that all cultures have certain concrete elements in common, then of course she will appear not only exclusionary (since needless to say she doesn't discuss all cultures) but even a bit mad—which may be why this criticism is frequently linked with the suggestion that Beauvoir is in some fundamental way out of control of her writing in this text. Again, if you imagine that her bearings are largely empirical, you will be exercised by book 2 of *The Second Sex*, in which Beauvoir takes a more fine-grained look at women's (present-day) lived experience; you will say—and it is often said by her critics—that Beauvoir leaves out certain kinds of experience and particularly the experience of poor women and women of color. For the record, my view, which it is not my purpose to document here, is that given that *The Second Sex* was written fifty years ago Beauvoir is almost unbelievably sensitive to the variety of experiences that women have had throughout history. But, again, if you construe her as trying to make an *empirical*

point about similarities among women's lives, then you predestine yourself to find what she's doing inadequate—as you would find the *Meditations* seriously problematic if you thought that Descartes were trying to doubt all of his knowledge through empirical means alone, on a case-by-case basis. A representative instance of the kind of criticism of Beauvoir I've been contesting in this paragraph is to be found in Spelman's "Simone de Beauvoir and Women."

17. That there is a further specification of what Beauvoir means by "relationship of reciprocity"—namely, the idea that it is something that can be marked by friendship or hostility and that in any event is "always in tension"—will be discussed later in the present chapter.

18. Not surprisingly, then, Lundgren-Gothlin spends a good deal of time on this passage, as will I. Occasionally, I will discuss variations in our responses to it. The passage is to be found in *The Second Sex* on pp. 139–141 and in *Le Deuxième Sexe* in volume I, on pp. 237–239. Most paragraph breaks are mine; I will signal the exceptions in notes. Beauvoir's paragraphs in *The Second Sex* are uncharacteristically long, and they also manifest her (this time characteristic) fondness for connecting lots of clauses with semicolons. (These features alone go a long way in accounting for many readers' sense of the book as messy and unwieldy, but also "breathlessly exciting," as Elizabeth Hardwick puts it [49].) In the long quotation that follows, I have transformed most of Beauvoir's clauses into sentences, and I have inserted paragraph breaks into what is a two-page opening paragraph in the original text.

19. In French as in English, the word for "man" can be used to denote both sexes. I have chosen to use male pronouns here, both for simplicity's sake and because in Beauvoir's view women, insofar as they are women (and what I mean by this will become clearer in the following pages), largely have not participated in the processes Beauvoir is describing.

20. I should perhaps use the pronoun "it" instead of "her" to denote "Nature": Beauvoir would use the pronoun *elle* here regardless of the point she's trying to make, since the French word for "nature" takes the feminine article. On my interpretation of what Beauvoir is trying to do in this passage this coincidence is fortuitous since, as we shall see shortly, she goes on to suggest that men harbor fantasies about appropriating women in the wake of the dissatisfaction and disappointment they experience as a result of their failure to appropriate "Nature" successfully.

21. The phrase "the unhappy consciousness" (which, in a typical instance of

the severe shortcomings of the English translation of *The Second Sex*, is rendered “the unfortunate human consciousness” by the hapless translator Parshley) of course comes right out of Hegel’s *Phenomenology*. As the master-slave dialectic develops, the slave figure becomes conscious of the conflict between his inherent ontological freedom as a thinking subject (the truth of his being “for-itself”) and his quotidian status as a worker (his material life as “in-itself”). His consciousness of this conflict produces the “unhappy consciousness,” a state of mind or spirit in which the slave is, in Robert Pippin’s words, “unable to accept the status of its relation to the world and others, and unable to rest content with its mere ability to demonstrate to itself the unsatisfactory character of its status” (*Hegel’s Idealism* 165). What Beauvoir is describing, then, is an *inner* conflict, the origin and resolution of which, as she will shortly suggest, is the encounter between self and other.

22. Even Lundgren-Gothlin misses this idea; she claims that what Beauvoir says is that reciprocity requires “recognition of one another *as subjects* in friendship and generosity” (my emphasis).

23. This astute translation of *se surmonte* is Lundgren-Gothlin’s.

24. Too, it ought to be obvious that in the background of this idea lies the Hegelian conception of what’s unsatisfying for self-consciousness about the mere consumption of Nature.

25. I’m about to quote what constitutes for Beauvoir the second paragraph of the “Myths” section of *The Second Sex*; this is where she puts the first paragraph break, in other words, of this section. I will here divide this second paragraph into two. For more on my splitting up of Beauvoir’s paragraphs in the long passage I have been examining, see n. 18 above.

26. Until further notice, all quotations from Lundgren-Gothlin are from p. 74 of her text.

27. In chapter 7 I explore Beauvoir’s grounds for the claim that woman is basically an existent who gives Life and does not risk her own life.

28. The verb “*redouter*,” meaning to fear or dread, carries overtones of awe; one might use it, for example, to speak of fear of one’s boss, or of God.

29. Quotations from Lundgren-Gothlin in the present paragraph are from p. 75 of *Sex and Existence*.

30. Lundgren-Gothlin appears not to be taking account of this fact when she writes that woman “has never been an enslaved equal, but has always been an Other.”

31. One can intuit that in those centuries in which the master treated the

slave as an absolute Other, the slave was also an object of fear for the master. Then the question would become: Why and how did the institution of slavery give way for the most part, while the institution, as it were, of misogyny did not? Addressing this question is a central task of chapter 7 of this book.

## 7. THE STRUGGLE FOR SELF IN *THE SECOND SEX*

1. Parshley's translation of these last sentences of the "History" section of book 1 of *The Second Sex* is particularly egregious. Where Beauvoir claims that woman sees and chooses herself [*se choisit*] not "*en tant qu'elle existe pour soi*," Parshley writes that she does so not "in accordance with her true nature in itself"—which is of course the opposite of what Beauvoir means to say. Then when Beauvoir says that we have to go on to describe the way men have dreamed women because "*son être-pour-les-hommes*" is important, Parshley writes that what's crucial is "what-in-men's-eyes-she-seems-to-be"—thereby obscuring any connection between Beauvoir's hyphenated phrase and the term "being-for-others."

2. By "in significant part" I mean to signal that Beauvoir's understanding of women's situation is not confined to those aspects of women's lives that are determined by their relations to men. She claims, for example, that the body itself is a situation (TSS 36). While I address this claim in the present chapter, it is not my aim to give a full analysis of it. (See Moi, *What Is a Woman?*, pp. 59–72, and Julie Ward, "Beauvoir's Two Senses of Body in *The Second Sex*," for more sustained discussions.) Let me stress once again that the purpose of this book is to make a case for the idea that feminist and other philosophers have reason to take an interest in Beauvoir's way of grounding her appropriations of other philosophers' work in her own experience, and particularly her own experience as a woman. I have tried to fulfill this aim by looking at two of Beauvoir's forebears whose influence on her is, I think, particularly underappreciated. But I do not mean to imply that my reading of *The Second Sex* is complete; indeed, for me to claim that it is would be to belie precisely what I find exciting about Beauvoir's philosophical procedures.

3. Those who are inclined to accuse Beauvoir of a certain homophobia at this juncture would do well to remember that her concern in *The Second Sex* is to explore what it means to be a woman and, particularly, how being a

woman differs from being a man. At this juncture she is concerning herself with the asymmetry in men's and women's roles *in reproducing the species* and not with sexual experience in general.

4. Abortion did not become legal in France until 1975; to this day, it is illegal beyond the tenth week of pregnancy. In April 1971, Simone de Beauvoir (along with the writer Marguerite Duras, the actresses Catherine Deneuve and Simone Signoret, and other French celebrities) would sign the so-called "Manifesto of the 343," which said, "A million women have abortions in France each year. Because they are condemned to secrecy, they are aborted under dangerous conditions. If done under medical control, this operation is one of the simplest. These millions of women have been passed over in silence. I declare that I am one of them, I have had an abortion. Just as we demand free access to birth-control methods, we demand freedom to have abortions." See Claudine Monteil, *Simone de Beauvoir*, especially chapter 2, for a fascinating account of the woman's movement in France during this period.

5. See, e.g., Evans, chapter 3.

6. Beauvoir was notorious for her own horror of having and caring for babies. But in interviews, especially toward the end of her life, she was at pains to insist that her own lack of desire to have children did not play a role in her admonishing women to consider carefully the possibility of opting out of motherhood. Tellingly enough, Beauvoir warned that, given the demands placed on mothers in our culture, having children frequently constituted for women a form a slavery. When asked, for example, by Yolanda Patterson in 1985 what advice she would give to women who wanted both to have children and to "maintain their own identity and independence," Beauvoir said, "One must really follow one's deepest desires. Otherwise one feels unfulfilled. . . . But one should be very careful not to become enslaved" (332). And in an interview (one in a famous series) with Alice Schwarzer in 1976 she said, "I think a woman should be on her guard against the trap of motherhood and marriage. Even if she would dearly like to have children, she ought to think seriously about the conditions under which she would have to bring them up, because being a mother these days is real slavery" (73).

7. Beauvoir's use of the notion of alienation in this context itself constitutes an appropriation, namely of the work of Karl Marx and Jacques Lacan (and, for that matter, Sigmund Freud). Even though this ought to be obvious to anyone familiar with the writings of these figures, there is work to be done in

specifying the terms of this appropriation. This is work that Toril Moi (and, to my knowledge, no one else) has undertaken in the sixth chapter of her *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, which is entitled “Ambiguous Women: Alienation and the Body in *The Second Sex*.” Like Lundgren-Gothlin, Moi is troubled by what she sees as a pervasive androcentricity in Beauvoir’s understanding of women’s “immanence.” Like me, she argues that Beauvoir’s writing in *The Second Sex* reflects the splits and contradictions she claims characterize women’s lives, although, as will soon be seen, Moi and I disagree about exactly how these splits and contradictions are reflected. Indeed, readers may well find it useful to compare what I have to say especially on this subject with Moi’s writing on ambiguity and alienation, particularly since I go over much of the ground in *The Second Sex* that she explored first. Moi writes, “If Beauvoir argues that women under patriarchy are torn by conflict and inner strife, the very texture of her book reveals this to be no less true for herself than for other women. *The Second Sex* enacts the very contradictions described by Beauvoir; confirming her analysis, her text also undoes it. The deepest paradox of all is that the most powerful anti-patriarchal text of the twentieth century reads as if it is written by a dutiful daughter only too eager to please the father” (177). (The first volume of Beauvoir’s autobiography, covering roughly the first two decades of her life—through the beginning of her liaison with Jean-Paul Sartre—is entitled *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*.)

Moi traces Beauvoir’s use of the term “alienation” not to Lacan and Marx, but to Lacan and, plausibly enough, Hegel. She characterizes Beauvoir’s relationship to both figures as one of “free elaboration” (157) or “free development” (159), and she seems to find Beauvoir’s license in both cases problematic. For example, she writes, “To discern the Hegelian influences in Beauvoir’s argument, however, is not to claim that she is being particularly orthodox. Freely developing the themes of recognition and the dialectical triad, Beauvoir entirely forgets that for Hegel, ‘recognition’ presupposes the reciprocal exchange between two *subjects*” (159). And again: “Attentive readers may already have noticed that her text moves directly from the Lacanian theory of the alienation of the child in the gaze of the other to the rather different idea that boys and girls alienate themselves in their bodies. Unfortunately, Beauvoir makes no attempt to relate Lacan’s view to her own” (163). 8. The paper she cites is Lacan’s “*Les Complexes familiaux dans la Formation de l’Individu*.” In her exhaustive history of psychoanalysis during its first one

hundred years in France, Elisabeth Roudinesco reports that a year before publishing *The Second Sex* Beauvoir telephoned Lacan, some five years before he began to conduct the ongoing seminar that would make him famous, and asked him to discuss the possibility of a link between sexual difference (and “female sexuality” in particular) and women’s emancipation. “Flattered, he told her they would need five or six months [the English translation of this passage, amusingly enough, says five or six *years*] of discussion to clarify the issue. Simone was not inclined to spend that much time listening to Lacan for a work that was already fully documented. She proposed a set of four interviews. He refused” (512). For a reading of Lacan’s conceptualization of infantile desire that dovetails with my reading of Beauvoir’s account, see William Bracken’s *Becoming Subjects*, especially chapter 4.

9. It’s not, again, that the infant is presumed by Beauvoir to harbor some sort of preexisting image of himself; it’s that he reacts to the abandonment (of, e.g., weaning) by looking for himself in the other’s reflection. This reaction to what in Hegelian terms we might call a crisis of self-certainty is itself, I think, essentially Hegelian. The difference between Beauvoir and Hegel, I am claiming, is that Beauvoir regards the infant as directly desiring self-petrification—thinghood—while Hegel suggests that the (formerly) subjectively self-certain being wishes to find in the other’s eyes an image of himself as essentially “for-itself,” so that the desire for self-petrification is, at best, deeply hidden.

10. I’m putting the word *other* in quotation marks here to flag the fact that my use of this concept here is not precisely that of any of the authors I’m discussing in this context.

11. Answering the question of why this is demanded of little boys and not little girls will require our coming to see how Beauvoir explains our investment in a certain picture of what it is to be a grown-up little boy, that is, a man. Certain feminists, prominently Nancy Chodorow and Dorothy Dinnerstein, have famously argued, in their appropriations of the “object-relations” school of psychoanalysis, that the demand that boys become independent is to be explained in large part by the fact that they are raised in a sexist culture by women, from whom the culture forces them to distinguish themselves. One of the minor motivations of the present section of this chapter is to distinguish this approach from that of Beauvoir.

12. Parshley translates “*il peut au moins partiellement s’y aliéner*” as “he can at least partially identify himself with it.” Throughout this crucial section of

Beauvoir's text, Parshley tends to translate the French word for "alienation" as "projection" or "identification." This is an instance of the kind of translation that makes Beauvoir's use of terms such as "alienation" seem cribbed and arbitrary to many English readers.

13. I don't think we need take as a sign of an incorrigible racism on Beauvoir's part her failure to note that some black people are women, or that some women are black. Her obtuseness here is compatible with the idea that black women's lives are perhaps torn in different ways from those of white women. (This is in fact the thesis of Angela Harris's critique in "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory" of the way white women have conceptualized black women—namely, as merely doubly oppressed, rather than as differently oppressed.) For evidence that Beauvoir was ordinarily far more sensitive to the insidiousness and complexities of racism, see her numerous discussions of the situation of American blacks in *America Day by Day*.

14. See, again, both Evans and Leighton for versions of this charge.

15. Poulain de la Barre wrote two astonishingly progressive books advocating women's liberation from sexual oppression, *De l'Égalité des deux Sexes* (1673) and *De l'Éducation des Dames pour la Conduite de l'Esprit dans les Sciences et dans les Mœurs* (1674). Beauvoir's quotation comes from the former and is quoted on p. xxvii of *The Second Sex*.

16. I should note, however, that in 1943, during the German occupation of France, Beauvoir was "expelled" from her job after the mother of one of her students, Nathalie Sorokine, accused her of "corrupting a minor." In her autobiography Beauvoir writes, "My name was restored after the Liberation; but I never went back to teaching" (*Prime of Life* 428).

17. For a discussion of Beauvoir's achievements as an "intellectual woman," see Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir*, especially part 1.

18. See Bergoffen, "Out From Under: Beauvoir's Philosophy of the Erotic," material that is developed in her book *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*. See also my brief discussion of Bergoffen in chapter 5.

19. Again, this is certainly true of forms of nonheterosexual erotic love, although given Beauvoir's preoccupations in *The Second Sex* she is concerned to focus on the perils and promises of relationships between women and men. For the record, book 2 of *The Second Sex* contains a chapter on lesbian experience.

20. Many feminists have suggested, for instance, that fathers ought to take a more active part in the rearing of their children. As I mentioned above,

Nancy Chodorow comes to this conclusion through an “object-relations” analysis of children’s relationships to their mothers; see her book *The Reproduction of Mothering*. Another familiar feminist line of argument is that women’s special “ways of knowing” ought to be acknowledged, explored, and culturally validated; see, e.g., Mary Field Belenky et al., *Women’s Ways of Knowing*. In the last decade or so, the idea that gender is “socially constructed,” an idea that of course takes its bearings, however loosely, from *The Second Sex*, has produced a spate of books and articles suggesting that individual acts of defiance or “performances” against sex and/or gender norms can disrupt these norms more easily than if they were biologically determined; by far the most influential of these writings is Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (although Butler in her later book *Bodies That Matter* claims that this [common] reading of *Gender Trouble* oversimplifies things).

21. I don’t deny, and neither does Beauvoir, that social conditions can be so horrific that one doesn’t have the luxury to undertake this encounter with the self. Indeed, as I have been stressing throughout this book, one of the most dramatic differences between Beauvoir’s understanding of human freedom and Sartre’s is that only Beauvoir takes oppression seriously. By speaking of one’s most “fundamental” nemesis, I mean to suggest that even when one enjoys the most marked genuine political freedom, the struggle with self that I take Beauvoir to be detailing in *The Second Sex* remains.

22. Interestingly, Sartre in 1948, when Beauvoir was writing *The Second Sex*, explicitly endorsed the idea of *authorship* as an invitation to the reader’s act of judgment. See his *What Is Literature?*, especially the middle two chapters. (I thank Toril Moi for pressing me to acknowledge this fact at this juncture.) The irony is that Sartre’s depiction of the author-reader relationship finds no correlate in his ontology in *Being and Nothingness*; indeed, as I have argued, there is no room for such a relationship in that book’s understanding of things.

23. The idea of “conversation” as an emblem of what is possible in relationships between human beings is another hallmark of the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, who is particularly interested in the forms that conversation takes (or does not) between men and women, especially as epitomized in two genres of film he calls the Hollywood comedy of remarriage and the melodrama of the unknown woman. (See, respectively, his *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Contesting Tears*). In *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* Cavell identifies the mode of conversation he is interested in as a central feature of a way of un-

derstanding the ethical life, alternative to the standard choices of utilitarianism and deontology, an alternative he calls “moral perfectionism.” The conversation that distinguishes perfectionism is evident in places as diverse as the discussion among friends that comprises Plato’s *Republic*, Kant’s vision of a Kingdom of Ends in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and the exchange between “interlocutors” in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*. My instinct is that *The Second Sex*, which I’m claiming is to be read as an appeal for conversation in the Cavellian sense, belongs in this company; this is a claim I hope to flesh out and support in more depth in forthcoming work.

24. In this context I recall Cavell’s memorable observation that “among friends the taking of pleasure is an offer of pleasure, and the showing of pleasure at pleasure offered is the giving of pleasure” (*Contesting Tears* 10).

25. At the very end of *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir suggests that social revolution is one—but only one—of the prerequisites for the improvement of women’s—and men’s—situations: “We must not believe, certainly, that a change in woman’s economic condition alone is enough to transform her. This factor has been and remains primordial in her evolution. But until it has brought about the moral, social, cultural, and other consequences that it promises and requires, the new woman cannot appear” (*TSS* 725, TM; *LDS* 2:655).

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