

# *Sex & Existence*

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*Simone de Beauvoir's  
'The Second Sex'*

EVA LUNDGREN-GOTHLIN

Preface by Toril Moi

Translated from the Swedish by Linda Schenck

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To Hans, Maud and Hannes

## Preface

I spent the spring of 1991 in Paris working on my own book on Simone de Beauvoir. At a time when I was starting to feel a little disheartened at the relative lack of serious work on *The Second Sex*, my pleasure at discovering Eva Lundgren-Gothlin's *Kön och Existens* was immense. Here, at long last, was a brand-new, full-length study of the philosophical sources of *The Second Sex*. Lundgren-Gothlin demonstrates the importance of Hegel, Marx and Engels to Beauvoir's thought, and the decisive impact her use of these thinkers had on *The Second Sex*. In so doing, she brings out the complexity and originality of Beauvoir's pioneering essay in new and illuminating ways. But this is not all: Lundgren-Gothlin also situates Beauvoir in the political and intellectual climate of her time and discusses the French political and historical situation in the 1940s, as well as Beauvoir's intellectual relations to Kojève and Merleau-Ponty, among others.

Lundgren-Gothlin's extensive research and detailed analyses enable us to see Beauvoir not simply, as sexist ideology would have it, as the epigone of Sartre, but as a thinker, who, like every other serious intellectual, read widely and well, and who used what she read to build up her own unique vision of the world. Most philosophers have to be content with making a modest contribution to a specialized field of thought. Perhaps this is why many of them have had difficulty in recognizing the scope and importance of Beauvoir's contribution to twentieth-century philosophy. For in *The Second Sex* she showed us a world in which women were daily subjected to injustice, and she did so with such power and insight that she actually changed that world; the political importance of *The Second Sex* in our century cannot be overestimated. Eva Lundgren-Gothlin's *Sex and Existence* helps us to understand Beauvoir's intellectual and political achievement in her epochal essay more clearly and more fully than before. I am delighted

that this book is now being made available to an English-speaking audience.

*Toril Moi*  
Duke University

## *Acknowledgements*

*Sex and Existence* was originally written as a doctoral thesis at the Göteborg University and published in Swedish in May 1991. Before the book was translated into English, I revised it slightly. Accordingly, references to works on Beauvoir published after 1990 have been added to this edition.

The Department of History of Ideas and Science at the University of Göteborg has been a stimulating research environment for many years. I would particularly like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Lennart Olausson, who has been a critical and insightful manuscript reader, and a committed partner in dialogue. I also thank the participants in the postgraduate seminar, and its head, Professor Sven-Eric Liedman. Scholars from other departments, including Peter Kemp, Margareta Hallberg, Jan Bengtsson and Ulla Holm, have made helpful suggestions about parts of the original manuscript. They and Ingrid Holmqvist, leader for the Forum for Interdisciplinary Women's Studies, also receive my thanks.

Grants from the Paul and Marie Berghaus Foundation, the Knut and Alice Wallenberg Foundation and the Swedish Institute have enabled me to spend time doing research in Paris. My thanks also go to the staffs of the libraries of the University of Göteborg, Bibliothèque Nationale and Bibliothèque Marguerite Durand in Paris for facilitating my work, and to the Axel and Margaret Axelson Johnson's foundation. The revised edition was prepared as part of a project financed by them. A grant from the Swedish Council for Research in the Humanities and the Social Sciences financed the translation. A special thanks goes to Toril Moi for her invaluable support in the English publication of my book. Thanks also to Sonia Kruks for valuable comments on the English manuscript and to the editor at The Athlone Press.

Finally, I would like to express my profound gratitude to my family for their unfailing support, particularly to my husband, Hans

Gothlin, who has been an invaluable aid, and a source of constant encouragement. I dedicate this book to him, my daughter Maud and my son Hannes.

*Eva Lundgren-Gothlin*



## *Abbreviations and Translations*

In the case of frequently quoted or cited works, abbreviations of the titles occur in the text. The reference to the English edition comes first, followed by a reference to the original French edition. When it has proved necessary to modify the English translation,<sup>1</sup> the abbreviation 'TM' has been added. If no reference to the English edition is made, the translation is my own.

BN	<i>Being and Nothingness</i> (Sartre)
CPM	<i>Cahiers pour une morale</i> (Sartre)
EA	<i>The Ethics of Ambiguity</i> (Beauvoir)
EN	<i>L'être et le néant</i> (Sartre)
FC	<i>Force of Circumstance</i> (Beauvoir)
ILH	<i>Introduction à la lecture de Hegel</i> (Kojève)
IRH	<i>Introduction to the Reading of Hegel</i> (Kojève)
LDS	<i>Le Deuxième Sexe</i> , Vol. I (Beauvoir)
LDS:II	<i>Le Deuxième Sexe</i> , Vol. II (Beauvoir)
LFA	<i>La Force de l'âge</i> (Beauvoir)
LFC	<i>La Force des choses</i> (Beauvoir)
MDD	<i>Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter</i> (Beauvoir)
MEC	<i>Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: Collected Works</i> (Marx and Engels)
MEGA	<i>Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe</i> (Marx and Engels)
MEW	<i>Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Werke</i> (Marx and Engels)
MJFR	<i>Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée</i> (Beauvoir)
PC	<i>Pyrrhus et Cinéas</i> (Beauvoir)
PG	<i>Phänomenologie des Geistes</i> (Hegel)
PL	<i>The Prime of Life</i> (Beauvoir)
PMA	<i>Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté</i> (Beauvoir)
PS	<i>Phenomenology of Spirit</i> (Hegel)
SS	<i>The Second Sex</i> (Beauvoir)
TM	translation modified; see introductory comments above.

# Contents

<i>Preface by Toril Moi</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Abbreviations and Translations</i>	xiii
 Introduction	 1
 PART I LIFE AND HISTORY	 9
1 A Historical Background Sketch	11
2 A Biographical Background Sketch	23
 PART II SEX AND DIALECTICS: HEGELIAN ELEMENTS IN 'THE SECOND SEX'	 53
Introduction	55
3 Hegel and Kojève	56
4 The Master–Slave Dialectic in <i>The Second Sex</i>	67
 PART III SEX AND LABOUR: MARXIST ELEMENTS IN 'THE SECOND SEX'	 83
5 The Significance of the Philosophy of the Young Marx	85
6 A Theory of Human Nature Inspired by Marxism	92
7 A Philosophy of History Inspired by Marxism	100
8 Beauvoir's Critique of Marxist Feminism	116
 PART IV SEX AND DESIRE: PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXISTENTIALISM	 125
9 Existentialism and Phenomenology	127
10 The Phenomenological Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre	135
11 The Philosophical Development of Simone de Beauvoir	152

## PART V THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR IN

## 'THE SECOND SEX'

	167
12 Man Is the One, Woman Is the Other	169
13 Inauthenticity and the 'Desire of Being'	184
14 Can Woman Be a Desiring Subject?	202
15 Authenticity and Reciprocal Recognition	211
16 Transcendence and Immanence	230
Epilogue	243
Conclusions	247
<i>Notes</i>	254
<i>Bibliography</i>	303
<i>Index</i>	320

## Introduction

*The Second Sex* (*Le Deuxième Sexe*), by Simone de Beauvoir, is one of the most influential books of the twentieth century. A source of inspiration to the women's movement in the late 1960s, it remains topical and much discussed today. None the less, it has been the subject of surprisingly few scholarly analyses. This might be attributed to its difficult philosophical structure, were it not that philosophers, too, have displayed a conspicuous lack of interest in studying the text. All Beauvoir's philosophical essays seem to be regarded as set apart from the core texts comprising the canon of the history of philosophy and the history of ideas.<sup>1</sup> Whereas Jean-Paul Sartre is considered one of the great philosophers of our times, Beauvoir is seen in his shadow, a disciple lacking original ideas, and *The Second Sex* is described, not least by feminists, as a classic example of existentialism *à la Sartre*.<sup>2</sup>

One consequence of this is that *The Second Sex* is and has been misunderstood and misread to an unusual degree. For example, Suzanne Lilar's *Le malentendu du Deuxième sexe* (1969), which was one of the first detailed analyses of it, argues that the book's fundamental problem lies in its association with Sartre's philosophy. According to Lilar, this philosophy, adopted uncritically by Beauvoir, presupposes absolute human freedom, as well as basic hostility in human relations. In Lilar's opinion, Beauvoir silences her own female voice, with its love of nature and its *joie de vivre*, although its muted tone occasionally makes itself heard.

Recent years have seen the publication of a large number of articles with a similar theme: that having adopted Sartre's existentialism, Simone de Beauvoir was unable to formulate a theory explaining the oppression of women as anything but freely chosen by them, and even less able to explain how human beings can possibly live in harmony with one another. These articles also tend to regard Sartre's existentialism as responsible for Beauvoir's deprecation of the feminine.<sup>3</sup> If the authors find elements of *The Second Sex* that contradict this picture, they are apt either to dismiss

them as inconsistencies or, like Lilar, to regard them as a kind of genuine female voice, usually silenced but occasionally making itself heard through the male discourse.<sup>4</sup>

The prevalent opinion expressed in the few full-length studies of *The Second Sex* is that Beauvoir rather uncritically accepted Sartre's philosophy. Donald L. Hatcher's *The Philosophical Foundations of Simone de Beauvoir's 'Le Deuxième Sexe'* sees Sartre's ontology as fundamental to *The Second Sex*.<sup>5</sup> In an unpublished dissertation, 'Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex" in the light of the Hegelian Master-Slave Dialectic and Sartrean Existentialism', Carol Craig argues, as I do, that Beauvoir was influenced by Kojève's interpretation of Hegel. But she fails to draw any substantial conclusions from this finding and continues to see Sartre's ontology as dominant in *The Second Sex*.<sup>6</sup>

Why should Simone de Beauvoir be regarded as no more than a disciple of Sartre? She herself often toned down her own importance, asserting that Sartre was the creative philosopher of the two.<sup>7</sup> According to Michèle Le Doeuff, she carried out her philosophical work covertly, without demanding a position as a philosopher or seeking acknowledgement as such, both in order not to challenge Sartre's position and because of the difficulties for women in claiming space as philosophers.<sup>8</sup>

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir never openly criticizes or questions Sartre's philosophy and largely adopts his conceptual apparatus, although she explicitly criticizes both Engelian historical materialism and Freudian psychoanalysis. However, as we shall see, a thorough analysis of *The Second Sex* reveals implicit criticism and a transformation of Sartre's ontology and anthropology which makes the conceptual similarity confusing and misleading. Beauvoir not only developed her own brand of existentialist philosophy, but also combined it with a philosophy of history, which is absent in Sartre's *L'être et le néant* (*Being and Nothingness*). Thus it is possible for Beauvoir to develop a theory of oppression and to draw conclusions about the conditions of human existence that differ from Sartre's. I shall argue that, for Beauvoir, in contrast to the early Sartre, a human being is not 'a useless passion', freedom is not absolute and human relations are not necessarily conflict-laden.

One of the purposes of this book is to show that Simone de

Beauvoir deserves serious consideration as a philosopher, and to subvert the picture of her as a disciple of Sartre. *The Second Sex* should be seen in a wider context than that of Sartre's philosophy. Three significant schools of thought were of importance to Beauvoir: Hegelianism, Marxism and phenomenological existentialism. I also maintain that Kojève (the French interpreter of Hegel), Marx's early theory of alienation and the concept of labour, and Engels's theory of the oppression of women all influenced Beauvoir's philosophy of history and her anthropology. Simone de Beauvoir's effort to combine existentialist thinking with Marxism and Hegelianism was not unique in France in the 1940s, but it was, none the less, fraught with problems. I examine the tensions and conflicts that arise in the text, which, in some respects, remain insoluble.

Another aim is to indicate the ways in which Beauvoir implements these philosophical traditions in order to explain the situation of women.

Although I discern philosophical influences not only from Sartre, but also from Hegel and from Marx and Engels, I am not suggesting that Simone de Beauvoir be regarded as a disciple of many rather than of one. Thinking does not arise in a vacuum but is nourished by and built on earlier philosophies: this is as true of feminist theory as of other schools of thought. Simone de Beauvoir made her own original contribution in the analysis of woman as the Other. Her synthesis of existentialism, Marxism and Hegelianism is also her own.

Scholars who have focused on Beauvoir's philosophical independence have usually emphasized that independence in relation to the concepts of freedom and situation.<sup>9</sup> In recent years, however, a growing number of them, including myself, have begun to criticize and undermine the picture of Simone de Beauvoir as a disciple of Sartre.<sup>10</sup> Sonia Kruks's *Situation and Human Existence: Freedom, Subjectivity and Society* (1990), which discusses the philosophies of Sartre, Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty, maintains that Beauvoir approached Marxism earlier than Sartre, and that this resulted in her seeing both the subject and freedom and its limitations differently from Sartre.<sup>11</sup> According to Kruks, Beauvoir's philosophy is, in many respects, more like that of Merleau-Ponty.

I also feel an affinity with Michèle Le Doeuff's *L'étude et le rouet*,

Vol. 1 (1989). Le Doeuff maintains that Beauvoir transformed Sartre's philosophy before adopting it; for example, she sees her as focusing on ethics rather than ontology, and as having eliminated many of Sartre's androcentric elements. But she does not analyse these transformations in detail and she concludes that Beauvoir's philosophy is individualistic and liberal.

Kate and Edward Fullbrook in their joint *Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre: The Remaking of a Twentieth-Century Legend* (1993), have turned the orthodox picture of Beauvoir's and Sartre's relationship upside-down: they argue that Beauvoir is the true philosopher and that Sartre has appropriated her philosophy as his own. Their book is basically a biography, and although it deals with the question of 'intellectual indebtedness' and shows insight in its cross-readings of texts by Sartre and Beauvoir, in my opinion, it does not succeed in making a plausible case for the claim that the main ideas of *Being and Nothingness* are to be found in *L'Invitée* and that accordingly Beauvoir is the originator of Sartre's philosophical system.

Simone de Beauvoir has been appraised more frequently as a writer of fiction than as a philosopher and the number of studies of her work which may be labelled 'literary criticism' is substantial.<sup>12</sup> Her life has been the subject of a growing number of biographies, the first of which was Claude Francis's and Fernande Gontiers's *Simone de Beauvoir* (1985).<sup>13</sup> This biography reflects the picture Beauvoir paints of herself in her memoirs. On the other hand, in *Simone de Beauvoir, a Biography* (1990), Deirdre Bair does not hesitate to expose the less glamorous side of Beauvoir, revealing intimate details of her life and her love affairs, but failing to portray her as a philosopher and intellectual.<sup>14</sup>

In her highly interesting *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (1994), which is neither straightforward biography nor literary criticism, Toril Moi regards Beauvoir more as an author than as a philosopher, but either way as an emblematic intellectual woman. Her purpose is to understand how Simone de Beauvoir became who she was and what she was at a deeper level and, in this context, she treats all Beauvoir's written work – letters and memoirs as well as literary and philosophical studies – as texts to be interpreted and cross-read.

There is a substantial number of introductory studies to Simone

de Beauvoir's life and work and an examination of books about her leads easily to the conclusion that she has tended to provoke strong reactions – reactions whose strength seems to have increased over time. Although the earliest introductions, which were published in the 1950s and 1960s, tended to be sympathetic in attitude,<sup>15</sup> the tone became more critical in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>16</sup>

The shifts in opinion relative to Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*<sup>17</sup> may be attributed to more general philosophical and ideological changes. As the philosophy of its times, from the 1940s through the 1950s, existentialism was singled out for attack by the younger generation of intellectuals in the 1960s; for example, by the structuralists and poststructuralists. Moreover, while Simone de Beauvoir was the guiding light of early feminists in the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s, she was less well suited to the spirit of the age when later feminists began to upgrade that which was specifically feminine. Interest shifted from demanding equal rights to a more general critique of the patriarchal order, and the life and works of Beauvoir, as a foremother, previously devoutly worshipped, became a focus of criticism.

Mary Evans's *Simone de Beauvoir: A Feminist Mandarin* (1985) is an example of the negative assessment Beauvoir received from feminists in the 1980s. According to Evans, Beauvoir's theory is patriarchal and reflects a liberal ideology marked by possessive individualism which glorifies a traditional male way of life while deprecating the traditional female one.<sup>18</sup>

Judith Okely, in her book *Simone de Beauvoir, a Rereading* (1986), compares her own 1980s view of *The Second Sex* with her reading of the book from the 1960s; a historical perspective which makes her assessment more balanced than, say, Evans's. Okely shows both how the book served to raise consciousness for women in the 1950s and 1960s, and at the same time provides a critical analysis of its shortcomings from a contemporary feminist perspective.

I also attempt to read *The Second Sex* both in a historical perspective and from a contemporary feminist point of view, although my focus, unlike Okely's, is less on explaining the shortcomings of *The Second Sex* in relation to Beauvoir's upbringing and life than on situating *The Second Sex* in its ideological and political context. It is important to bear in mind that *The Second Sex* was



published in 1949; there was neither general feminist awareness nor a radical women's movement in the France of the 1940s. Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex* in a male-dominated intellectual environment, using the philosophical tools that were relevant to her – the philosophies which, in post-war Paris, were regarded as theories of liberation. The Second World War and the experience of the German occupation provide a partial explanation of the philosophical focus of *The Second Sex* on violence and the emphasis on the significance of risking one's life in the name of freedom. Part I of this book provides the historical background, and elucidates this situation in detail.

From a contemporary feminist point of view, however, this type of hermeneutically based insight does not make Beauvoir's philosophy any less problematic. In applying concepts from Sartre, Hegel and Marx, being inspired by their views of human nature and remaining uncritical of their androcentric features, Beauvoir integrates those very features into her own theory. This situation is exacerbated by the fact that her work is based on biological and historical facts formulated from a male perspective. I intend to focus throughout on the androcentric components of Beauvoir's philosophy and the distortions caused by an uncritical acceptance of the sciences of her time.

Thus, the perspective on which this study is based is both hermeneutic, in that I analyse and try to understand *The Second Sex* in relation to its historical context, and ideological, in that I criticize from a feminist point of view. In the spirit of Ricoeur,<sup>19</sup> I have tried to combine the two.

*Sex and Existence* is divided into five parts. Part I comprises two chapters, the first of which provides a historical background sketch, including a description of the situation of women in France in the 1930s and 1940s, and the second a biographical background sketch, with a depiction of the main features of Beauvoir's (and Sartre's) life up to 1950. These chapters are intended to give the reader a frame of reference for the analysis of *The Second Sex* which comprises the three remaining parts of the text. Part II discusses the Hegelian elements of *The Second Sex*, Part III the Marxist elements, and Part IV the existential phenomenology. Part V focuses on Beauvoir's anthropology as a whole and how it is