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## Thinking with Simone de Beauvoir Today

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**Abstract:** In the last decade, the importance of Simone de Beauvoir's contribution to 20th-century French philosophy has been beyond debate. However, it can be tempting to read her contributions as the dated beginnings of feminist philosophy, and to believe that her work is only interesting from the perspective of the history of philosophy. To the contrary, this article claims that contemporary philosophers can and should take Beauvoirian philosophy as a source of fruitful insights on contemporary issues in political and moral philosophy by showing the limited scope of two classic critiques of Beauvoir and by defending the relevance of her work for thinking about female submission and the importance of erotic experience.

**Keywords:** Simone de Beauvoir, submission, feminist philosophy, intersectionality, sexual ethics, existentialism

Seventy-five years after the publication of *The Second Sex*, the image of Simone de Beauvoir is finally beginning to change. In France, her literary and philosophical contribution is the subject of a new interest: her memoirs were published in the highly prestigious Pléiade collection in 2018, and the first volume, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, was assigned to all candidates for the prestigious *agrégation de lettres modernes* (the national competitive exam to become a literature teacher), which is a sign of entry into the literary canon. The public rediscovered her with passion during a program on the public radio in the summer of 2023, the success of which surprised even its author. Even in philosophy, where she has often been reduced to the roles of Sartre's austere companion, a successful novelist of little originality, or a slightly outdated figure of feminism, her importance is beginning to be taken seriously: since 2018, she has been included in the high school philosophy curriculum, an increasing number of publications focus on her work, and she is no longer studied solely through the prism of her relationship with Sartre. In the United States and England, where it has long been commonplace to see copies of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* stacked on the philosophy shelves of bookstores, philosophical works on Beauvoir are even beginning to be the subject

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of articles published in the most prestigious journals. In short, Beauvoir seems to have entered the philosophical canon.

An important aspect of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophical work, which may go unnoticed by those reading her for the first time, is her critique of philosophy: in her memoirs, in her diaries, as well as in certain articles written in the immediate postwar period, Beauvoir refuses to consider herself a philosopher because of what she sees as the inability of philosophy—by which she means systematic philosophy, of which Kant and Hegel are the greatest examples—to account for human existence in all its complexity, ambiguity and temporality.<sup>1</sup> This conviction led her to multiply the forms in which she tried to capture life—essays, novels, memoirs, travelogues—and to strive to use sources from the social sciences of her time. However, the socio-theoretical dimension of her work implies an inscription in her time that is in danger of aging badly. While Sartre emerged as one of the greatest living philosophers in the 1950s and 1960s, few people today see his political works as important for emancipatory struggles. Similarly, Beauvoir has long been seen as a somewhat outdated vestige of so-called second-wave feminism: is not she the stereotype of that bourgeois white feminism whose blind spots intersectional feminism has exposed?

In this paper, I will give a personal account of the power—and possibly the limits—of Beauvoirian philosophy for our times.<sup>2</sup> Obviously, it is not possible to show everything that might be useful in Beauvoirian thought for philosophers and social theorists in a single paper. I will therefore concentrate on a few points that I consider important. In the first part of the article, I will examine two points on which Beauvoir is usually criticized as being outdated: her lack of an intersectional analysis of oppression and her possibly conservative conception of gender, and I will show that on both of these points Beauvoir is both rightly criticized and useful in responding to the objections that can be raised against her. Then, on a more personal note, I will emphasize how powerful Beauvoir's thought can be to understand

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1 Margaret Simons recalls this interview with Beauvoir in March 1979, in which Beauvoir said: "For me a philosopher is someone like Spinoza, Hegel, or like Sartre, someone who builds a grand system and not simply someone who loves philosophy, who can teach it, who can understand it and who can make use of it in essays. [...] Sartre is a philosopher, and I am not, and I never really wanted to be a philosopher. I love philosophy very much, but my work has not been in philosophy. I have created a literary work. My interest has been with novels, memories, and essays like *The Second Sex*. But that is not philosophy. On the level of philosophy, I have been influenced by Sartre. Obviously, I could not have influenced him, since I did not do philosophy. I critiqued it; I discussed many of his ideas with him, but I had no philosophical influence on Sartre." (Simons 1986, 168).

2 Many Beauvoir scholars have endeavored to do just that in some way or another (Bauer 2015; Kruks 2012; Marso 2017).

two important questions, on which my work focuses women's submission and the erotic experience.

## 1 Simone de Beauvoir and Race

The most common objection to Beauvoir is that she is a stereotype of these post-World War II feminists who mistakenly believed that their experience was representative of the experience of all women, and that they could generalize feminist theory from their experience alone. British anthropologist Judith Okely, for example, has accused Beauvoir of primarily offering, in *The Second Sex*, an anthropological study of the women of the 'village' of Saint Germain des Prés (the Paris neighborhood where Beauvoir lived). Moreover, she contends, Beauvoir implicitly offers herself as an exemplary case, therefore the book is not the general study of the condition of all women (Okely 1986). If, as I claim below, Okely's attack on Beauvoir is misplaced, others are far more convincing.

The most fundamental problem with Beauvoir's method in *The Second Sex* is its analogical dimension: to explain women's oppression and its specificity, Beauvoir proceeds by comparing and contrasting this oppression with the oppression of Blacks, Jews and proletarians. However, as Elizabeth Spelman and Kathryn Gines have shown, the implicit effect of this method is that it pretends that women are neither black, Jewish nor proletarian: "The race/gender analogy often codes race as black man and gender as white woman, neglecting the situation of women of color..." (Gines 2010, 36).

Not only does this method have the effect of creating the false impression that women are all white, it also has the effect of making invisible the ways in which gender oppression and colonial, racial, anti-Semitic, or classist oppressions can work together to produce specific oppressions. In short, by operating with these analogies, Beauvoir invisibilizes what Black feminists have long demonstrated and Kimberlé Crenshaw has popularized under the term 'intersectionality.' Not only does she suggest that 'women' in general are those who are not Black, poor, or Jewish, but she overlooks the fact that these Black, poor, and/or Jewish women are victims of a particular kind of sexism that comes from the intersection of oppressions. Yet, a theory of sexist oppression cannot be complete if it does not cover all kinds of sexist oppression, and a sound social theory should not have such blind spots.

The colonialist bias of Beauvoir's work until she mobilized against the atrocities committed by France in Algeria is also particularly noteworthy. First, the Orientalist representations in Beauvoir's work are striking. For example, the life of women in harems recurs as a typical example of Beauvoir's opposition to Sartre's radical theory of freedom (see, for example, Beauvoir 1947, 38). Beauvoir repeatedly

refers to ‘Orientals’ as a people of uniform desires and behavior.<sup>3</sup> And when reading her diary, correspondence and memoirs, one cannot help but be embarrassed by how little she seems to care about French colonial oppression when she travels to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia before the anti-colonial uprisings begin. Given that her condemnation of the dehumanization at work in colonialism appears on several occasions—for example, in *Pyrrhus and Cineas*, she denounces the white women who undress freely in front of Indochinese boys because they do not see them as men (Beauvoir 1944, 132)—and that she would become one of the most committed intellectuals against French colonialism in the 1950s and 1960s, these traces of the Orientalist and colonial ideology of her time are all the more surprising.

Beauvoir’s lack of an intersectional conception of oppression and these colonialist representations are undoubtedly one of the serious weaknesses of her philosophy for contemporary readers. Nevertheless, like Spelman and in contrast to Gines, I find it particularly interesting to contrast these limitations with the emancipatory potentialities of Beauvoir’s thought: as Spelman notes, Beauvoir is far from unaware of the dynamics of race and class that take place between women. She notes “I think that in de Beauvoir’s work, we have all the essential ingredients of a feminist account of ‘women’s lives’ that would not conflate ‘woman’ with a small group of women—namely, white middle-class heterosexual Christian women in Western countries.” (Spelman 1988, 54) Beauvoir’s philosophy has an important emancipatory power despite its intersectional shortcomings.

First, right from the introduction to *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir emphasizes the ways in which class and racial interests make it impossible for women to be in solidarity with one another,<sup>4</sup> and she repeatedly mentions the ways in which poverty increases women’s oppression.<sup>5</sup> Contrary to Gines’ claim that the comparisons between oppressions are Beauvoir’s way of claiming that women’s oppression is more important than all others (Gines 2014), these comparisons also serve to assert the injustice of the oppression suffered by Black people, both in the US and in France 6.

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3 She thus writes “The Oriental man who is unconcerned with his own destiny is satisfied with a female who is his pleasure object; but Western man’s dream, once elevated to consciousness of the singularity of his being, is to be recognized by a foreign and docile freedom.” (Beauvoir 1949, 188) and “For Orientals, a wife should be fat: everyone sees that she is well fed and brings respect to her master. A Muslim is all the more respected if he possesses a large number of flourishing wives.” (Beauvoir 1949, 193)

4 “As bourgeois women, they are in solidarity with bourgeois men and not with women proletarians; as white women, they are in solidarity with white men and not with black women.” (Beauvoir 1949, 8)

5 See e.g.: “An American reporter, who lived several months among American Southern ‘poor whites,’ has described the pathetic destiny of one of these women, overwhelmed with burdens, who labored in vain to make a hovel livable.” (Beauvoir 1949, 474)

Second, Beauvoir was far from thinking that analyses of racial or class oppression are irrelevant to feminism. On the contrary, throughout her life and work, Beauvoir never ceased to insist that the struggle for women's emancipation is inseparable from, and must be waged alongside, the struggle against the capitalist system. Moreover, anti-racist and anti-colonial struggles played a key role in Beauvoir's life and work: she built her feminist theory on the oppression of Blacks in the United States, and her struggle against the Algerian war was the other major political battle of her life. Beginning in 1945, Beauvoir began work on a book on the status of women. In 1946, she spent several months reading everything she could find on the subject at the Bibliothèque nationale. But in 1947, this research was interrupted by her departure for four months of conferences in the United States. There, she was reunited with the writer Richard Wright. She had met Wright in Paris in 1946, read *Native Son* and *Black Boy*, and published other of his texts in *Les Temps modernes*, the journal she co-edited with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Shocked by the extent of the racial inequalities she saw during her trip to the United States, she asked Wright to act as her guide on these issues. He advised her to read *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, an encyclopedic work on the problem by Swedish author Gunnar Myrdal, and John Dollard's *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. He also introduced her to the idea of 'double consciousness,' developed by the great Black sociologist W. E. B. Du Bois. In his autobiography *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes the alienating experience of African Americans constantly seeing themselves through the eyes of white, racist society. He shows that racial oppression gives way to a double consciousness of oneself, the one the subject has of themselves, and the one they have of the way in which white people see them.

After her return to Paris, Beauvoir insisted in her letters to Nelson Algren, her American lover: her readings on American racism and the way Black people experience it led her to completely re-conceive what would become *The Second Sex*. She read in it a theory not only of racial oppression, but also of the lived experience of that oppression, which she used as a model for her own theory of women's oppression and experience. This centrality of the analysis of racism is evident in *The Second Sex*, and even more so in the diary of her trip to America that she later published, *America Day by Day*.

In this respect, Beauvoir also played the role of intermediary: by publishing Wright's work in *Les Temps modernes*, and by giving such a place to analyses of racial oppression in her work, she helped to disseminate the work of Black thinkers in France. Contrary to Sartre who, at the time, refused to take economic and social conditions into account in his theory of freedom, Beauvoir constructed a theory of oppression and emancipation (that Sartre would eventually endorse) that made economic and social conditions the starting point of all oppression. It was Beauvoir who, after her trip to America, first recognized the similarities between gender

oppression, racial oppression, and class oppression. The deep affinity between the theorization of racial oppression and that of gender oppression was not lost on Frantz Fanon, who, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, reappropriates Beauvoir's existentialism and describes what he calls 'the lived experience of the black man' on the model and with the methodology and concepts of the part of *The Second Sex* devoted to the 'lived experience' of women (Renault 2014). In this sense, far from being an anthropological study of rich white Parisians, Beauvoir's philosophy must be read as a crucial moment in the development of a social theory that fights not only against oppressions linked to class, but also against those linked to race and gender. It is therefore important both to reject her comparative approach to oppression and her colonialist biases, and to recognize the importance of her contribution to an anti-sexist and anti-racist social theory.

## 2 Masculinity, Gender Binarity, and Biological Essentialism

A second common axis of criticism of Beauvoir lies in what some have seen as her masculinism, others as her heterosexism or gender binarism: according to some commentators, Beauvoir believes that the world is made up solely of men and women, united in what she calls an 'original *Mitsein*' that should be reconquered through love in order to, as the last sentence of the book puts it, "beyond their natural differentiations, unequivocally affirm their brotherhood" (Beauvoir 1949, 766). She seems to believe not only that only men and women exist, but also that they are naturally different and are destined to live together in harmony. At the same time, *The Second Sex's* most famous line, 'one is not born but becomes a woman,' is commonly interpreted as a sign that Beauvoir invented the distinction between sex and gender, showing that what it means to be a woman is the product of socialization, not of a feminine essence (Butler 1986, 25–49).

The critiques of Beauvoir's understanding of what we now call gender are disturbingly contradictory: Beauvoir is alternately accused of exalting masculine values, of believing in biological determinism<sup>6</sup> and thus in the idea of a feminine essence, of believing that there is no biological difference between men and women, and so on. In France, she is regularly used by anti-trans activists as the philosopher who showed that trans women cannot be women, and in *Gender Trouble*, Judith

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<sup>6</sup> The common accusation that Beauvoir believed in biological determinism was disproved when it became clear that the Anglophone raising it had been working with a translation done by Parshley, a zoologist who had decided to amend or cut the passages that seemed wrong to him and held deterministic views.

Butler sees Beauvoir as the thinker who opened the door to gender subversion, even if she did not go as far as her methodological and conceptual framework would allow (Butler 2006, 122). Moreover, Beauvoir herself has criticized some of her positions: in her memoirs, she dismisses her early philosophical writings *Pyrrhus and Cineas* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as too disconnected from concrete life, she goes back on certain radical positions in *The Second Sex*, and she criticizes the lack of militancy and feminist radicalism that was hers.

Reading *The Second Sex* after the challenging of the category of ‘woman’ that has taken place over the last forty years may at first seem strange, given how much Beauvoir uses the term. The central question that *The Second Sex* seeks to answer belongs to the category of questions philosophers since Socrates have called an essence question, because it questions the essence or nature of a concept—the question ‘What is a woman?’ As she explains in her memoirs, Beauvoir conceives of *The Second Sex* as a preamble to her future autobiographical work: as she struggles with the autobiographical book she is trying to write, she realizes in a discussion with Sartre (Beauvoir 1963, 136) that analyzing her femininity is the prerequisite for any autobiographical enterprise. She therefore decides that, before she can write anything about herself and her life, she must answer this fundamentally philosophical question: ‘What is a woman?’ It is tempting to accuse her of being an essentialist because she asks an essence question. The way Beauvoir formulates the central question of her book, as early as on the first page of the introduction, and the fact that throughout *The Second Sex* Beauvoir speaks of ‘the woman’ instead of ‘women,’ for instance, could indeed lead one to believe that Beauvoir assumes the existence of a female nature, that she is an essentialist, and claims that there is an essential difference between man and woman. But while Beauvoir poses this essence question, she never gives an essentialist answer; she refutes biological, metaphysical, and linguistic essentialism. She argues that women are what they are not because of their essence but because of their situation.

The concept of ‘situation’ is a key to overcoming the opposition between essentialism and nominalism, because it allows us to recognize both that women are assigned a social destiny, that is, a norm that preexists them and conditions their existence, and at the same time that they can transcend this social destiny, not by seeing it as merely contingent, but by exercising their freedom against it. Beauvoir writes in the Introduction:

When an individual or a group of individuals is kept in a situation of inferiority, the fact is that he or they are inferior. But it is about the scope of the verb to be that we need to be clear; bad faith entails giving it a substantial value, when in fact it has the Hegelian dynamic meaning: to be is to have become, to have been made as one manifests oneself; yes, women in general are today inferior to men, that is their situation opens fewer possibilities to them: the question is whether this state of affairs must continue. (Beauvoir 1949, 12–3)

The concept of situation makes it possible both to describe the reality of women's inferiority in relation to men and to historicize it, that is, to show that there is nothing natural and therefore fixed in this inferiority. Against a Platonic essentialism that gives this inferiority a natural and fixed dimension, Beauvoir asserts the necessity of conceiving this inferiority as a historical given, which allows, on the one hand, to think its past, that is, to think of it as the result of an oppression, as something that has happened, and, on the other hand, to think its future, that is, the possibility of women's emancipation.

At first glance, however, the concept of situation does exonerate Beauvoir from the charge of transphobia or undue belief in biological sex. When I read *The Second Sex* with my students, two criticisms come up regularly: Beauvoir wrongly believes in gender binarity, and she has an overly social understanding of gender that prevents her from being trans-inclusive. That Beauvoir thinks there are two sexes is easily documented in *The Second Sex*. After all, the book consists of answering the question 'What is a woman?' by showing, in the first volume, how men make women the absolute Other and, in the second volume, what this imposed alterity does to women's experience. She writes:

One only has to walk around with her eyes opened to see that humanity is split in two categories of individuals with manifestly different clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, movements, interests, and occupations; these differences are perhaps superficial; perhaps they are destined to disappear. What is certain is that for the moment, they exist in a strikingly obvious way. (Beauvoir 1949, 4)

It is very tempting to conclude from this quote that she subscribes to gender binarity. However, I want to argue here that her point is more subtle than that: by making this strange list of completely different categories of things (bodies, emotions, social characteristics), Beauvoir invites her reader to understand that this binary difference is social and therefore historicizable and changeable. First, she provides a thorough study of intersex in the biology chapter to emphasize that biological sex is not clearly binary. Her reason for rejecting biology as an answer to the question 'What is a woman?' in this chapter is that there is no biological destiny for humans: humans both have and are their bodies, and these bodies have a social meaning. In other words, there are differences between bodies, and there are important ways in which most female bodies differ from most male bodies, but (1) there are bodies that do not fall into this binary, which challenges its natural and evident character, and (2) these differences do not matter outside of the meaning that society gives them. It is only because the society in which we live gives specific importance to the differences between the social categories of 'man' and 'woman' that we ascribe such importance to the physiological differences between males and females in the human species.

Regarding the ability of her views to include trans lives, the problem is a bit trickier because Beauvoir never addressed it directly. Nevertheless, Beauvoirian scholars have recently argued persuasively that her account of womanhood, if not directly or explicitly trans-inclusive, could be made so (Burke 2019, 2020; Neuhaus 2023). Beauvoir's emphasis on the importance of 'becoming' in womanhood seems to allow for the idea that one could become a woman despite, for example, having been assigned male at birth. And the common objections to the descriptions of 'inversion' and 'transvestites' in the chapter on lesbians have been convincingly rebutted by Meryl Altman (Altman 2020, 84–115). In sum, the strongest objection that can be made to Beauvoir is that she did not directly address trans existences, but that this in no way precludes her theory from being used to conceive of a non-exclusively binary, trans-friendly world.

### 3 Beauvoir and Submission

In recent years, the usefulness of Beauvoirian analyses for thinking about contemporary issues in philosophy has been widely documented. Nancy Bauer has argued that Beauvoir's philosophy shows how philosophical methods and philosophy itself need to be rethought (Bauer 2001). Sonia Kruks has demonstrated, among other things, that Beauvoir's philosophy can be a very useful way to overcome the pitfalls of postmodern feminism and to think about the duties of privileged people (Kruks 2012). Lori Marso and Elaine Stavro have argued that Beauvoir provides important keys for thinking about contemporary political issues (Marso 2017; Stavro 2018). Sara Cohen Shabot has shown how useful *The Second Sex* is for understanding bioethical issues related to labor and motherhood, especially obstetric violence (Shabot 2018, 2021), and Skye Cleary has exposed how it can help to live an authentic life (Cleary 2022). Bonnie Mann, Filipa Melo Lopes, and I have argued that it helps think about contemporary masculinity in useful ways (Garcia 2022; Mann 2014; Melo Lopes 2023). And a growing number of scholars are working on Beauvoir's usefulness for thinking about important issues in moral philosophy (e.g., Bremner 2022; Knowles 2019). I cannot do justice to all of this growing literature in this paper, but it supports the general claims I will make below regarding Beauvoir's importance for contemporary philosophy.

To demonstrate that Beauvoir's philosophy, despite certain weaknesses and blind spots highlighted by third-wave philosophers, is profoundly useful for thinking about the contemporary world, I will take two examples of how I have used it in my own research. First, I think Beauvoir's philosophical work is crucial to understanding the very important problem of women's submission to men under patriarchy. As I have argued in my first book (Garcia 2021), one factor in the

endurance of patriarchy is women's participation in their own oppression. I call submission women's deferential compliance with oppressive norms. The philosophical problem raised by women's submission is this: Traditional philosophical perspectives view submission as a choice of heteronomy and therefore consider it morally wrong. When applied to women, the problem is even murkier: Historically, women's submission, unlike men's, has not been understood as being against nature. On the contrary, submission is prescribed as the normal, moral, and natural behavior of women. This valorization of submission goes hand in hand with the idea of an essential and natural inferiority of women: it is because women are conceived as incapable of being free in the way that men are, or because such a freedom is seen as a potential danger, that their submission is good. According to these sexist views, women submit voluntarily; there is a difference in nature between men and women, on the basis of which women are inferior to men.

Any study of women's submission is confronted with the following problem: either one takes the appeal of submission seriously and one adopts the sexist position of an immutable female nature (characterized by a natural disposition to submit), or one rejects the idea of a natural inferiority of women, and in that case submissive women who are content with this submission appear as passive victims or as submissive beings guilty of not cherishing their freedom. The study of women's submission also requires a complete change of perspective on male domination: It demands looking at male domination not from the perspective of those who dominate, but from the perspective of those who submit themselves. Instead of describing women's subordination in an external and objective manner, it means asking what it means for a woman to be a woman living under male domination, and thus describing a subjective, from the bottom-up experience of domination. It means deliberately not assuming that submission is in women's nature or against women's nature, that it is immoral or a sign of an oppressed false consciousness shaped by patriarchy.

In my book, I argue that there are several obstacles to understanding women's submission to men, and that Beauvoir's philosophy helps to overcome them. The first issue is intrinsically linked to the one I outlined above: what exactly is the relationship between femininity and submission? Are women inherently masochistic, as Freud seemed to believe, or is it, as feminist scholar Catharine MacKinnon has argued, that the categories of man and woman are built on domination and submission so that being a woman is by definition submission? I argue that the concept of 'situation' developed by Beauvoir and briefly explained above allows Beauvoir to highlight and historicize the relationship between femininity and submission. According to her, there is no immutable essence of woman, yet it is wrong to say that nothing but the name that is given to them differentiates women from men. Women are the individuals that are in a certain situation. Defining womanhood

as a situation is the first step for her to show that there is something feminine in submission, but not because women are naturally submissive. Submission is not a nature, but it appears to women as a destiny: to be a woman is to be in a situation where submission appears as your destiny. It is to be a person to whom submission is prescribed, from the outside. The force of the social prescription is such that it is difficult to escape. But it doesn't follow that submission is natural or inevitable. In fact, seeing submission as the social norm prescribed to women means that the close relation between femininity and submission is not inevitable, that it must be seen as the result of historical power relations, and therefore that it can change.

More precisely, the concept of situation offers a way to understand the problem of submission in its complexity, because it does not provide an explanation based solely on the individual (as in the essentialist explanation), nor on the society (as in strong constructionism), but articulates the role of the individual and the role of the society. Indeed, in order to understand how female submission functions, one must hold together two levels, that of the individual, who makes choices and behaves in certain ways, and that of society, which prescribes certain behaviors to individuals and shapes their preferences.

However, the concept of situation is not sufficient to answer to the epistemological question at the heart of any study of women's submission. Studying women's submission requires attention to how women live and experience the structural relations of domination in which they are in an inferior position. It requires being able to describe women's lives in their ordinariness and in their least remarkable aspects. And it requires to changing the perspective on relations of domination, from a traditional top-down perspective to a bottom-up one. It is notoriously difficult to study the experiences of submissive people because they are silenced by domination. One of the goals of domination is to silence oppressed people and to make sure that their experiences and their points of view appear as negligible or, better yet, do not appear at all. In order to analyze female submission, one needs sources about individuals who have been historically deprived of power, about relationships that belong to the private sphere, which is under-documented, and about relationships in which individual and structural dimensions are intertwined. Women, insofar as they are for instance workers, Blacks, lower castes, lesbians, disabled, or all of these at once, find themselves in relations of social domination of one group over another. As women, however, they endure a form of domination that has a social component but manifests itself mainly in inter-individual relations.

Women's submission is therefore very difficult to study philosophically. Insofar as it refers to a mundane experience, it constantly eludes analysis. Insofar as it requires an inversion of the perspective on power, it seems impossible because, on the one hand, it can only be done by the oppressed and, on the other hand, it is out

of reach for the oppressed, since oppression consists precisely in preventing them from talking about and analyzing their experiences.

Beauvoir's original phenomenological method, which is at the origin of what is now commonly called 'critical phenomenology' (Oksala 2023), responds to these pitfalls, and reveals a way to understand and describe what submission is. Because of her privileged social position, Beauvoir has access to the experience of submission without at the same time being silenced as many submissive women are. As she writes, she has "accumulated the advantages of both sexes" (Beauvoir 1963, 189). This position, and the original phenomenological method that she builds, allow her to respond to the conundrum of a bottom-up approach of a dominated experience and to reveal that the way submission is experienced by women is as a destiny.

Beauvoir's phenomenological method consists in granting a crucial role to the description of multiple first persons. At the end of the introduction of *The Second Sex*, she sets herself the task of "describ[ing] the world from the woman's point of view such as it is offered to her" (Beauvoir 1949, 17). It is an original project because it does not describe their lives from an external point of view but their lives as they live them. In general, and as the first volume shows, women's lives are analyzed or discussed only from the perspective of men. Women are always objects—objects of study and sexual objects. In *The Second Sex*, women appear for the first time as a multiplicity of subjects. But most importantly, she does so through an original method: Beauvoir is a phenomenologist insofar as she relies on first-person experiences, but she is an original phenomenologist because she multiplies the sources of first-person narratives. Unlike Sartre and other phenomenologists, Beauvoir does not use the first person to describe women's lived experience, thus clearly signifying that what is in question is not her personal, individual experience. *The Second Sex* is not autobiographical. Beauvoir uses the third person to describe women's experiences, and the severity with which she sometimes judges them shows that these descriptions are not an autobiographical work. They are the result of meticulous research into a large number of diaries, of memoirs by famous women, and of studies in psychology and sociology.

At the same time, unlike sociologists and social scientists—who often are, or think they are, in a position of exteriority with what they describe—it is very clear (and she claims it) that Beauvoir is judge and jury. When she describes the everyday life of the housewife or the experience of motherhood, she is not describing experiences that are hers. Her personal experience is merely one of the sources on which she bases her description. In this respect, Beauvoir's analyses are neither simple generalizations from individual experience, as is often the case in Sartrean phenomenology, nor scientific, objective, and distant analyses of other people's experience. Beauvoir uses her personal experiences, the experiences of her friends, and her observations of everyday life, as well as literary and scientific works, to

generalize from a multiplicity of lives and of first-person experiences, and to bring out typical experiences and typical figures. Her work then does not show the shortcomings of a subjectivist and particular analysis, nor of a masculine analysis that freezes the diversity of experiences in the assumption of a feminine essence.

Against an 'eternal feminine' that means to be universalizing, fixed, and ahistorical, Beauvoir brings to light singular experiences that, when juxtaposed, are not particular cases, but singular declinations of the first-person experience of what a woman is. This multiplication of points of view is important, because it allows her to erase the specificity of this or that individual, and this or that situation, to bring out a more general experience. In this way, Beauvoir's analysis removes once and for all the suspicion of a paternalistic, overbearing, and imperialist approach of submission: in her work, it seems clear that submission is not an attitude of 'other' women, who supposedly manifest the weakness of their desire for freedom through their veil or by their resignation to their situation. On the contrary, by proposing a phenomenology of the lived experience of submission by all women, in all ages, in all situations, Beauvoir reveals the generalized and almost universal character of female submission.

Beauvoir's philosophy is also crucial to understanding submission because she develops a theory of oppression as othering that demonstrates that submission constitutes a social destiny for women, to such an extent that women can even take pleasure in it. The oppression of women by men takes place through a process of alienation—of transformation into an Other—which consists in an objectification of women. Women are taught throughout their lives that they are objects for men—who see women as radically other than themselves—and this objectification works so well that women see themselves as the other and not primarily as subjects. Women submit to men because they have always already been considered as objects and not subjects by men and (therefore) by themselves.

This theory of oppression leads her to offer a new account of female embodiment. Beauvoir develops a philosophy of the body that shows how patriarchy makes women's bodies belong to men before they belong to women themselves. The social oppression of women by men occurs through the transformation of women into an absolute Other, whose function is to be an object of love and desire for men. The concrete character of women's alienation through objectification is tangible in its impact on women's experience of their own bodies. Beauvoir enables us to understand how women, even though they are not born that way, become submissive if they do not resist the norms of femininity, by showing that women are the only beings whose bodies already have a social meaning before women can even experience them. To become a woman is to discover that our own body belongs to men's gaze even before it is fully ours. The specificity of women's body, according to

Beauvoir, is that it is a social body before it is a lived body, and therefore functions as a destiny.

Finally, and perhaps more importantly, Beauvoir's existentialist ethics proposes a theory of freedom in which women's submission appears not as a strange abdication of natural freedom but as the direct result of women's oppression. It proposes a conception of freedom as an urge felt by everyone and as a costly risk, which makes it possible to respond to the problem of female submission. She shows that submission is not the fact of relinquishing of a freedom one already has, but the fact of giving up the pursuit of freedom. To not pursue freedom is tempting for all human beings, but women's situation makes freedom more costly and thus submission is more appealing to women than men. Therefore, it is not that women actively choose submission, but that they consent to the submission that is prescribed to them by social norms. This theory of freedom is crucial and resolves the apparent antinomy of consent to submission. In her understanding of freedom as requiring concrete actions, there is no contradiction in the idea of consenting to submission. Under non-ideal conditions, oppressed people, especially women, make cost-benefit calculations and can end up following, endorsing or even enjoying harmful social norms.

An important aspect of this analysis is that it is not dated. Many people wonder whether *The Second Sex*, is not irremediably dated, given that it was published in 1949. There is no doubt that the overall situation of women has changed radically since the 1940s. While the recent overturning of *Roe v Wade* in the United States reminds us that these rights are not a given, many women have acquired formal equality with men: they can work, drive, have a bank account and even have an abortion without a man's permission. Women can have a social existence without being married, and in most countries of the West, lesbian couples can have families of their own. These facts might have made *The Second Sex* irrelevant if it were a sociological study, but it is not. And the oppressive structure of patriarchy still functions in many ways as Beauvoir analyzed it, even if the examples change: women may not be expected to stay in the private sphere forever, but they are still very much expected to provide most of care work and to put the preferences of others before their own in ways that are explained by the analyses above.

## 4 Beauvoir and Good Sex

But Beauvoir's philosophical contribution is not restricted to social critique: I want to argue here that Beauvoir not only helps us understand the oppression of women, but also outlines ways to emancipate ourselves that are particularly relevant in the post #MeToo era. Thus, another aspect of Beauvoir's work that has been very

important to my own philosophical work is the positive views on the erotic experience that she defends in *The Second Sex*. Debra Bergoffen, Karen Vintges, and Meryl Altman, have emphasized that *The Second Sex* contains views on the potentially emancipatory and even revolutionary dimension of sex (Altman 2020; Bergoffen 1996; Vintges 1996). Altman notes that “Beauvoir was interested in giving women full human subjectivity; that this importantly included sexual subjectivity” (Altman 2020, 18).

Beauvoir’s account of good sex is first to be found implicit in her critique of bad sex. One of the reasons why *The Second Sex* was considered scandalous when it first appeared was precisely the passages about sex (Galster 2004). As she recalled in her memoirs, she was called all sorts of names but most of all sexual ones, for publishing that book (Beauvoir 1963, 197), in part because *The Second Sex* gave accounts of bad sex and of how women’s oppression led to bad sex. Beauvoir heavily criticized the monolithic and ignorant vision of women’s sexuality offered by psychoanalysis (Beauvoir 1949, 58–59). Some of her main objections to Freud were that he understood feminine libido solely through a comparison with the male libido and that he conceived of women’s libido in a simplistic manner. Through this critique, she makes the case that women’s libido is fundamentally ambivalent, both active and passive. She writes:

The idea of a passive libido is disconcerting because the libido has been defined as a drive, as energy based on the male; but one could no more conceive *a priori* of a light being both yellow and blue: the intuition of green is needed. Reality would be better delineated if, instead of defining the libido in vague terms of ‘energy,’ the significance of sexuality were juxtaposed with that of other human attitudes: taking, catching, eating, doing, undergoing, and so on; for sexuality is one of the singular modes of apprehending an object; the characteristics of the erotic object as it is shown not only in the sexual act but in perception in general would also have to be studied. (Beauvoir 1949, 59)

In this passage, she affirms that there is a specificity of women’s libido in its articulation of passivity and activity, but more fundamentally, that sexuality is inseparable from the other realms of human activity. When women are oppressed in such a way that they are conceived by men as the absolute Other, this necessarily has an impact on sexuality and on women’s sexual subjectivities in general. Therefore, it is a mistake to take sexuality as a given, as psychoanalysis does. Sexuality must be historicized, libido must be understood as the product of a gendered education in which little girls are taught to take pleasure in passivity, and it is essential to understand women’s sexual masochism in the context of this education to be a sexual prey that she describes in the second volume (Beauvoir 1949, 349).

It is only when we socialize and historicize sex that we can understand, for instance, that “woman’s claim to pleasure makes men angry” and that “it even seems advantageous to them to deny woman the temptations of desire along with

the autonomy of pleasure.” (Beauvoir 1949, 451) Pleasure is not a physiological fact, it must be replaced in the social world in which it is given—or not. This call for a broader, more social understanding of sex is undoubtedly at the root of the feminist idea—and motto—of the 1970s that the personal is political: what Beauvoir is calling for in her critique of psychoanalysis is to an understanding that women’s sexuality cannot be understood apart from the patriarchal shaping of women’s subjectivity. And there is no doubt that this idea is also at the root of the #MeToo movement.

Beyond this description of bad sex, *The Second Sex* contains, perhaps surprisingly, a positive view of sex. Debra Bergoffen sees the rare passages in which Beauvoir speaks positively about good sex as a sign of Beauvoir’s ‘muted voice,’ that is, of a set of claims that are supposedly out of step with the rest of the book’s claims, and in which the erotic appears as a means of liberation (Bergoffen 1996, 110). I think this is a mistake: as Meryl Altman convincingly shows (Altman 2020, 60), the positive views of sex that Beauvoir develops are perfectly coherent with the rest of her enterprise. It is two sides of the same coin to show how patriarchy leads to bad sex, and to argue that a less patriarchal world is a world in which sex would be better. Beauvoir writes:

The erotic experience is one that most poignantly reveals to human beings the ambiguity of their condition. They feel there as flesh and as spirit, as the other and as subject. Woman experiences this conflict at its most dramatic character because she seizes herself first of all as an object and does not immediately find a confident autonomy in pleasure; she has to reconquer her dignity as transcendent and free subject while assuming her carnal condition: this is a delicate and risky enterprise that often fails. But the very difficulty of her situation protects her from the mystifications by which the male lets himself be duped; he is easily fooled by the fallacious privileges that his aggressive role and the satisfied solitude of the orgasm imply; he hesitates to recognize himself fully as flesh. The woman has a more authentic experience of herself. (Beauvoir 1949, 416 translation modified)

Beauvoir makes it clear that subjectivity is embodied: to be a subject, and especially a subject of desire, is both to be and to have a body, that is, to be a subject in a body and to have a body that is an object for others. For Beauvoir, authentic existence means recognizing this ambiguity of being both subject and object, mind and body, both trapped in gender norms and autonomous. This ambiguity is not unique to women; it is part of the human condition. But men have the power to represent women in such a way that they can avoid confronting this ambiguity. Beauvoir’s analysis here is original and powerful, in that it completely reverses the usual perspective: contrary to a common view, it shows that patriarchy does not guarantee men good sex. On the contrary, male domination deprives men of a fulfilling sexuality by offering them a self-centered, inauthentic conception of their own eroticism, because they conceive of women in a way that deprives them of an authentic relationship with them.

Beauvoir makes points here that are extremely important for sexual ethics and for feminist philosophy in the twenty-first century. Her insights are undoubtedly at the origin of my second book, *The Joy of Consent: a Philosophy of Good Sex* (Garcia 2023), in which I argue that doing feminist sexual ethics should be committed not only to opposing impermissible sex, but also to thinking about what good sex is and the emancipatory role it can play. The focus of #MeToo and second-wave analyses of sex has been sexual violence for understandable reasons, but this has seemed to imply that the only valuable discourse about sex in moral philosophy is a liberal one in which consent plays the role of the criterion of permissible sex. I argue that we should also think about what good sex is under the non-ideal conditions that are our patriarchal experiences. And I take it that this is a claim that Beauvoir made discretely in *The Second Sex*.

The Beauvoirian analysis of the erotic experience clarifies what a successful erotic experience should look like from the point of view of the individual's relation to themselves. A successful erotic experience is not simply one in which pleasure is maximized—although that is undoubtedly desirable. A successful experience is one in which the human being experiences corporeally, carnally, what they are in all their ambiguity. And in this experience, the relationship with the other is absolutely essential. It is in relation to the other, because I see them as other, that I recognize myself as subject. It is through the gaze of the other that I discover myself, or know myself to be an object. And what gives the subject dignity and freedom is precisely to hold together this ambiguity of being both subject and object, an ambiguity that is by its very nature a vulnerability, but which is also the very condition of the joys of the erotic experience.

But this ambiguity is only possible in relationship, and this is why, for Beauvoir, the female experience is more authentic than the male experience: men have the privilege of being able to avoid relationship, of believing themselves to be alone and independent, in sexuality as elsewhere. But this is, in her view, a lie to oneself, because our being-in-the-world is a being-with-others, and it's in our relationship with them that our subjectivity is constructed, progressively and mutually. This is why, for Beauvoir, male domination is an obstacle to erotic fulfillment, and even more so for men than for women. But if men renounce this domination, at least on an individual level, then erotic fulfillment is possible despite the ways in which female sexuality is shaped by gender norms:

The asymmetry of male and female eroticism creates insoluble problems as long as there is a battle of the sexes; they can easily be settled when a woman feels both desire and respect in a man; if he covets her in her flesh while recognizing her freedom, she recovers herself as the essential in the moment she becomes an object, she remains free in the submission to which she consents. Thus, the lovers can experience shared pleasure in their own way; each partner feels pleasure as being their own, while at the same time having its source in the other.

The words 'receive' and 'give' exchange meanings, joy is gratitude, pleasure is tenderness. ... What is necessary for such harmony are not technical refinements but rather, on the basis of an immediate erotic attraction, a reciprocal generosity of body and soul. (Beauvoir 1949, 415)

Against the idea that the good erotic experience is one of using the other, which corresponds to the model of male sexuality, Beauvoir shows that not only the moral quality, but also the joy and pleasure of good sex come from giving, giving of oneself, and receiving. Such a description helps us to understand that women have much easier access to fulfilling sex than men, the main barrier for them being that men, because of the norms of masculinity they endorse, deny themselves and them at the same time. Clearly, this kind of erotic experience does not require love in the romantic sense of the term, but rather a 'reciprocal generosity' and mutual recognition that are the basis for treating the other as a person.

This intersubjective recognition is difficult to obtain. Gender norms generate epistemic injustices, whereby men are invited to actively ignore the subjectivity of their partners and treat them as occasions for sexual pleasure, while women are discouraged from expressing and even conceiving their pleasure and desire. It is also difficult to acquire, as sexuality tends to be conceived as the terrain of an economy of maximizing one's pleasure at a minimum of cost. But it is likely to be the condition for an authentic sexual relationship in which we engage as equal human subjects. And for this intersubjective recognition to happen, not only must individuals seek it and to be willing to make the efforts necessary to achieve it, but social conditions are necessary: indeed, and this is probably another of Beauvoir's most important insights for us today, she makes clear that sexual pleasure and intersubjective recognition require social and economic conditions of equality and freedom, a world that she sees as being "exactly the one the Soviet revolution promised" (Beauvoir 1949, 760). The emancipation through good sex towards better sex and more freedom is not only an individual one, it requires social transformations that drastically change the situation of the sexes.

## 5 Conclusions

One of the central tenets of Beauvoir's life is that there is no divorce between philosophy and life. As such, her life is a philosophical quest and work, and her philosophical work is an attempt to grasp human existence in all its concreteness. Far from rendering her philosophical work obsolete over the years, this permanent link between philosophy and life is undoubtedly at the heart of the relevance of her thought. Although certain scientific data have become obsolete, the situation of

women has changed, and the sexual binary is no longer self-evident, her analyses nonetheless stand the test of time.

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